Lifts – A Descent:

The Gendering of Vertical Space

&

Higher Voices:

A collection of linked short stories

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Abstract

This thesis in Creative and Critical Writing comprises two closely related parts which contribute to an understanding and discussion of the gendered nature of vertical space.

The critical thesis examines literary representations of the experiences of women and children who live in tower blocks built as social housing. My analysis draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey to investigate the production of the tower block as a gendered social space. I employ the lift as a lens to study the structuring and shaping of high-rise narratives and consider its role through a close reading of works by Alan Spence, Livi Michael, Alan Beard and Stephen Kelman. In four chapters – on liminality, disgust, mobilities and play – I argue that the tower block lift is represented as both a highly gendered space and as a mythologised space used to embody the narrative of the broken promise of the utopian solutions to the post-war housing crisis in the UK.

Higher Voices is a collection of twelve short stories – linked by environment, characters and events – set in a tower block in London over a one-year period which includes the Winter of Discontent and the election of Margaret Thatcher in May 1979. Each story is told from the viewpoint of a strong female or child narrator to give voices to those who can be marginalised in this setting. While themes of demolition and dereliction permeate, a sense of love, hope and justice is evident. The innovative use of twelve interludes set in the lift reinforces the importance of this conduit in the lives of the tower block's residents; it peoples the building through fractured conversations and glimpses of graffiti which inject humour and irony and allow revelations to be made.

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Epigraph

Brutalist by Paul Farley

Try living in one. Hang washing out to dry
and break its clean lines with your duds and smalls.
Spray tribal names across its subway walls
and crack its flagstones so the weeds can try

their damnedest. That's the way. Fly-tip the lives
you led, out past its edge, on the back field;
sideboards and mangles made sense in the peeled
spud light of the old house but the knives

are out for them now. This cellarless, unatticked
place will shake the rentman off, will throw
open its arms and welcome the White Arrow
delivery fleet which brings the things on tick

from the slush piles of the seasonal catalogues.
The quilt boxes will take up residence
on the tops of white wardrobes, an ambulance
raise blinds, a whole geography of dogs

will make their presence felt. And once a year
on Le Corbusier's birthday, the sun will set
bang on the pre-ordained exact spot
and that is why we put that slab just there.

One by one the shopkeepers will shut
their doors for good. A newsagent will draw
the line at buttered steps. The final straw
will fill the fields beyond. Now live in it.[1]

[1] Paul Farley, 'Brutalist' in *Tramp in Flames* (London: Picador, 2006), p. 10.

Part I

Lifts – A Descent:

The Gendering of Vertical Space

Introduction

This thesis explores the gendering of vertical space through an analysis of literary representations of lifts in tower blocks in British realist fiction.[2] The foundational premise of the thesis is provided by Henri Lefebvre's proposition that '(Social) space is a (social) product'.[3] While space has conventionally been seen as a passive container for social life, Lefebvre points out the social nature of space itself. He writes – drawing attention to the processual nature of space – that 'modern' spatial practice might be characterised by 'the daily life of a tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project'.[4] My analysis is informed throughout by the feminist geographer Doreen Massey's argument that 'space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through'.[5] Massey's work explores the complex ways in which space and place are connected to gender and emerging gender relations and as I consider the lift from this perspective, I examine its role in structuring and shaping the fictional narratives of female and child characters.

In my close readings of tower block texts, I analyse the dialectical relationships between characters and settings to understand the production of the lift as a mythologised space. I explore the 'coming-into-being and disappearance' of the codes associated with the lift through interactions between lifts and residents, as each is defined in relation to, and by virtue of its action on, the other.[6] As Lefebvre writes, 'Codes will be seen as part of the practical relationship, as part of an interaction between 'subjects' and their space and surroundings'.[7] I concentrate on the contents of these codes and the social practices inherent to them.

Sociologists Fuller and Low state that 'space is both a category and a lens'; the literary lift is a space with shared characteristics and the ways in which it is used provide a focus which allows insight into the characters' broader experiences.[8] Reflecting the tradition

[2] Although I use the term 'realist fiction', the texts I analyse might also be defined as works of naturalism which 'has always lent itself easily to the expression of social causes because the typical naturalistic narrative depicts outmatched individuals fighting against an oppressive world order of some kind'. Lorna Sage, *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p. 462.
[3] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991), p. 26.
[4] Ibid., p. 38.
[5] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1994), p. 186.
[6] Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 18.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Martin G. Fuller and Martina Low, 'Introduction: An invitation to spatial sociology', *Current Sociology Monograph*, 65 (2017), 469–91, p. 472.

of Lefebvre, Fuller and Low provide a definition of space which captures the experiential and interactive relationship between the spatial and the social:

> We define space as that which is concrete, multi-dimensional, lived-in and experienced. Spaces are relationally constituted, contestable and processual. They are constituted through the objects and bodies that are placed in the world and the modes of making-sense of the meaning of particular spaces.[9]

Although Lefebvre cannot be called a feminist, 'his theoretical understandings of the dynamics of space have clear implications for gender relations'.[10] He discusses the violence and phallocentrism of the tower block but little work has extended his writing on the gendering and sexualisation of the spaces of modernity, even though it is central to his argument and politics.[11]

Massey describes space as 'a pincushion of a million stories'.[12] Despite its position as an icon of post-war British architecture, surprisingly few authors have exploited the tower block's potential as a fictional setting. As the social historian John Boughton writes:

> The subject of public housing is hardly to be found on bookshelves. There is some good academic writing […] but you'll struggle to find anything in the mainstream. And in literary fiction, authentic interest in or real knowledge of the lives of the millions who have lived in council homes over the years is almost non-existent.[13]

As a consequence, critical studies of literature have only recently begun to engage with the tower block as an important urban location. Literary scholar Emily Cuming writes, 'Although council housing is a burgeoning topic in the media and social sciences, it is less frequently encountered as a subject of cultural significance […] housing estates form a ubiquitous part of the physical landscape, and this setting – in all its variations – needs to be considered'.[14] The existence, however, of valuable analogous research such as *Apartment Stories* – in which Sharon Marcus analyses discourses of nineteenth-century apartment

[9] Fuller and Low, 'Introduction', p. 476.
[10] Yasminah Beebeejaun, 'Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 39 (2017), 323-34, p. 325.
[11] Massey, *Space*, p. 184.
[12] Doreen Massey, 'Doreen Massey on Space', *Social Science Bites*, 1 February 2013, <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2013/02/podcastdoreen-massey-on-space/> [accessed 30 June 2018].
[13] John Boughton, 'Top 10 books about council housing', *Guardian*, 25 April 2018, Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/25/top-10-books-on-council-housing-public-john-boughton-zadie-smith-lynsey-hanley> [Accessed 30 June 2018].
[14] Emily Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880-2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 175.

blocks and examines the intersections of domesticity and urbanism, public and private space and masculine and feminine spheres – provides a useful model for my work.[15]

In *Wigan Pier Revisited*, an exposé of poverty and politics in the 1980s, Beatrix Campbell describes tower blocks as 'the symbol of all our disaffection'.[16] Similarly, when the tower block is used as a fictional setting it is overwhelmingly represented as an adverse environment in which the post-war hope of the utopian vision for social housing has dissolved into narratives which portray decaying buildings and societal breakdown. It is rare to find enthusiasm, affection or support for the project in fictional representations of high-rise life. The tower block was little used as a fictional setting until the late 1970s by which time its unfavourable image was entrenched in the public imagination.[17] As early as the late 1960s, the hope associated with the high-rise, once heralded as the solution to the post-war housing crisis, was rapidly crumbling; the unfavourable image was exacerbated in 1968 by the partial collapse of Ronan Point – a twenty-two storey block in East London – which has become mythologised as the death knell for the tower block in the UK.[18] Depictions of decaying tower blocks echo an artistic, fictional and dramatic tradition of '*ruinenlust*'.[19] In her discussion of ruin lust, Katie Beswick describes the Brutalist housing estate as an archetypal contemporary ruin, 'with a fixed identity that is often evoked in discourses of social ruin and ruination'.[20]

As with the utopian promise of the high-rise in the 1950s and 1960s, the component spaces – the walkways, the balconies and the lifts – were also imbued with expectation. Without the lift the tower block could not have been built; in 1930, the architectural historian Francisco Mujica wrote, 'the entire history of skyscrapers contains an homage to the

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[15] See Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories* (London: University of California Press, 1999).

[16] Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1984), p. 36.

[17] This unfavourable image inspired J.G. Ballard's classic dystopian novel *High-Rise* which describes the disintegration of a luxury tower block and the descent into anarchy of its residents. J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975). Ballard said, in an interview, 'events I described in that novel have taken place - - high rises [*sic*] all over the world been so vandalized, that in some cases they've had to've been blown up!' Jon Savage, 'JG Ballard', *Search and Destroy Magazine* (1978) <https://www.jgballard.ca/media/1978_reprinted_1988_search%26destroy_newspaper.html> [accessed 7 December 2018].

[18] Anne Power and John Houghton, *Jigsaw Cities: Big Places, Small Spaces* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007) p. 68.

[19] '*Ruinenlust*' can be defined as 'the curious psychopathology of being drawn to that which we most fear'. Frances Stonor Saunders, 'How ruins reveal our deepest fears and desires', *Guardian*, 7 March 2014, Art, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/07/ruins-exhibition-tate-britain-decay> [accessed 30 June 2018].

[20] Katie Beswick, 'Ruin Lust and the Council Estate', *Performance Research*, 20 (2015), 29-38, p. 29.

inventors of the elevator'.[21] Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French architect who was a pioneer of modern architecture and internationally influential in urban planning, described the elevator as one of the three fundamental organs of a skyscraper and wrote, in 1947, 'I emphasize the question of the elevators because I consider it the key to all the urban reforms which will save our contemporary cities from disaster'.[22]

Today, in New York, the Otis elevator carries more people than any other form of public transport.[23] However, the lift, a 'paradigmatic space of urban modernity', is at least two thousand years old. [24] Slaves operated twelve winch-powered lifts in the Colosseum so that scenery, props, animals, and gladiators could be brought up from the hypogeum to the arena. The theatrical tradition was continued in the showmanship of Elisha Graves Otis' demonstration of his groundbreaking safety hoister at the New York Crystal Palace in 1854. Otis stood on a platform as an assistant axed through the rope by which the platform was suspended and reportedly uttered, 'All safe gentlemen, all safe', to the stunned audience after he dropped only a few inches.[25] Otis' macho demonstration of power and control was such an effective publicity stunt that it has been accepted in popular history – a narrative propagated by Otis (the company), still the largest manufacturer of lifts in the world – as the birth of the elevator even though there are examples of lift installations from the 1830s onwards and the demonstration was scarcely mentioned in the New York press at the time.[26]

For Le Corbusier, lifts were central to the future of the city. Dismissing criticisms of the unreliability of the elevator, he claimed, idiosyncratically, that the problem was a phenomenon curious to France:

> France alone has a monopoly on the fatal notice printed on a placard set askew on the wall: *The* elevator is *out* of order. My American auditors roared with laughter when I told them that the obstacle always raised by European opponents against my suggestions for a "radiant city" was this: "Elevators don't work!" [...] It may be said that in New York the construction of elevators has reached a moving technical and

[21] Franciso Mujica, qtd. in Andreas Bernard, *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 18.
[22] Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals were White* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 64.
[23] Leo Hollis, *Cities Are Good For You: The Genius Of The Metropolis* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. 233.
[24] Niall Martin, 'The (Dis)Locative Effect of Noise: Globalisation, Disorientation and Noise in Marc Isaacs' Lift', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 57 (2016), 62-76, p. 66.
[25] Hollis, *Cities*, p. 232.
[26] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 4.

> plastic perfection. A conquest of modern times, a product of selection, of worthy architecture; a feast for the eyes and the spirit.[27]

This acclamation of the lift, written over fifty years ago, is echoed in more recent architectural discussion, 'A good elevator user experience is more than just a ride – it's an emotional experience that combines aesthetics, accessibility, comfort, safety, reliability and eco-efficiency'.[28] However, while a ride in the lift in the fiction of the tower block is often depicted as emotional, it is the antithesis, in every respect, of the experience described above.

Despite its significance to the history and representation of the tower block, geographer Stephen Graham writes that the lift has been widely neglected, by social scientists and architects as well as humanities scholars.[29] Even architectural historians, Glendinning and Muthesius, make scant reference to the lift in *Tower Block*, a comprehensive tome on the architecture and politics of the high-rise, informed by visits to every block in the UK.[30]

In *Fictions of the City*, an examination of mass housing in films and novels set in London and Paris, Matthew Taunton briefly uses the lift as a lens through which to consider the alienation and isolation associated with tower blocks in the films *Wonderland* and *Nil by Mouth*. By contrasting two lift scenes, Taunton explores the characters' relationships not only with their immediate environment but also with the city beyond. He describes the lift in *Nil by Mouth* as 'an inconvenient and perilous interstitial realm', which neatly sums up three of the literary lift's defining characteristics.[31] When a character uses a lift in a book or a film the interaction often facilitates an introduction to other common areas of the building also important in defining the setting; for example, in these two scenes Taunton describes 'vaguely menacing corridors', a 'heavily vandalised hallway', and 'humdrum spaces'.[32]

The only extensive text on the cultural significance of the lift is *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*, by Andreas Bernard.[33] Bernard comments that in literature 'The doors of modern elevators open and close like the curtains of a theater' and asks why the

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[27] Le Corbusier, *Cathedrals*, p. 62.
[28] Felix Mara, 'Floors, Stairs, Lifts and Wayfinding', *The Architect's Journal*, 20 December 2012, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/buildings/specification/floors-stairs-lifts-and-wayfinding/8640623.article> [accessed 28 June 2018].
[29] Stephen Graham, 'Super-tall and Ultra-deep: The Cultural Politics of the Elevator', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31 (2014) 239–65, p. 239.
[30] Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius, *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland* (London: Yale University Press, 1994).
[31] Matthew Taunton, *Fictions of the City* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 173.
[32] Ibid., pp. 173-74.
[33] Bernard, *Lifted.*

elevator is so important in the spatial structure of urban stories.[34] His response is that the lift acts as a tool for coalescing narratives in the socially diffuse twentieth-century city: as an intimate yet public everyday space, it is a setting in which relationships can be formed when characters and plotlines converge. He argues that when the lift breaks down mid-flight, the awkwardness of proximity gives way to solidarity and that the sealed box encourages confession – a century ago the beautiful and intricately designed wooden cabs in buildings such as the New York Public Library were often compared to confessionals. Bernard states that no other public space can be as secluded which means it has been exploited for clandestine romantic encounters. He also presents the lift as a site of transformation and suggests that the privacy allows an individual to 'let his guard down' or, for those leading a double life, the opportunity for a change of costume. Finally, Bernard suggests that the lift can play a symbolic role. He draws on Arthur Hailey's novel *Hotel*, the story of an independent hotel in New Orleans in which the management is fighting to save the business. The main narrative function of the lift is to bring the characters of four separate plotlines together but the second function is symbolic: the unreliable and dilapidated lift is mentioned throughout the novel as an indicator of the state of the hotel. Nevertheless, the lift to which Bernard refers – in fiction set in apartment blocks, hotels, offices and department stores – is a different kind of space to lifts located in local authority tower blocks.

In British realist fiction set in tower blocks we learn more about the common areas – corridors, lobbies, stairwells and walkways – than the flats in which the characters live.[35] It is the lift, however, which is established as a mythologised space and is integral to depictions of the fragmented nature of high-rise life. It is the synecdoche used to represent the broken promise of the utopian vision: the perceived failure of the high-rise used as social housing, a stance taken, for example, by Peter Hall who writes that 'Ideas, forged in the Parisian intelligentsia of the 1920s [...] [are] at best questionable, at worst catastrophic'.[36] Kim Duff, in her discussion on British literature and urban space, writes that 'the high rise concentrates

[34] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 243.
[35] There is no perfect word to describe the internal space – that which is inside the building but outside the flats – of the tower block but throughout this discussion I use the word 'common'. Critical authors writing on high-rise space use a range of terms including 'public', 'semi-public', 'shared' and 'communal' but each has its inaccuracies. I think that 'common', defined by the OED as 'Of or belonging to the community at large' most closely describes a space that is for the use of and belongs to the whole community in some sense. I am aware of the potentially deprecatory class connotations of the term but I treat it as a neutral descriptor which does not have the associations derived from social use and meaning which underpin distinctions between 'public' and 'private' tower block space. "common, adj. and adv." *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], Oxford University Press, December 2018, <www.oed.com/view/Entry/37216> [Accessed 8 February 2019].
[36] Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), p. 219.

the social discontent of the city into the smaller container of the tower block'.[37] I compress this further and argue that the social discontent of the tower block is concentrated into the lift.

In this thesis the lift provides a powerful lens through which to focus my exploration into the gendering of vertical space. As the social anthropologist, Hazel Andrews, writes:

> Spaces can be read in relation to how they are encoded with ideas of masculinity and femininity. As such gendered space arises not only in the assignation of meaning but also in the practice and embodiment of sociocultural identities. The intersection between space and gender therefore reflects existing beliefs and practices related to sexually differentiated practices and allows for the production and reproduction of gender relations.[38]

Through my analysis of the fiction, I argue that the lift is represented as a highly gendered space and that men and women use, experience, and shape it differently. This has important implications – for example when it is vandalised or out of action, as the lifts in the fiction of the tower block often are, the repercussions for women and girls are far greater than the repercussions for men and boys.

In the four chapters of this thesis, I consider the intersection and co-production of space and gender in the tower block through a close examination of the role of the lift in the production and reproduction of gender relations. In each chapter, I close read one fictional text alongside a wider body of fiction and theory in order to elucidate four distinct, yet overlapping, themes in the gendering of the lift: liminality, disgust, mobilities and play.

In Chapter 1, I consider the liminality of the lift and its role as a public and a private space, concentrating on Alan Spence's short story 'Greensleeves' (1977) through a reading of Marc Augé's work on non-place and supermodernity.[39] I argue that the ostensibly liminal non-places of the high-rise – lifts, corridors and stairwells – are actually coded as public space, particularly for women, in the fiction of the tower block. Characters interact with coded spaces in distinctly gendered ways: male characters' navigation of the space is largely unimpaired; women, however, experience immobility and confinement. In Chapter 2, I analyse the lift as a site of disgust with a focus on Livi Michael's novel *Under a Thin Moon*

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[37] Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space After Thatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), p. 11.

[38] Hazel Andrews, 'Gendered Space', in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* ed. by Wai Ching Angela Wong, Maithree Wickramasinghe, Renée C. Hoogland and Nancy A. Naples (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016) <doi:10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss326>.

[39] Alan Spence, 'Greensleeves', in *Its Colours They Are Fine* (London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1977); Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2006).

(1994) in relation to Sara Ahmed's work on the performativity of disgust.[40] I posit that it is primarily male characters who shape the material space of the lift; this reflects the gendering of agency in the tower block as a whole. The gendered appropriation of the lift makes the space less welcoming, as its disgusting and vandalised nature discourages and restricts its use. Chapter 3 considers the impact of the lift on mobilities in the context of the 'new mobilities paradigm' and the inequality of mobility, primarily using Alan Beard's short story 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' (1997).[41] I examine how the stuck lift is used as an important, recurring narrative device in the fiction of the tower block. The broken-down lift has a far greater impact on the mobilities of women than men. The stalled lift is also used metaphorically to illuminate the representation of the confinement and atrophy of tower block residents, both male and female. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the lift as a playful site in Stephen Kelman's novel *Pigeon English* (2011) using Caillois' work on the sociology of play and returning to the writing of Lefebvre and Massey on play and childhood.[42] I consider the dialectic of social space and social practice and show how the paidic use of the lift in high-rise fiction extends the questions of gender discussed in the previous chapters. Although boys enjoy playing in the lift and the other common spaces of the tower block, their actions can contribute to the production of a disgusting and frightening social space for others. In considering how child characters use common spaces differently, I argue that the appropriation of the spaces by boys results in the exclusion of girls and women.

I close with a postscript on Grenfell Tower in which I reflect on the changing and future narratives of social housing and the tower block and the relationship between fiction and prevailing media and political discourses.

[40] Livi Michael, *Under a Thin Moon* (London: Minerva, 1994); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2014).
[41] Alan Beard, 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky', in *Taking Doreen out of the Sky* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Fiction Group, 1997).
[42] Stephen Kelman, *Pigeon English* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

Chapter 1: The Liminal Lift

> The lift – when it is in order – is freely used by all. [However] […] if it should happen that Madame Marquiseaux gets into the lift at the same time as Madame Orlowska, she will make some tiny and perhaps unconscious gesture signifying that it is her lift, of which she condescends to share the usufruct for a short moment.
>
> Georges Perec, *Life A User's Manual*[43]

Le Corbusier and subsequent modernist architects such as the Smithsons in the UK aspired to create 'streets in the sky'; in contrast to a street on the ground, the tower block and its common spaces trouble distinctions between public and private space.[44] In relation to a terrace of houses, for example, the street is manifestly public but how public is a walkway, stairwell or lift that runs through a block of flats? The ambiguity of such space is illustrated in the interaction between Madames Marquiseaux and Orlowska and captured in Niall Martin's suggestion that the lift is, 'Neither public nor private, inside nor outside', and Bernard's argument that it is of 'indeterminate status' and 'semi-public'.[45]

The unclear status of tower block space is reflected in Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, in which he argues that place is conducive to social life but that non-place, 'the opposite of utopia', does not contain any 'organic society'.[46] One of the sites he considers is the housing estate of the French *banlieue* 'where people do not live together and which is never situated in the centre of anything'.[47] Many of the suburbs of French cities are marginal sites, associated with high crime, poverty, and unemployment; the residents – large numbers of whom are immigrants – face both physical and social isolation.[48] Unlike the estates of the peripheral *banlieues,* the UK's development of tower blocks aimed to build high-density housing centrally, on land made

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[43] Georges Perec, *Life A User's Manual* (London: Collins Harvill, 1988), pp. 215-216; Perec was a friend and colleague of Lefebvre and *Life A User's Manual* is described by Peta Mitchell as an 'architext', in which 'architecture and literature are so thoroughly imbricated that book and building become one.' Peta Mitchell, 'Constructing the Architext: Georges Perec's Life a User's Manual', *Mosaic*, 37 (2004), 1-16, p. 2.

[44] Le Corbusier's influence was apparent in the Smithson's design of deck access housing. 'The concept of "streets in the sky" […] [was] first identified in the unsuccessful entry by Alison and Peter Smithson in the 1952 Golden Lane housing competition.' Ian Colquhoun, *The RIBA Book of British Housing: 1900 to the present day* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2008), p. 12.

[45] Martin, (Dis)Locative Effect, p. 66; Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 177.

[46] Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 112.

[47] Ibid., pp. 107-8.

[48] See Loïc Waquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

available through slum clearance and the destruction resulting from the Blitz. However, despite this apparent centrality, as Cuming writes, 'even when they [estates] are situated in inner-city areas, their construction and design has often resulted in a boundedness and segregation from mainstream metropolitan life'.[49] I suggest that the isolation and lack of community Cuming identifies is germane to fictional depictions of the inner-city high-rises of Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and London.

'Greensleeves' is a short story from the Scottish writer Alan Spence's *Its Colours They Are Fine*. The collection of thirteen loosely-linked stories, set in Glasgow, recounts fragments of the lives of the working-class people of the city. Spence writes with compassion about the difficult circumstances of everyday life and there is a powerful political undercurrent to his work. 'Greensleeves' is a poignant reflection on the place of elderly people in society but in addition to her old age, the unnamed protagonist is disempowered by gender, class, poverty, and through her interaction with the 22-storey tower block itself. John Burns argues that the paralysis prevalent among Spence's characters is likely to have been inspired by James Joyce's *Dubliners*.[50]

'Greensleeves' is set over the course of one evening and through backstory and the mundane events which take place, the protagonist reveals a deep sense of isolation and loneliness. The tower block and the lift are far more than background in this contemplative piece. The setting, which has a strong physical presence and impacts greatly on the protagonist, is fundamental to the narrative and is predominantly experienced as non-place, a place of transience in which human beings operate in a state of anonymity. Augé's examples of non-place include 'the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airport and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets'.[51] Many of these non-places can be defined as 'inherently liminal'. [52] In this chapter, I consider how it can be useful to examine the lift – as well as other common spaces of the high-rise such as stairwells, corridors and walkways – as non-place. Despite the intentions of architects such as the Smithsons, these spaces are primarily thoroughfares: their function

[49] Emily Cuming, 'Private Lives, Social Housing: Female Coming-of-Age stories on the British Council Estate', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7 (2013), 328-45, p. 330.
[50] John Burns, *Alan Spence's Its Colours They Are Fine And Way To Go* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2010).
[51] Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 79.
[52] Kathryn Bird '"Weren't all true nomads at their happiest in limbo?": Hauntings in Non-Places in Hilary Mantel's Beyond Black and Nicola Barker's Darkmans' in *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* ed. by Dara Downey, Ian Kinane and Elizabeth Parker (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, Ltd, 2016), pp. 111-34 (p. 111).

is to allow people to move from one place to another; they are thresholds between public space and private space.[53]

Whereas Bernard writes of relationships formed in lifts, in 'Greensleeves', Spence represents the lift as a space in which people will not even make eye contact:

> Nobody would utter a word, all lost in themselves […] everyone staring straight ahead or looking down at their feet, anything rather than catch another's eye. Sometimes it was just surliness, like the young man from the seventeenth floor with his neat suit and his newspaper and his rolled umbrella […] More often though, the people who didn't talk just seemed too tired or preoccupied to make the effort.[54]

Spence's lift is a space of frequent encounter but infrequent interaction – the protagonist knows fellow residents only by sight. The lift expresses the loneliness and discontent of the tower block and both spaces are depicted as places of transience and anonymity. In 'Greensleeves', and the other texts I discuss here, high-rise living is characterised by its impermanence: residents often want to relocate – the tower block is temporary 'housing' rather than 'home'.[55] As cultural commentator Lynsey Hanley writes, 'Council homes were never intended to be holding cages for the poor and disenfranchised, but somehow, that's how they ended up.'[56] Characters are unable to move up and down the block when the lift is broken and they are unable to move out of the block itself, a space often portrayed as broken too.[57] The anonymity the protagonist experiences when using the lift illuminates her isolated existence; it draws attention to the magnitude of the building and the number of residents and also questions the presence of community:

> The lifts were about the only place she ever saw her neighbours. It was like passing through a strange town and just catching glimpses of the people who lived there. Descending or rising through layer after layer, and every layer a few more lives she would never know. [58]

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[53] In 1952 the Smithsons asserted that 'streets would be places and not corridors or balconies, thoroughfares where there are shops, post boxes, telephone kiosks'. Colquhoun, *RIBA Book of British Housing*, p. 12.
[54] Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.
[55] In 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky', Mark says, 'I'd seen Peacock Towers go up when I was a kid […] Ever since, people have been queuing to get out'. Beard, 'Doreen', p. 57.
[56] Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 11.
[57] 'Tories have always tended to see it [council housing] as compensatory and temporary: you use it when you can't buy your own, and only *until* you can buy your own'. Lynsey Hanley, 'Municipal Dreams by John Boughton review', *Guardian*, 19 April 2018, Society Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/19/municipal-dreams-john-boughton-review> [accessed 30 June 2018].
[58] Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

The woman compares travelling in the lift not to walking along a familiar street, perhaps recognising people to say hello to or stopping to chat – as envisaged in the modernists' 'streets in the sky' – but to passing through an unfamiliar, more anonymous place, a 'strange town'.[59]

In high-rise fiction, lifts are often portrayed as cramped, claustrophobic and coffin-like. Spence, however, describes not only the lift's interior but also its journey through the shaft and this creates the impression of a more capacious space, 'Descending or rising through layer after layer'.[60] The use of the word layer – rather than storey or floor – conjures up the strata of the earth and the atmosphere. In another passage, the woman refers to the 'empty bottomless feeling she sometimes got on the lift', reminiscent of the bottomless pit associated with hell; once again the magnitude of the tower block is emphasised.[61] When we see large numbers of people in the lift, it serves to accentuate the publicness and anonymity of the space, 'the lifts were always breaking down because too many people would crowd on at once. And there was always sure to be somebody loud and drunk'.[62] Spence's portrayal of the lift and its shaft as large spaces highlights the protagonist's isolation, 'The lift would creak and shudder its way up and up and she would feel the emptiness below her, increasing as she got further from the ground, suspended, supportless, a sheer black drop into nothing at all'.[63] As Augé writes, 'The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude'.[64] In the non-place of the lift, people become detached from their identity and are only identifiable as a mass group, in this case 'neighbours'.[65]

Marc Isaacs' *Lift* (2001) is a short film in which the residents of a UK high-rise block are recorded riding up and down in a lift. The location of the block is unspecified – the only external image of the tower is a brief close up shot at the start of the film – the remainder is filmed from inside the lift. The location of the tower block is ostensibly unimportant – this film could be shot in any lift, reflecting Augé's comment on the similitude of non-place.[66] It

[59] Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Revelation 9.1-12 or Dante's Circles of Hell; Spence, *Colours* p. 170.
[62] Spence, 'Greensleeves', p. 162.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 103.
[65] Alex Arch, *"Non-Places" – The Theory of Supermodernity*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 March 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1rivX0hi2w> [accessed 28 June 2018].
[66] Marc Isaacs, *Lift*, online video recording, YouTube, 22 September 2009,
< https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJNAvyLCTik&t=7s> [accessed 28 June 2018].

is interesting, however, to consider how the film *is* located. In addition to accents from around the world, the younger residents speak Multicultural London English (MLE) and the older residents speak with cockney accents.[67] There is an interesting dichotomy in witnessing the vestige of a traditional working-class community in the dislocated non-place of the lift.

As does 'Greensleeves', *Lift* shows the complexities of forming relationships in liminal space and the impact that the space has upon them. Niall Martin writes that Isaacs' lift is 'the setting for encounters between strangers who are also neighbours, people who live on top of each other but signally fail to constitute the 'vertical community' idealised by the urban planners that once saw in high-rise residential blocks the replacements for streets of terraced housing'.[68] Isaacs' lift is narrow, cramped and claustrophobic and the discomfort of proximity is apparent: as in 'Greensleeves', eyes are often downcast. Neither the protagonist nor the tower block in 'Greensleeves' is named and the anonymity increases the sense of alienation; this character could be any elderly woman living in any high-rise development. The hostile environment and the protagonist's vulnerability as a single woman are reiterated in a scene in which a bullying salesman knocks at her door and attempts to sell her a mortise lock:

> [Salesman] 'But ah hope ye don't mind me askin ye, d'ye live here [by] yerself?'
> 'Well, yes …' she said.
> 'Aye well,' he said. 'Ye only huv tae read the papers these days tae see the kind a things that's happenin aw the time. D'ye know whit ah mean?'[69]

The dichotomy between the local and the supermodern seen in *Lift* is also apparent in 'Greensleeves'. The story can be interpreted as a comment on the lift and the tower block as non-place, yet the characters speak a dialect which is unequivocally Scots. This produces a collision between a form of speech firmly rooted in the local and the disconnected and displaced experience of supermodernity.

The high-rise in 'Greensleeves' is described as '22 storeys of concrete and glass. Boxes on boxes, and hers right on the top'. This block is portrayed as the converse of homely or characterful and the flat's location, 'right on the top', implies remoteness. The word 'box'

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[67] Sanjana Varghese, 'Big up MLE - the origins of London's 21st century slang', *New Statesman*, 26 August 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2017/08/big-mle-origins-londons-21st-century-slang> [accessed 15 November 2018]; The London location is also revealed through residents' conversations.
[68] Martin, '(Dis)Locative Effect', p. 66.
[69] Spence, *Colours*, p. 168.

is often used as a disparaging term for both flats and lifts.[70] In 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' (1997), Alan Beard's short story about a family trapped in a tower block by poverty, flats are referred to as 'clapboard boxes' and in Kerry Hudson's semi-autobiographical novel, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* (2013), the lift is described as a 'piss-stinking metal box'.[71] Furthermore, the association of the lift with another type of box, the coffin – an antithesis of hope and mobility but perhaps the ultimate in private space – is a recurring one in tower block narratives.[72] Will Self, in his short story '161' (2002) written during a residency in a flat on the twentieth floor of a block in Liverpool, describes the lift as a 'pock-marked steel casket'; the tower was soon to be demolished.[73]

Bereft of any sense of homeliness, describing a flat as a box conjures an image of a container into which people without agency are put. The protagonist of 'Greensleeves' has been evicted from her previous home in a tenement which she fondly remembers as 'A decent red sandstone block, clean and solid and old', so that the building could be demolished. In contrast to the extensive descriptions of the tower block's common areas, there is minimal comment on the interior of the woman's flat, although it is apparent that she has little affection for her new home. Ironically, once inside the flat, the thing she enjoys most is looking out, 'And the view from these windows was one thing she was grateful for, some consolation for all the rest'.[74]

Research has shown that residents' experiences of living in tower blocks are worse if it was not their decision to live there.[75] In a podcast, in which the poet Paul Farley – who was five years old when his family was moved to the Netherley Estate in Liverpool – discusses his poem 'Brutalist', he comments:

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[70] The French philosopher, Bachelard, wrote, 'the inhabitants of the big city [Paris] live in superimposed boxes'. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 47.

[71] Kerry Hudson, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 136.

[72] In *Our Fathers* – a novel about generational conflict surrounding the rise and fall of the tower block – when faced with his grandfather's imminent death, Jamie Bawn comments, 'even when they [the lifts] were working, you couldn't fit a coffin in them. It was a design fault: you couldn't fit a coffin'. Andrew O'Hagan, *Our Fathers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 227.

[73] Will Self, '161', in *Dr Mukti and Other Tales of Woe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 163; Roald Dahl's short story, 'The Way Up to Heaven' subverts the dominant portrayal of the gendered space of the lift when a woman leaves her husband trapped in a lift in their home and goes away for six weeks. Roald Dahl, 'The Way Up to Heaven', *The New Yorker*, 27 February 1954, p. 28, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1954/02/27/the-way-up-to-heaven> [accessed 12 February 2019].

[74] Spence, *Colours*, p. 165.

[75] Robert Gifford, 'The Consequences of Living in High-Rise Buildings', *Architectural Science Review*, 50 (2007), 1-16.

> I think a lot of harm was done then by moving those people out in that way and as I get older it's starting to come into focus as a horrible kind of urban clearance that happened in the 50s and 60s and into the 70s [...] Le Corbusier said that thing about a house being a machine for living in; I honestly have to say I think Le Corbusier houses are machines for dying in.[76]

Death is prevalent in the texts: in 'Greensleeves' there is a sense that the woman is trapped in a holding pen waiting to die; in *Under a Thin Moon*, a story of four women living on a council estate amid a debilitating cycle of poverty, one of the women commits suicide; in 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' we see the demise of a job and a relationship; and *Pigeon English*, a coming-of-age story about gang violence, ends with the murder of the protagonist. Throughout Isaac's *Lift* we see a bluebottle, a metaphor for 'a fly on the wall' perhaps, buzzing loudly as it walks up the side of the lift. In the final image, however, the fly is dying, struggling on its back on the floor, and it is hard not to think of the association between flies and death.[77] The death of the fly perhaps alludes to the death of tenants who have spoken of serious mental and physical health problems, the death of a sense of community among this diverse population and the death of the utopian vision of the high-rise.

The social and physical isolation of the tower block in 'Greensleeves' is illuminated by the lack of local amenities, 'no Handy Stores or Indian grocers here'.[78] When the protagonist attempts to buy some milk from a van one evening she discovers that both lifts are out of order. She knows that even if she were able to walk down the stairs she would be too frail to get up them again, 'She was stuck here. Trapped. Twenty-two floors. All the twos. Two little ducks. Halfway to Heaven. Top of the house'.[79] When she hears the jingle of an ice cream van, she remembers the folk song 'Greensleeves' from her childhood, 'all sadness and grace, all minstrels and knights and ladies in high towers, imprisoned'.[80] The protagonist is powerless, and we are presented with a twentieth century twist on a classic theme of Gothic literature – the damsel in distress imprisoned in a tower and in need of rescue.[81]

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[76] Paul Farley, "Paul Farley reads his poem 'Brutalist'", *Audioboom*, 24 March 2011, <https://audioboom.com/posts/311423-paul-farley-reads-his-poem-brutalist> [accessed 30 June 2018].
[77] Flies are commonly associated with death and decaying matter and used to represent messages of death and disasters. For example in Emily Dickinson's poem beginning 'I heard a fly buzz when I died'; Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (USA: Start Publishing LLC, 2017), pp. 182-3.
[78] Spence, 'Greensleeves', p. 169.
[79] Ibid., p. 170.
[80] Ibid., p. 161.
[81] See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Kerstin W. Shands, *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Augé does not propose that supermodernity is all-encompassing, the perception of space is subjective. The woman in 'Greensleeves' has a more ambivalent relationship with the lift and her neighbours than in the other texts discussed in this thesis. As the only setting in which the woman sees her fellow residents, there are occasions on which she enjoys using the lift – at weekends for example when the atmosphere is convivial – although, ultimately, the fleeting periods of companionship serve to reinforce her customary solitude:

> Sometimes it [the lift] was nice at the weekend, people coming home in the evening, glad for the moment to be free. She liked it then, everybody was happier, more relaxed, more ready to talk and joke and laugh. But the lift would gradually empty towards the top and by the time it reached her floor she was usually alone again.[82]

This is a rare example of an adult character expressing some affection for the lift, maybe because 'Greensleeves' was published in 1977, before the prevalent discourse had become quite so entrenched. However, even here Spence uses the lift and the presence, then absence of other residents to emphasise the protagonist's loneliness. Isaacs uses the lift similarly; as Niall Martin writes, 'Obviously inappropriate within a lift, this voice [Isaacs'] asks questions which are in every sense too big for this space'.[83] As the residents learn to trust Isaacs they reveal intimate details about their mental and physical health; they talk about love, death and religion and allow insight into their primarily unhappy lives. The confinement and the perceived privacy of the lift allows, or perhaps cajoles, residents into speaking openly. Isaacs himself comments, 'it's a very pure film because it's a unique space in which to deal with those themes'.[84] Isaacs' *Lift* echoes Bernard's assertion that the awkwardness of proximity gives way to solidarity and that the sealed box encourages confession. However, in the fiction I analyse, the lift is portrayed as a public space, not a private space conducive to revelation.

Throughout 'Greensleeves', the lift and the tower block are represented as gendered spaces. For the protagonist, the physicality and technology of the lift are portrayed as frightening which provides insight into her anxious personality, 'At first she'd been terrified of the lifts, the rickety way they clanked and jarred from floor to floor. But gradually she'd become used to it'.[85] The lift is also used to emphasise her solitude, 'although sometimes the

[82] Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.
[83] Martin, 'Dis-Locative Effect', p. 71.
[84] James Quinn, *This Much is True – 14 Directors on Documentary Filmmaking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 261.
[85] Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.

fear came back, especially if she was alone'.[86] Whereas the lift is often a formidable or lonely place for the woman and impacts greatly on her mobility, for boys it is a playful space, 'One of their favourite tricks was to press all the buttons so that the next one to use the lift would stop at every floor. That was one that seemed to annoy everybody, and the boys were always in danger of being thumped for it'.[87] The complexities of neighbours who are also strangers sharing the space of the lift, and the tension between community and isolation, are intimately connected with its history. Bernard points out the concerns surrounding established spatial orders when elevators were first introduced into the most expensive apartment buildings during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

> The elevator cab intensified the problematic relationship between private and public space, intimacy and anonymity already evident in the stairwell […] how great must have been the challenge to the order of communal life represented by an elevator whose passengers are forced to stand crowded together in a small space?[88]

The issues are further complicated when gender is taken into consideration. The mapping of gender and space has long been identified in classic codings between a masculine public sphere and feminine private, often domestic, sphere. Such distinctions have been considered as important – if idealised – aspects of social order, from the salons of eighteenth-century Europe to the restriction of women, characterised as reproductive labourers, to 'hidden' private space in classical Greece.[89] However, such clear distinctions between male public and female private space are not always evident in practice. As the social geographer Liz Bondi writes, 'not only do both women and men traverse public and private domains in their daily lives, but also many of the activities and interactions characteristic of daily life take place in spaces that are not unambiguously situated in either "public" or "private" domains'.[90]

The following extract, from Karen Campbell's novel *This Is Where I Am* (2014), demonstrates the gendered coding of the lift's space. The narrator is Abdi, a Somalian refugee who lives with his young daughter in a tower block in Glasgow:

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[86] Spence, *Colours*, p. 162.
[87] Ibid., p. 166.
[88] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 192.
[89] See Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[90] Liz Bondi, 'Gender, Class and Urban Space: Public and Private Space in Contemporary Urban Landscapes', *Urban Geography*, 19 (1998), 160-85, p. 164.

> The last time I took a lift, there was a teenage girl lying inside it. Her eyes were closed, and there was a needle protruding from the crook of her inner elbow […] I knelt to check the girl was breathing, saw a spit-bubble at her lips […] Her lips moved and I pretended she was fine. Left her there, sliding up and down in the metal cage, and crept inside and locked my door.[91]

The image of the helpless girl being transported repeatedly up and down the tower in the 'cage' is a disturbing one. We are presented with another damsel in distress, a passive female, and a man in control – although this unconscious young woman has taken opiates which numb any distress she experiences. This is an intimate space – the detail of the spit-bubble evokes the lift's sense of confinement and the proximity of the characters – yet Abdi regards it as a public space, a space over which he has no responsibility or ownership and that he can dissociate from, a place for encounters with anonymous 'neighbours who are also strangers'.[92] Abdi lives in the same block as the girl yet this is not impetus enough for him to help her even though he is, fundamentally, a good character. He can retreat to the private space of his flat and 'pretend' that the situation is not happening, although the use of the word 'crept' hints at his shame. Abdi's response to the lift as a public space is unusual for a male character, perhaps because as a refugee and single parent he occupies a marginal social position. The final line of this quotation, when Abdi locks his door, can be likened to the final sentence of 'Greensleeves', 'she closed the door and turned the key, locking herself in for the night'.[93] Both examples emphasise the delineation between the spaces of the tower block which are coded as public and private. Similarly, in *Species of Spaces*, Georges Perec describes an apartment's front door as a threshold: 'The door breaks space in two, splits it, prevents osmosis, imposes a partition. On one side, me and *my place*, the private, the domestic […] on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics.'[94] For the characters I discuss here, there is little or no ambiguity that the common space, that which is outside the flat but within the confines of the building, is anything other than public.

Doris Lessing's 'The Mother of the Child in Question' ('The Mother'), a short story about home, maternal love and the role of the welfare state, provides an excellent example of gendered representations of space which are coded and represented as 'public' and 'private' – particularly the latter which is relatively unexplored in the fiction of the tower block. A social worker, Stephen Bentley, attempts to persuade the mother of a working-class

[91] Karen Campbell, *This Is Where I Am* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 27.
[92] Martin, (Dis)locative, p. 66.
[93] Spence, 'Colours', p. 170.
[94] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 37.

immigrant family to send their disabled daughter to a special school.[95] 'The Mother' appears in *London Observed: Stories and Sketches* (1992) but the setting is not identified in the story and, contained within the footprint of the estate, it has a placeless feel which contributes to the sense of anonymity and isolation; this tower block, like the tower block in 'Greensleeves', is unnamed. The non-place of the block's public space contrasts strikingly with the private space of the flat, which is narrated as intimate and feminine. The depiction is encapsulated in this definition of exterior and interior by the architectural historian Gerard Rey Lico:

> So men are engaged in erecting grand and impressive edifices, skyscrapers […] that "project" and leave a sore-thumb effect on the landscape. But these male erections are usually cold, oppressive, and inhuman. Yet, the confinement of women in the enclosed space of domesticity yields positive results: a domestic interior of women that is warm, rich, nurturing, and comfortable.[96]

Lessing uses the leitmotif of the lift as a shorthand or code to set the scene and to delineate the public and the private space in the opening paragraph, 'The lift smelled bad: someone had been sick in it. He [Stephen] walked up grey urine-smelling stairs'.[97] These familiar elicitors of disgust – vomit and urine – conjure a grimy, hostile environment, a public environment. When Stephen enters the flat he is thrust into a soft world full of colour: a 'red plush sofa'; 'polished', 'shining', 'brightly coloured' objects; the mother, Mrs Khan, wears 'flowered pink silk' and a 'pink gauzy scarf'.[98] As Cuming states, 'depictions of interiors and housing take on unique and imaginative forms in the context of a domestic environment that has sometimes been negatively associated with homogeneity and social marginalisation'.[99] The reader is taken from outside the block, painted as a filthy and deserted expanse, through the common spaces of the stairwell, lift and corridors and into the private interior which is small and claustrophobic, 'overfilled overclean'.[100]

Mrs Khan is ensconced at home caring for her daughter, Shireen, while Mr Khan is out at work. The female characters remain inside when Stephen and Hassan (a young son) leave the flat at the end of the story. Only male characters are witnessed outside the block:

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[95] Doris Lessing, 'The Mother of the Child in Question', in *London Observed: Stories and Sketches* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).
[96] Gerard Rey Lico, 'Architecture and sexuality: the politics of gendered space', *Humanities Diliman: A Philippine Journal of Humanities*, 2 (2001), 30-44, p. 39.
[97] Lessing, 'The Mother', p. 36.
[98] Ibid., pp. 36-37.
[99] Cuming, *Housing*, p. 167.
[100] Lessing, 'The Mother', p. 38.

Stephen, Hassan and an old man with a walking stick. In Mr Khan's absence, Hassan is the representative, even though he has older sisters, and when Stephen mentions a charge for the school, Hassan replies, 'My father has the money'. Neither female character has a voice: Mrs Khan's English is poor and Shireen cannot speak. However, when Stephen asks Hassan, 'Did your father tell you to be here?', Hassan replies 'No, sir. My mother said I must be here'.[101] The social worker realises that it is neither Mr Khan nor the state in control but Mrs Khan, 'That woman, that *mother*, would not admit her little girl was simple [...] Mrs Khan was watching him, proud she had won yet another victory against those busybodies'.[102]

The historical association of women and domestic space establishes the home as a place of feminine containment and oppression, a depiction which tallies with that of 'Greensleeves', *Under a Thin Moon* and 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky'. In contrast, in Lessing's story it also acts as a space of resistance and empowerment which contrasts with female experience of the public space of the tower block. This reading echoes bell hooks' description of the value of 'homeplace' as a refuge for black women, 'that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we heal our wounds and become whole'.[103]

In the fictional texts analysed for this thesis, I had expected to encounter an ambiguity in the depictions of the common, internal spaces of the high-rise, in line with Bernard who argues that such spaces fill 'an unstable intermediate position between the private space behind closed apartment doors and the public space outside the building'.[104] I have, however, established that the ostensibly liminal spaces of the tower block are clearly coded as public and that it is a flat's front door which is the threshold between private and public space. Characters interact with these coded spaces in distinctly gendered ways: male characters traverse the common space of the tower block and its environs whereas female characters are confined to their flats or, as in the case of the teenage girl in *This Is Where I Am*, trapped inside the lift. When female characters do use the lift, it is largely portrayed as fetid and frightening and a space of encounter rather than interaction. In Chapter 2, I develop this discussion to examine how the experience of disgust associated with the lift contributes to the gendering of vertical space.

[101] Lessing, 'The Mother', p. 40.
[102] Ibid., p. 42.
[103] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 49.
[104] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 177.

Chapter 2: The Disgusting Lift

> The goal of civilizing manners is to repress the disgusting, to put it out of mind or at least out of mind in public spaces.
>
> William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*[105]

In Zadie Smith's novel *NW* (2012), the narrator mentions, in an off-hand manner, 'lifts that were to be avoided almost as soon as they were built'.[106] This reflects an image of the lift which has become so entrenched in the imagination of readers that the space is now evocative with minimal description. The disgusting and defective lift, in which urine is as ubiquitous as graffiti, is a recurring trope. In *The Uses of Phobia*, a series of essays on literature and film, David Trotter examines representations of the urban phone box which, like the tower block lift, has become 'indelibly associated in the literary imagination with urine'.[107] This chapter examines the role of disgust in narratives of the lift, the tower block and its residents. Focusing on Livi Michael's novel *Under a Thin Moon* and drawing on work on disgust and affect, I argue that the disgusting nature of the lift 'sticks' to female characters, emphasising the role of the building in shaping their lives and the role of the residents in shaping the building. Developing themes introduced in the previous chapter, I explore questions around isolation, transience and agency. I suggest that in the works I analyse, the female characters' lack of power and exclusion from society derives partly from the social production of the space of the lift.

In literature, lifts and phone boxes are places where you can be private in public and are often out of order and vandalised. Indeed, as David Trotter argues, 'we don't fully recognise a phone-booth as a phone-booth until we've felt just a little bit sick at the sight and smell of it. The disgust is the recognition'.[108] He continues, 'the phobic object or scene is never unrepresentable. Far from remaining unconscious, phobia is informed throughout by a person's perception and beliefs about the environment'.[109] Consequently, Smith does

[105] William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 182.
[106] Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 301.
[107] David Trotter, *The Uses of Phobia: Essays on Literature and Film* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), p. 140.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

not need to mention the urine, vomit and excrement in the lift in *NW*, the reader brings that knowledge with them.

I draw on the work of Mary Douglas and other theorists of disgust as a way of understanding some of the factors at work in this literature. Douglas, in her classic anthropological text, *Purity and Danger*, in which she defines dirt as 'matter out of place', suggests that 'as we examine pollution beliefs we find that the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load [...] I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the 'social order''.[110] In the literature of the tower block, the disgust associated with the lift is used to establish a space in which the social order – and indeed social order – is seen to have broken down. Indeed, one of the few works of high-rise fiction which does not reflect Beswick's 'social ruin and ruination', is *The China Governess* (1963), a crime novel by Margery Allingham.[111] This novel depicts a London tower block, and council tenants, in stark contrast to later works and reflects the differing dramatic conventions associated with the 'structure of feeling' (to use Raymond Williams' phrase) of the early 1960s, a time when the discourse around the tower block was less determined by the pessimism that has since established itself. [112]

The China Governess is unusual in that the author comments on the optimism associated with the high-rise – 'This estate is called a Phoenix […] it's a social rebirth, a statement of a sincere belief that decent conditions make a decent community' – *and* the squalid conditions of the slums which tower blocks were often built to replace.[113] Mr Cornish, a local councillor, focusses on the plight of women and children in this visceral description of slum life:

> 'Children crawled over each other like little grey worms in the gutters,' he said. 'The only red things about them were their buttocks and they were raw. Their faces looked as if snails had slimed on them and their mothers were like great sick beasts whose byres had never been cleared. The stink and the noise and the cold and the hatred got into your belly and nothing and no one has ever got it out again.'[114]

[110] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.
[111] Margaret Allingham, *The China Governess* (London: Penguin, 1967).
[112] Raymond Williams writes 'it seems clear that the dramatic conventions of any given period are fundamentally related to the structure of feeling in that period. I use the phrase *structure of feeling* because it seems to me more accurate, in this context, than *ideas* or *general life*'. Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama Limited, 1954), p. 21.
[113] Allingham, *Governess*, p. 16.
[114] Ibid., p. 107.

Depictions of disgusting tower block common areas are missing from *The China Governess*, 'they entered the aluminium-lined passenger elevator which carried them up to the top floor. The convenience and neatness impressed him'.[115] Yet, within a decade or so, in fictional representations of the tower block, the slums are not mentioned and it is the tower block itself which has become disgusting.[116]

Livi Michael's novel, *Under a Thin Moon*, set on an estate in Manchester in the 1980s, is a passionate, political commentary on Thatcherism. In an interview in 2000, Michael said, 'I had experience of growing up on a council estate and this gave me a powerful sense of what [an] environment can do. This is what I wanted to communicate'.[117] She has also commented, 'I write from a female working class [*sic*] perspective. My politics are driven from where I come from. It is an emotional bias that stays with you all your life'.[118]

Under a Thin Moon is a painful portrayal of four marginalised women disempowered by their gender, class and poverty; each of the four interwoven narratives is told from a third person character perspective. I focus on the story of Wanda – a seventeen-year-old single mother who seems far older than her years – and the difficulties of bringing up her young daughter, Coral, in a highly unstable domestic and financial situation. The tower block in which Wanda lives, indeed the world in which she operates, is bereft of any sense of community or support network; Wanda becomes increasingly vulnerable to exploitation and is treated cruelly by men and women alike as she, in turn, is increasingly cruel to Coral. The quality of her unhappy life degenerates amid a destructive cycle of debilitating poverty. The homophone of her name is indicative of the path her life is taking, '*wander* […] to be (in motion) without control or direction […] to have no fixed abode or station'.[119] Initially,

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[115] Allingham, *Governess*, p. 13.

[116] Allingham is prophetic about the problems which high-rise blocks were destined to face. Mr Cornish infers a lack of community, perhaps referring to modernist architects' 'streets in the sky', 'It's not quite like a street. A lot can happen without the neighbours knowing'. Allingham, *Governess*, p. 11; Jane Stevenson wrote, '[Allingham] must have been one of the first writers to observe the alienating potential of tower blocks, even while the concrete was still setting in the first wave of postwar town planning'. Jane Stevenson, 'Queen of Crime', *Guardian*, 19 August 2006, Fiction, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/19/fiction.shopping1> [accessed 30 June 2018].

[117] Pat Wheeler, Sharon Monteith and Livi Michael, 'Interview with Livi Michael', *Critical Survey*, 12 (2000), pp. 94-107, p. 94.

[118] Bernadette Hyland, 'Livi Michael draws on her northern, working class [*sic*] roots to bring the Lancashire Witches back to life', *Guardian*, 11 September 2012, Books, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/the-northerner/2012/sep/11/blogpost-lancashire-witches-pendle-livi-michael [accessed 30 June 2018].

[119] "wander, v." *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], Oxford University Press, June 2018, <www.oed.com/view/Entry/225437> [Accessed 1 July 2018].

Wanda seeks to numb her pain though compulsive spending but as her debts escalate she is forced to take a job as a bar maid and has to leave Coral with Di, a neighbour who allows the young children she looks after to watch pornographic videos and later in the novel robs Wanda of her few possessions. Wanda's boss threatens to sack her and offers her substantial sums of money to have sex with him; eventually, utterly dejected, Wanda succumbs.

The lift, depicted as a disgusting space, plays an important role in *Under a Thin Moon* and central to this evocation of disgust is urine and excrement. There are few other public spaces in literature – exceptions being toilets and phone boxes – in which characters are confined in proximity with the bodily secretions of strangers. It is the combination of the disgusting and the public nature of the space which makes the symbolism of the tower block lift so effective. This is no new sensibility: echoing Mary Douglas' suggestion that 'dirt is matter out of place', William Miller quotes from a handbook on manners written in 1589, 'Let no one, whoever he may be, before, at, or after meals, early or late, foul the staircases, corridors, or closets with urine or other filth, but go to suitable, prescribed places for such relief'.[120] In *Under a Thin Moon,* the disgust is evident from the protagonist's instinctive reaction to the lift the first time we see her use it, 'Wanda holds her breath so she can't smell the muddy urine they are standing in [...] [She] is glad to get out of the lift so she can breathe'.[121]

The lift is not the only common space associated with the fetor of urine – stairs are often tainted too. In *In the Ditch* (1972) – a semi-autobiographical novel which examines immigration and the welfare state – in which the protagonist, Adah, is also a single mother, Buchi Emecheta uses the stairwell as a leitmotif. In a description of Adah's new home, Emecheta writes, 'The stairs leading to the top flats were of grey stone, so steep that it took Adah and her kids weeks to get used to them. They were always smelly with a thick lavatorial stink'.[122] The disgusting stairwell is mentioned again later in the novel: 'She [Adah] had to be careful over the wet slimy stairs (some teenagers had decide [*sic*] to make a toilet of them)'.[123] The adjective 'slimy' is a powerful one, loaded with visceral meaning. In her discussion on the performativity of disgust, Sara Ahmed quotes Jean-Paul Sartre on

[120] Miller, *Anatomy*, p. 153.
[121] Michael, *Thin Moon*, pp. 138-139.
[122] Buchi Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (London: Allison & Busby, 1979), p. 26; Adah lives in a ten-storey mansion block but many of the problems she faces are pertinent to tower blocks. There is also an interesting section later in the novel in which the council offers to re-house her in a flat in a high-rise.
[123] Ibid., p. 50.

substances which are neither solid nor liquid, 'I suddenly understand the snare of the slimy: it is a fluidity which holds me and compromises me […] it clings to me like a leech'.[124] In Ahmed's terms, the slime on the stairs is not only disgusting and dangerous, it also sticks – literally and symbolically – to Adah.

Although the stairs in *In the Ditch* are disgusting, as Michael effectively conveys in her description of urine in a lift, disgust is intensified when experienced in a confined, airless space: not only is the smell more potent, it becomes impossible to distance oneself and the desire to distance oneself is instinctive. As Winfried Menninghaus writes:

> The fundamental schema of disgust is the experience of a nearness that is not wanted […] the defence mechanism of disgust consists in a spontaneous and especially energetic act of saying "no" (Nietzsche). Yet disgust implies, not just an ability to say no, but even more a compulsion to say no, an inability *not* to say no.[125]

However, as in Wanda's experience, when a character is inside a lift, it is impossible to say 'no'; for the duration of the journey he or she is trapped in proximity to that which disgusts, in this case 'muddy urine'. The 'muddy' could refer to the colour of the urine, conjuring a dark, strong-smelling liquid, or it could refer to mud itself, another elicitor of disgust, a 'sticky' substance which 'clings' – in this case to the pram, 'The trolley wheels make muddy tracks across the floor as they leave'.[126] Similarly, in Hudson's novel, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma*, the narrator, Janey, who has lived with her mother in a succession of bedsits, bed and breakfasts, and council flats has no choice but to use the lift despite its repulsiveness, 'Even if the lift was working, and it usually wasn't, you had to get into the piss-stinking metal box full of shattered glass and baggy, milky condoms, trying to hold your breath until the nineteenth floor'.[127] Once again the lift serves as a shorthand, used to illustrate how Balfour Court is 'the worst high-rise' when Janey and her mother move into their new flat.[128] Furthermore, the condition of the lift allows the reader to make judgements not only about the building, but about people who live in tower blocks because, as Miller writes, 'Above all, it [disgust] is a moral and social sentiment. It plays a motivating and confirming role in moral judgement'.[129] The 'disgusting' lift thus becomes a

[124] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 90.
[125] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 1.
[126] Michael, *Thin Moon*, pp. 138-39.
[127] Hudson, *Tony Hogan*, p. 136.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Miller, *Anatomy*, p. 2.

synecdoche for the 'disgusting' tower block and the 'disgusting' residents who shape the space in which they live.

Echoing Wanda's experience of stickiness, Campbell describes the tower block lift as 'an aluminium cell sticky with spit and sweets'.[130] Ahmed writes, 'the sticky and the disgusting have been linked, if not reduced to each other,' and the word 'sticky' itself is used to convey disgustingness. [131] She continues, 'To name something as disgusting is to transfer the stickiness of the word 'disgust' to an object, which henceforth becomes generated as the very thing that is spoken'. Identifying places and people as disgusting is thus performative and captures the damaging effect of the portrayal of the tower block as a hostile environment. As Ahmed argues, 'to get stuck to something sticky is also to become sticky'.[132] We can see this on a number of levels in *Under a Thin Moon*: disgust sticks to Wanda and her baby when the muddy urine follows them out of the lift on the wheels of the pram.[133] The point is also pertinent on a larger scale; as Nicola Wilson writes, '*Under a Thin Moon* offers a powerful story of environmental determinism [...] and the links between gender, poverty and place'.[134]

It is apparent that the physical environment of the tower block and the people who live in it 'stick' to Wanda and contribute to her becoming increasingly 'sticky' or 'disgusting' herself. The verticality of the block is referenced in relation to Wanda abusing her daughter, '[She] knows there is no limit to the *downward* [emphasis added] slide. She used to think you could go no further than hurting a child,' but her situation worsens when she accepts payment for sex, 'She is overwhelmed by the ugliness of what has happened with Jim'.[135]

However, this deterministic interpretation, which privileges the role of the physical environment in shaping the lives, experiences and characters of those living in it, contrasts with the dialectic of society and space introduced by Lefebvre, Massey and other theorists of space. From this perspective, it is also evident how the physical environment of the block is shaped by social processes and particularly the actions of other residents. Wanda is not one of the disgusting residents who shape the lift or the other common spaces, the

[130] Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited*, p. 35.
[131] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 89.
[132] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 91.
[133] A pram is also used in *Our Fathers* to juxtapose the innocence of a young child with the disgusting space of a lift, 'The sliding door of the 'Evens' lift was trapped in a mangled pram'. O'Hagan, *Our Fathers*, p. 69.
[134] Nicola Wilson, *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 163.
[135] Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 204; p. 222.

protagonists of tower block fiction rarely are. She is one who experiences the disgust that others create or, as Trotter puts it in relation to the phone box, the 'stickiness left behind by a previous user'.[136]

Wanda is acted upon by others through the spaces of the tower block and distanced from these spaces and the people who occupy them by Michael's use of the medical term 'urine' as opposed to the scatological 'piss'. As the novel progresses, a shift in the language, from the colloquial to the formal, is indicative of Wanda's increasing desire to disconnect, to 'unstick', from her environment – which she does, ultimately, by ending her life. It is interesting to note that when the lift is mentioned in this earlier quotation, it is not 'faeces' or 'excrement' that is referred to but 'shit':

> She [Wanda] can hear the groans and creaking from the lift shaft, the howls and shrieks of the lads who are messing about in the lift. Up and down the floors they go, banging on the metal doors, and in the morning MUFC, Gaynor is a slag, will be smeared all over the walls in their shit. And the lift won't work. Again.[137]

In this quotation, men adversely shape the physical and emotional environment of the lift and Wanda has to deal with the consequences. Through urinating and defecating, and daubing tribal and misogynistic graffiti on the walls, men not only transform the lift into a disgusting and frightening space, they assert ownership of the space and ultimately, as a result of the vandalism, take usership away from others. These unseen men are not given the status of character. It is as though they form part of the setting or environment; their narrative purpose is to illustrate their impact and reveal the residue they leave behind.

In the majority of texts I analyse, the attribution of blame for the anti-social behaviour which causes disgust in the lift is explicit: the perpetrators are men and boys. In a few texts – such as in the example of Hudson's lift quoted earlier, which is described as 'piss stinking' and filled with 'shattered glass' and 'baggy milky condoms', blame is not explicitly ascribed. The 'baggy milky condoms' could be the result of sex between a man and a woman, or indeed, two men. I have not, however, encountered examples in which blame is attributed to women or girls; females are always the victims. It is interesting to note that little or no attempt is made by the authors to understand or empathise with the reasons why men act in the way they do or to consider that their behaviour could be a form of resistance and subversion. This is a very different stance to that taken in the depiction of the antisocial

[136] Trotter, *Phobia*, p. 140.
[137] Michael, *Thin Moon*, pp. 49-50.

behaviour of boys, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. When boys are the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour it is often framed as a form of subversive play, a reaction to the establishment and the conditions of the environment imposed upon them.

Wanda's experience of disgust in the lift is not dissimilar to that of the protagonist of 'Greensleeves' who comments, 'At times it could be really disgusting, with people being sick or even using the lifts as toilets'.[138] The lift is portrayed as a vital piece of infrastructure for women but a space that men and boys vandalise or play in. However, there is ambiguity in the elderly female protagonist's experience of disgust: she describes the urination in the lifts as 'really disgusting' but when the caretaker recounts how the perpetrator of the act was punished she feels a degree of sympathy for the boy:

> Staunin therr bold as ye like,' he'd [the caretaker] said, 'pishin in the coarner! So ah took um bi the scruff a the neck and rubbed is bloody nose in it! Told um if they acted lik wee dugs they'd get treated like them. Dirty wee tikes!'
>
> She'd thought that was a bit cruel and maybe a bit coarse as well, but she couldn't help laughing with the others.[139]

In the texts I analyse in this thesis, female reactions to the lift and the acts which take place in it are passive: fear, awkwardness, embarrassment. This contrasts with the behaviour shown by a man, albeit a caretaker in a position of authority, who responds with aggression. Usually, however, if children are the perpetrators of antisocial behaviour there is a more considered response, from both men and women. In 'Greensleeves', for example, the protagonist overhears a discussion about poor behaviour in which two women allude to the role of the detrimental conditions in which the children live:

> 'You should see some of the children, running about wild. Like wee savages. And as for some of the language!'
>
> 'Mind you,' the other one had said, 'You can't really expect anything else. They're all just shifted out from Partick and Govan, and all these dirty old tenements are just falling to bits. It's not as if they've ever known anything better'.[140]

As introduced in Chapter 1, the lift is ostensibly a liminal space, a threshold between public and private. In the lift in *Under a Thin Moon*, as in the lift in 'Greensleeves', it is men and boys who create and control the impact of disgust and damage and this reflects the gendering of agency in the lift and the tower block as a whole. We see how the gendered appropriation

[138] Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.
[139] Ibid., p. 163.
[140] Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

of the space affects its disgusting nature: it is a more private space for men than for women and girls, a space in which men are private in public and commit intimate acts such as urinating or defecating. It is also men and boys who transform and appropriate the lift through tagging and other graffiti. The protagonist of 'Greensleeves' notes this proprietorial male behaviour, 'The lifts were always marked with *their* slogans, strange symbols, *their* own names, the names of *their* gangs [emphases added]'.[141] In the previous chapter, I described how the space of the lift is narrated as public rather than semi-public or private space. Here, the reiteration of the word 'their' emphasises how the homosocial interaction of men with the material space of the lift asserts a dynamic of enclosure and exclusion which establishes the lift as a space in which the female narrator feels out of place. In the following chapter I move from a discussion of 'sticky' lifts to 'stuck' lifts, deepening my discussion of the interaction of the uses and materiality of the lift to consider how it enables or restricts the mobility of tower block residents.

[141] Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.

Chapter 3: The Stuck Lift

> And stalled lifts generating high-rise blues
> can be set loose. But stalled lives never budge.
>
> Edwin Morgan, *Collected Poems*[142]

The French cultural theorist Paul Virilio observed that the invention of each new type of transportation produced a new type of accident: shipwrecks, train derailments, aeroplane crashes.[143] Bernard adds, 'The elevator, whose danger of falling was soon eliminated, produced at the end of the nineteenth century the new accident type "getting stuck"'.[144] Reflecting on 'the mobilities paradigm' which grew out of the spatial turn associated with the work of Lefebvre and Massey, sociologist Mimi Sheller emphasises the coveted value of mobility in contemporary societies. In doing so, she quotes Zygmunt Bauman's suggestion that, 'the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern time'.[145] As Sheller continues, this ability to move depends upon access to elements such as money, vaccines, or qualifications, but also 'a capability to connect to others', access to 'technical systems' including cars, lifts, aircraft and the like and, perhaps most importantly, resources to manage these when the system fails.[146] Moreover, as is clearly seen in the texts I analyse here, mobilities depend on, 'lumpy, fragile, aged, gendered, racialised, and more or less impaired bodies, inhabited as people are intermittently on the move'.[147]

The stuck lift is ubiquitous in fictional representations of the tower block; it is not, however, used to display the range of tropes – most commonly sexual encounter and confession – found in literature, film, television and advertising set in other types of buildings. The stuck lift of the tower block does not form 'group[s] thrown together by fate, a "closed society" par excellence', as Bernard describes.[148] It is used as a plot device to drive characters to, and draw attention to, the stairwell and other common areas, or to keep

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[142] Edwin Morgan, 'Glasgow Sonnets', in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 292.
[143] Paul Virilio, qtd. in Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 211.
[144] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 211.
[145] Mimi Sheller, 'From spatial turn to mobilities turn', *Current Sociology Monograph*, 65 (2017), 623–39, p. 626.
[146] Ibid., p. 631.
[147] Ibid., p. 629.
[148] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 246.

characters inside their flats. The impact of the broken-down lift in tower blocks has immediate and quotidian consequences for women and children. On a broader scale it also acts as a metaphor for the social, economic and spatial immobility of tower block residents.

In the fiction of the tower block, the lift is so often broken or takes so long to arrive that when it does work it is worthy of note as in Karen Campbell's novel *This Is Where I Am* when the narrator, Abdi, comments, 'Pressing the button, expecting the interminable wait, and instead – magic happens! The lift doors open. This is a rare good omen'.[149] The lift's role in mobilities is crucial, as Graham argues, 'the social isolation caused by the breakdown of lifts can impact just as deeply as that caused by the failure of transport systems such as trains or buses'.[150] Isolation is a recurring theme in the fiction of the tower block and, as Cuming observes, 'Many literary narratives of female experience on mass housing estates […] are characterised by a defining sense of physical immobility, usually in the form of the protagonist's confinement in the domestic sphere, resulting in a paralysing sense of isolation and inwardness'.[151] Although Cuming's analysis includes literature and film set in high-rise blocks she does not mention the importance of the lift in her discussion of immobilities. In the texts I analyse in this thesis, it is not only the lift which is portrayed as stuck but also the residents. Ahmed writes, 'Some forms of stickiness are about holding things together. Some are about blockages or stopping things moving'.[152] The OED defines stuck as both, 'held fast or trapped in some place or position; unable to move or be moved' and 'unable to progress or develop; blocked, stalled'.[153]

'Taking Doreen out of the Sky' ('Doreen') is the title story from Alan Beard's collection of thirteen vignettes. The vignettes offer insightful snapshots of the difficult everyday lives of working-class people – all but two of the stories are told in the first person – and are set against the complex urban landscapes of the West Midlands in the 1980s and 1990s. 'Doreen', which takes place over the course of one evening, is the tale of a man who is made redundant, his sadness, and the trepidation he feels about breaking the news to his wife. Mark, the protagonist, lives with his wife, Doreen, and their son, Ian, in a tower block. They are desperate to move out of their flat but, as Mark says, 'With only one kid we're a

[149] Campbell, *This Is Where I Am*, p. 27.
[150] Graham, 'Super-tall and Ultra-deep', p. 256.
[151] Cuming, *Housing*, p. 189.
[152] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, p. 91.
[153] "stuck, adj.2." *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online], Oxford University Press, June 2018, <www.oed.com/view/Entry/192040> [Accessed 1 July 2018].

long way down the [council's waiting] list'.[154] Mark and his wife conform to traditional gender roles: Mark is the wage earner and Doreen stays at home to look after their three-year-old son. As the story's title suggests, Doreen's role is ostensibly passive, although we later see how Mark too has little control over a number of aspects of his life.

The story begins as Mark has just been made redundant without notice from his job on the production line in a factory which manufactures seals for steel rings. He is devastated by the news, 'It was a chunk of paradise to me – a big firm with big wages', as his ambition to escape from poverty and move out of the high-rise flat into a house with a garden has been thwarted; he meanders through the city as he makes his way home. [155]

References to verticality pervade this story from the title onwards. Mark comments on his ambition, 'Each seal supposedly getting us a ha'penny or so nearer the ground', to move into a house, 'three or four years and Doreen would be opening the front door on to the street, perhaps a garden'.[156] On Mark's way home from work an evangelist hands him a leaflet, 'Either you are on the DOWNWARD course which leads to destruction or on the UPWARD path which leads to life'.[157] When Mark arrives back at the tower he comments, 'I thought Doreen might be looking down at me – perhaps bringing in washing from that oversized flowerbox which is our balcony', a spatial metaphor for his apprehension that Doreen will despise him when she hears his news; this fear is later substantiated when she says, 'If you'd trained for something instead of drinking away your youth perhaps we wouldn't be here now'. When the couple discuss the redundancy, Doreen asks, "'Well, are we upward or downward bound?' 'God knows,' I said and laughed for the first time today. 'Downward, let's hope, out of this flat'".[158]

The stuck or broken-down lift is not only used as a metaphor for being trapped but, in addition, illustrates how its failure impacts more on the mobilities of women and children than men. When Mark discovers that the lift is broken he uses the stairwell instead, 'I hesitated outside our door, wheezing like Eric [a colleague] from the eight flights of stairs and the smell of piss'.[159] For Doreen, however, using the stairs has not been an option. Mark says, 'I asked how Ian had been ('Bombing around as usual'), if she'd been out (no – the lift

[154] Beard, 'Doreen', p. 57.
[155] Ibid., p. 48.
[156] Ibid., p. 49.
[157] Ibid., p. 52.
[158] Ibid., p. 64.
[159] Ibid., p. 57.

was out of order)'. Doreen has been stuck inside the cramped flat with an energetic three-year-old boy, immobilised by the broken lift. Mark reveals that this situation is not unusual, 'I worry about Doreen cooped up with Ian inside that flat. Though she hardly complains, I can see her tightening with it; it's getting to her insides, making her ill'.[160] The repetition of the word 'inside' – firstly in relation to the flat and then Doreen's body, creates a sense of physical and mental confinement and the word 'tightening' suggests that the predicament is getting worse.

When the lift is broken – as it often is in the fiction of the tower block – the only option is the stairs. In a 1977 article about Greater London Council blocks, written during a maintenance engineers' strike, Nikki Knewstub notes that '591 lifts were not working out of a total of 2,900'.[161] The article quotes a mother who says 'When the lifts are out I just have to stay here. You can't take a child of 17 months and a three-months-old baby up and down 21 flights of stairs'.[162] As this mother's experience shows, and as is illustrated in 'Doreen', stairs are not equally accessible to men and women, because it is generally women who care for young children. Although Mark wheezes when he uses the stairs, men typically use them with little comment, as in this exchange in Smith's *NW* when a resident speaks to his guest, '"Press that [lift] button now, will you? Broken? Ah well, let's take the stairs – better for you"'.[163] Stairs for women, however, are portrayed as more problematic: when Wanda uses the stairwell she is assaulted and Doreen and the protagonist of 'Greensleeves' stay indoors, unable to use it at all. [164]

When the lift was introduced into apartment buildings at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was seen as a technology that would benefit women and children. In a German history of the hygiene movement published in 1912, Wilhelm Gemünd commented that climbing stairs presented hazards 'especially for the feeble, those suffering from cardiac and pulmonary diseases, convalescents, girls and young women especially during menses'.[165] Bernard states that the installation of the lift meant that the residents of top

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[160] Beard, 'Doreen', p. 51.
[161] Nikki Knewstub, 'High on the 21st floor, fear lies in a lift shaft', *Guardian*, 15 November 1977, Politics Past, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1977/nov/15/past.firefighters2> [accessed 30 June 2018].
[162] Ibid.
[163] Smith, *NW*, p. 112.
[164] In *Brick Lane*, the stairwell is depicted as a hostile environment when used by Nazneen, the protagonist, 'The stairs gave off a tang of urine. She bunched the skirts of her sari with one hand and took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle against an unforgiving ridge'. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), p. 54.
[165] Wilhelm Gemünd, qtd. in Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 114.

storeys no longer had to endure the difficulty of climbing stairs and that it would encourage children to spend more time outdoors.[166] Remarkably, more than a century later, when women use the stairwell in the fiction I analyse it is portrayed as tiring or dangerous or impossible to climb and is as much a site of fear and disgust as the lift. For example, in Emecheta's *In the Ditch* we see how the condition of the stairs impacts negatively on Adah's mobility, 'the light bulbs along the stairway had their own way of going out at night […] you had to plan all your outings in the day when there was enough light.[167] Stairs are not only portrayed as worrying for the women themselves, they are also anxious about their children playing on them. Adah voices her concerns, 'I'm thankful the kids spend most of their time at school and do not have to run up and down them [the stairs]. They're so dangerous'.[168] In *Under a Thin Moon,* Wanda reluctantly allows Coral to play in the stairwells and on the landings; she won't let her daughter play outside but can't keep her inside either, 'it [the flat] is too small and cramped and the neighbours complain if she is noisy'.[169]

Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment is a collection of critical essays which explores the relationship between women and the built environment, a publication which evolved from the meetings of a feminist architectural discussion group held in the late 1970s.[170] The image on the front cover encapsulates a theme in the gendering of vertical space often represented in fiction: a woman struggling up a flight of stairs carrying a pram with a baby in it. In her essay, Jos Boys writes that the design of housing can, 'exaggerate the distances of facilities from women at home [...] in the lifts, stairs and lobbies of high-rise flats [...] Physical space can add to the isolation of childcare and domestic labour'.[171] In her book, *Council Housing and Culture,* Alison Ravetz writes that one of the hardest things about living in tower blocks was 'getting up and down in lifts that […] often failed'.[172] The geographer Stephen Graham expands on this:

> Unreliable, vandalised and poorly maintained elevators have long been an Achilles heel of modernist dreams of mass social housing in vertical towers [...] Without functioning elevators, these Corbusian blocks, rather than emancipating 'machines

[166] Bernard, *Lifted*, p. 91.
[167] Emecheta, *In the Ditch*, p. 50.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Michael, *Thin Moon,* p. 200.
[170] MATRIX, *Making Space: Women and the Man Made Environment* (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1985).
[171] Ibid., p. 47.
[172] Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 109.

> for living' or modern spaces projected into the light and air of vertical space, quickly reduce to dystopian places of extreme isolation and enforced withdrawal, *especially for those with children* [emphasis added].[173]

Graham is not suggesting that it is only mothers who struggle with broken-down lifts – of course fathers have parenting responsibilities too, although day-to-day care is rarely evidenced in the fiction I analyse, perhaps partly due to the greater number of single mothers in social housing.[174] However, the psychologist Robert Gifford suggests that it is women and children who suffer the greatest mental strain from high-rise living. A Canadian study, conducted in the late 1970s, concluded 'on higher floors, men experienced less strain, whereas women experienced more strain. The women in this study were all mothers, so the difference may well result from the difficulties of parenting from on high'.[175]

The difficulties of parenting from on high is often written about in the fiction of the tower block. The problems above identified by geographers, architects, and psychologists feature in fictional accounts of high-rise living and the impact of the broken-down lift on the lives of female residents and their children is a common preoccupation. The impact on women, and relative lack of impact on men, as shown in 'Doreen', is also conveyed in this passage from *In the Ditch*, in which Adah is advised by a female acquaintance not to accept the council's offer of a flat on the fourteenth storey of a tower block:

> We came here three months ago, but Jesus, it's awful. The height's enough to drive you round the bend, I'm so frightened. Are you coming to live here? Don't take it. Whatever do they want you to do with all your kids when the lifts break down? It has broken down about six times since we came here. I leave everything to John to carry up for me. It's killing.[176]

Once again, a woman's response to the tower block and the lift is gendered: the height is intimidating, so much so that it impacts on her mental health – she later reveals she takes sedatives – and without her husband she is unable to cope with the broken-down lift. Adah is generally portrayed as an intelligent, strong and resilient character yet the broken lift frightens her too:

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[173] Stephen Graham, *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 145.
[174] Between 1970 and 2000 the proportion of children born to single mothers who lived in social housing in the UK grew from six per cent to twenty-eight percent whereas the proportion of children born to single mothers in home ownership remained unchanged. Ruth Lupton, Rebecca Tunstall, Wendy Sigle-Rushton, Polina Obolenskaya, Ricardo Sabates, Elena Meschi, Dylan Kneale and Emma Salter, *Growing up in social housing in Britain: A profile of four generations, 1946 to the present day* (Tenant Services Authority: London, 2009), p. 5.
[175] Gifford, 'Consequences', p. 7.
[176] Emecheta, *In the Ditch*, p. 128.

> The thought of the lift breaking down and my having to carry my baby, push-chair and shopping up fourteen floors! Huh! What happens when I leave the children all alone in the flat to do my shopping? I'll go mad with worry.[177]

In the texts I analyse, if the lift is broken and a man is not available to help – be it because the woman is an isolated single mother such as Adah and Wanda, a widow like the protagonist of 'Greensleeves' or, as in the case of Doreen, their husband is out at work – women and their children are immobilised.

The gendered experience of lift immobilities is elaborated in a further important element of its dominant representation: namely that it is broken because it is vandalised. In *Under a Thin Moon*, the lift is put out of action by men and boys and this impacts greatly on Wanda. Her reaction to the broken lift illustrates her fragile mental state and reiterates the inconvenience and frustration of the recurring situation, '[Wanda] yanks the trolley through the swing-doors to the lift. She presses the lift button several times and smacks the metal door when it does not come'.[178]

In *Making Space*, Jos Boys argues that the spatial arrangement of tower blocks did not create 'high-rise blues' but 'by worsening the difficulties in getting out with small children or transporting heavy shopping up steps around endless corners and ramps, these estates must sometimes seem the last straw'. [179] The idea of the 'last straw' is conveyed in this extract from a page-long scene in which Wanda goes to and fro as she attempts to get out of the building with her baby:

> Wanda manoeuvres the trolley through three sets of swing-doors to the lift but Coral starts crying for her doll. When Wanda ignores her she begins to scream. Back they go through the three sets of swing-doors [...] Back she goes leaving Coral on the landing this time. But as they get through the first set of swing-doors there is a bubbling noise from Coral's nappy [...] She has shit over everything she has on.[180]

In the disturbing section which follows, an exasperated Wanda physically abuses her daughter as she changes her nappy. When Coral is finally ready, Wanda attempts to leave the flat but is once again thwarted, '[she] pushes her way through the three swing-doors to the lift. Then she turns back again. She has forgotten her bag'.[181]

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[177] Emecheta, *In the Ditch*, p. 128.
[178] Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 61.
[179] MATRIX, *Making Space*, p. 47.
[180] Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 32.
[181] Ibid., p. 33.

If the lift is out of order male characters use the stairwell; it is, however, extremely difficult for Wanda to negotiate stairs with a pram and a baby. This brings us back to the theme of public and private space. In vandalising the lift, and disrupting tower-block mobilities, men are not only asserting ownership, they are taking ownership, indeed *usership*, away from others. As discussed in the previous chapters, while the lift is ostensibly a common space for men and women, male activity creates a space which is less welcoming for women.

A second incident in which the broken-down lift impacts on a female character is found in 'Doreen'. As Mark stands outside his front door – waiting for his wife to let him in – he sees a neighbour, Ma Yates, 'She went past in fur-collared coat and old-fashioned knee-length boots, heading for the lift, muttering. I could have told her the lift was out of order but didn't, just watched her press the button and wait'.[182] In this scene, Mark is knowing and has acted on his knowledge and climbed the stairs, but Ma Yates is unknowing and impotent. It is yet another example involving the lift where men are in control, even when the equipment is broken.

However, a passage in which Mark describes the view of the high-rise opposite highlights that men living in tower blocks also lack agency, albeit in different ways. Mark is aware not only of his own confinement and immobility, he recognises that he is one of many in a similar situation:

> Those [flats] with curtains open showed scenes like ours – people grouped round TVs. I sometimes imagine the whole front being swung open on hinges, to reveal families in their sets of clapboard boxes, like those cages of rats you see in animal experiments on telly. I can just see some big hand coming in, picking on someone, putting them through tests.[183]

The boxes and cages – words also used to describe lifts – are uniform, there is no suggestion of individuality or homeliness.[184] In his essay on the uncanny, published in 1919, Sigmund Freud explored meanings of the German word for 'uncanny': *das Unheimliche*, the 'unhomely'.[185] Anthony Vidler suggests that buildings such as tower blocks are not inherently *unheimliche*, but are imbued with such qualities through their social role and

[182] Beard, 'Doreen', p. 57.
[183] Ibid., p. 59.
[184] Perec describes tower blocks as 'thousands of rabbit hutches piled one above the other'. Perec, *Species*, p. 89.
[185] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (London: The MIT Press, 1992).

prevailing political sentiments.[186] The suggestion in 'Doreen' is that residents who live in uninspiring dwellings have uninspiring lives. The high-rise blocks evoke Cuming's assertion that 'housing' equates to 'poor housing […] loaded with negative associations', rather than home.[187] The 'big hand' implies Thatcher's government, the 'tests' the high-rise social housing experiment.

In her tower block poem, 'Unthinkable' (2007), Frances Leviston uses a sink, as a variation on a box or a cage, as the container which traps. This could be a reference to sink estates, a derogatory term associated with high crime levels and social deprivation, a term described by Tom Slater as a 'semantic battering ram'.[188] A sink is also a container associated with cleaning and washing away. Leviston writes, 'I was afraid of the people inside, trapped like spiders in a sink | neither rescued nor put out of what I imagined to be | their misery'.[189] The image of a spider stuck in the sink, scuttling round and round as it slips down the sides in a futile attempt to climb out, is a powerful and poignant one. The assumption that the residents are frightening and wretched, and the comparison with spiders – creatures which commonly evoke disgust – reveals judgments which chime with the prevalent discourse. At the end of the poem, however, the narrator realises that the judgements are misguided.

Similarly, the stalled lift is used as a metaphor in Edwin Morgan's *Glasgow Sonnets* (1972), a socio-political sequence which depicts the rehousing of tenants from the slum tenements of the Gorbals to the tower blocks of Red Road. In the final sonnet, x, Morgan takes the reader up the lift to the thirtieth floor of a tower block. In an analysis of the sequence, Nerys Williams comments that Morgan uses the lift to echo 'Lefebvre's belief that space is a contested site of power relations'.[190] She also argues that the tower block is represented as a space of 'confinement, atrophy and immobility'. Its impact on the residents is conveyed in the last four lines of the poem 'They linger in the single-ends that use | their spirit to the bone, and when they trudge | from closemouth to launderette their steady shoes | carry a word that weighs us like a judge'.[191]

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[186] Anthony Vidler, qtd. in Berthold Schoene, *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 130.
[187] Cuming, *Private Lives*, p. 2.
[188] Tom Slater, 'The invention of the 'sink estate': Consequential categorisation and the UK housing crisis', *The Sociological Review*, 66 (2018), 877-97, p. 879.
[189] Frances Leviston, 'Unthinkable', in *Public Dream* (London: Picador, 2007), p. 15.
[190] Nerys Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 148.
[191] Morgan, C*ollected Poems*, p. 292.

Ultimately, 'Doreen', *Under a Thin Moon* and 'Greensleeves' are tower block narratives which offer little hope. 'Doreen' is a tale of working-class families and the struggles they face: the trappings of instability, unemployment, poverty and poor housing. The metaphor of the broken-down lift reverberates in a discussion about Mark's redundancy. Doreen comments, "'And that's it then is it? Just like that you're out of a job'. She added – 'again.' She didn't say 'and we're stuck here', but that's what she meant. I said 'Happens all the time, love'".[192] Mark's response to his job loss attempts to brave the devastating news but also accepts the bitter inevitability. He is left feeling insignificant and insecure: he has neither job nor decent home and his self-doubt spills into concerns about his marriage, 'I missed Doreen's undressing: she was already in bed, sheets tight across her breasts, reading a library book when I came in from the bathroom. We lay separately'.[193] Towards the end of the story, Doreen says, '"we will get out of here, Mark, won't we?"'[194] Mark does not reply.

In *Under a Thin Moon,* the stuck lift acts as both metaphor and catalyst of Wanda's own confinement and atrophy. It results in a harrowing scene in which Wanda is forced to lug the pram, with Coral inside it, up nine flights of stairs while being assaulted:

> Mikey runs up the stairs to where Wanda is and grabs hold of her end of the trolley [pram]. Wanda holds on too, she will not let go. But more hands grab hold of it, heaving it over the stairwell. It is a straight drop, two floors down.
>
> Stop it, Wanda screams, let go.
>
> Rockabye baby, Pete yells, pushing the trolley, and Coral cries loudly.
>
> Inside Wanda a voice is saying that they can't do it, they won't dare, but the rest of her is screaming. She hits out and tears at their hair. It is all she can do because the trolley is now out of her hands.[195]

In this stairwell scene, the verticality of the block, with the potential to fall to one's death from a height, is essential to the narrative. The impact of vertical living on Wanda becomes even more apparent when the themes of falling and death, in the setting of the lift, invade her nightmares. Falling can be regarded as mobility out of control and a nightmare which involves falling is a classic anxiety dream, a trope in popular culture which draws on psychoanalysis. Michael uses this nightmare as both a metaphor and a premonition:[196]

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[192] Beard, 'Doreen', p. 62.
[193] Ibid., p. 64.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 175.
[196] James, A. Hall, *Jungian Dream Interpretation A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1983), p. 46.

> She [Wanda] is in the lift and Coral is with her in the trolley. The lift is out of control. It is plummeting downwards so fast Wanda can hardly breathe or see. It passes all the floors, and the ground, and still it plunges down. Wanda presses all the buttons but there is no end to the falling of the lift. Then suddenly it stops but the doors stay shut.[197]

In this dream, as in Wanda's 'real' life, the lift is portrayed as a frightening, claustrophobic space over which she has no control. She presses every button but 'there is no end to the falling', which symbolises the lack of control she has over her destiny. The lift is likened to a coffin: its doors remain closed and the sealed box ends up deep underground. Wanda and Coral are buried alive.

At the end of *Under a Thin Moon*, Wanda kills herself by overdosing on tranquilizers and slitting her wrists in the bath. Close to the start of the novel, in a narrative told from the perspective of Coral as a young adult, Coral has a flashback to her mother's death. As in the description of Wanda's nightmare about dying, the lift and not being able to use the lift register in Coral's memory of her mother's suicide:

> Up and up the stairs she [Coral] goes because she can't reach the lift button, and as she climbs higher and higher all the old anxiety returns. The stairs seem to go on and on but then she gets to the door and calls out mam, mam but no one answers [...] And there is her mother sitting up in the bath, staring at Coral. And there is the blood curling all around her like scarlet smoke in the bath-water. Mam, mam, screams Coral, but no one answers.[198]

Coral's failure to reach the lift button evokes pathos at the start of this paragraph; it sets the scene with a reminder of how young, how small and how helpless she is. Her inability to use the lift and reach her mother increases the narrative tension and shows how the verticality of the tower block impacts on the mobilities of girls as well as women. The use, or not, of the lift in negotiating the building is contrasted in the nightmare and flashback scenes: in the nightmare, Wanda cannot control falling *down* the lift shaft whereas in the flashback, Coral is unable to use the lift to climb *up* the tower. The flashback also raises the question had Coral been tall enough to press the button, could she have reached Wanda in time to save her?

Both scenes end in death. Wanda's nightmare, however, alludes to a descent into hell whereas Coral's flashback intimates an ascent into heaven, perhaps suggestive of hope. The

[197] Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 129.
[198] Michael, *Thin Moon*, p. 20.

notion of hope, amid this overwhelmingly bleak tale, returns on the last page of the novel when Coral sits at a typewriter with a blank sheet of paper to tell the stories of the main female characters in *Under a Thin Moon*. When asked in an interview why she chose Coral for this role, Michael replied, 'Coral is the youngest person in the book and I saw hope as lying with the future generation'.[199]

In this chapter I have shown two important roles of the stuck lift in the fiction analysed. The first is as an important narrative device which affects the mobility of both female and male characters but has far greater impact on the mobilities of women and girls. This differentiation of freedom to move stratifies gendered experiences of the tower block. Secondly, the stuck lift plays a metaphorical role in illustrating the blockages which confine both male and female characters in a state of social and economic atrophy in tower blocks. In the next chapter I focus in more detail on the experiences of child characters, their play, and the gendered distribution of agency in the shaping of social space.

[199] Wheeler, 'Interview', p. 106.

Chapter 4: The Playful Lift

> I used to change my piece of gum once a day. I used to do it in our lift on the way home from school. Why the lift? Because I liked sticking the gooey piece that I'd just finished with on to one of the control buttons. Then the next person who came along and pressed the button got my old gum on the end of his or her finger. Ha-ha!
>
> Violet Beauregarde in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Roald Dahl[200]

In previous chapters, I have explored how residents' lives are shaped by the spaces of the tower block but have considered in less detail the actions through which the residents themselves shape the spaces. In this chapter I focus on Stephen Kelman's novel, *Pigeon English* (2011), to explore how residents shape and are shaped by the space of the lift and the tower block through play. Moreover, I argue that the ways in which children play and shape the lift, are – like the experiences discussed in previous chapters – highly gendered.

Lynsey Hanley writes that the continued presence of rules and prohibitions around play on council estates, such as the ubiquitous No Ball Games sign, suggest 'a long history of uncomfortable relations between children and adults on British estates'.[201] For Lefebvre, play is a central component of social life, and of the 'anthropological needs' and thus rights of human beings. 'The human being,' Lefebvre writes, 'has the right to accumulate energies and to spend them, even waste them in play'.[202] He argues that these energies must be expended productively and writes that 'The release of energy always gives rise to an effect, to damage, to a change in reality. It modifies space or generates a new space'.[203] The geographer Tara Woodyear elaborates this thinking, 'Playing is momentary in nature. It exploits the openness and circumstance of the everyday […] In its spontaneity, playing can occur in any space or place, or the journey between them […] It can also be productive or transformative of space'.[204]

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[200] Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (London: Puffin, 2016), p. 39.
[201] Lynsey Hanley, 'Yes, let's get rid of 'no ball games' signs – but it won't solve our problems', *Guardian*, 2 July 2015, Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/02/no-ball-games-haringey-council-children-play-obesity> [accessed 5 June 2018].
[202] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 147.
[203] Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 177.
[204] Tanya Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies: not merely child's play', *Geography Compass*, 6 (2012), 313–26, p. 320.

Woodyear's description of play introduces its spontaneity, a characteristic feature of children's play which contributed to sociologist Roger Caillois' distinction between *ludus* – a regulated, rule-bound form of play – and *paidia*, which is chaotic, disruptive and unauthorised.[205] This latter form is the type witnessed in the fiction of the tower block and is productive of space in distinctive, at times challenging and destructive, ways. In this chapter I consider the shaping of the lift and other common spaces through *paidia*; *ludus* rarely features in the texts, perhaps reflecting the disrupted and chaotic lives of the characters and the prohibition on games to which Hanley refers. Caillois comments on the stark differences between the ways in which games are played:

> At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature […] I call this second component *ludus*.[206]

As Woodyer states, 'positioned as a counterpoint to the conventional, playing is couched in a framework of resistance'.[207] In Colin Ward's work on children in the city, he extends this discussion to consider the tower block lift. He emphasises that the lift is not a neutral mechanism to facilitate vertical living. Instead, it is a tool which shapes and is shaped by interactions between children and adults:

> The striking thing is not that high density living in apartment blocks has killed off the ancient ploys of childhood, but that they have been adapted by children to the new conditions of living. When high flats with lifts were imposed upon the urban working class [*sic*] household in Britain, it was not anticipated that the lifts would become a weapon in the war of children against the adult world, or, perhaps simply a plaything.[208]

Pigeon English, a best-selling critically acclaimed novel set in an estate in Peckham, South London, explores themes including gang warfare, immigration and poverty. It draws on the tragic killing of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor in 2000 and illustrates Ward's idea that children's use of the lift – as well as other common spaces of the tower block – modifies its

[205] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
[206] Ibid., p. 13.
[207] Woodyer, 'Ludic Geographies', p. 316.
[208] Colin Ward, *The Child in the City* (London: The Architectural Press Ltd, 1978), p. 101.

conventional use and turns it into a weapon and a plaything.[209] Told in the first person by an innocent eleven-year-old narrator, *Pigeon English* is a coming-of-age novel which is both humorous and heart-breaking. It is the story of Harrison (Harri) Opoku who has immigrated to England from a Ghanaian village with his mother and older sister Lydia – leaving the rest of his family behind – to live on the ninth floor of a 14-storey tower block. The novel begins with a crime scene: a young boy, an acquaintance Harri describes as a 'half friend', has been murdered outside a fast food restaurant and as the novel unfolds, Harri and a schoolmate attempt to track down those responsible for the murder. As Harri navigates his way through his often perplexing and unfamiliar urban environment, he unwittingly becomes involved in the gang warfare which permeates the violent estate.

Although every user of space modifies it, *Pigeon English* is the only text I analyse wholly written from the viewpoint of a character who actively does so; Harri, for example, is the only character to admit farting in the lift, 'Then the doors closed again and I let a woodpecker fart out. I dedicated it to God and all the angels. Adjei, it was too close!'[210]

A novel which opens with the chilling line, 'You could see the blood', is not an obvious one in which to explore play yet play is prevalent throughout the narrative.[211] Games such as chooking [stabbing], 'X-fire was teaching us about chooking. He didn't use a real knife, just his fingers'; suicide bomber, 'when you run at the other person and crash them as hard as you can'; who can get the closest to a burning climbing frame, and jumping in piss puddles, are informed by a childhood which is far from idyllic.[212] As *Pigeon English* illustrates, however, this is unsurprising given that play is often imitative. Ward cites children in the US playing 'Assassination' after the death of President Kennedy, children in Berlin 'shooting each other across miniature walls' and Auschwitz children playing 'Going to the Gas Chambers'.[213] There is, nonetheless, an incompatibility between Harri's innocence and vulnerability and the disturbing nature of the games he plays – as an incomer from a Ghanaian village he does not have the cultural knowledge or experience of the children brought up on the estate.

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[209] Kelman, who grew up on a council estate said, 'With *Pigeon English* I was lucky that a lot of the material came from my own experience, my own background, so I had that knowledge to draw on'. Interview with Stephen Kelman, Foyles, <www.foyles.co.uk/stephen-kelman> [accessed 28 June 2018].
[210] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 167.
[211] Ibid., p. 1.
[212] Ibid., p. 14; p. 13.
[213] Ward, *Child*, p. 97.

In *Pigeon English* children play frequently in the common areas of the tower block and rarely in the playground. The lift functions as an important play space and although Kelman's representation of the lift as a disgusting, defective space is familiar from Chapter 2, when the lift is observed from a child's perspective it acquires a different valence: typical characteristics are subverted, new aspects of its use are revealed. As Stuart Aitken writes, 'if adults use space to contain children's activities and monitor their interactions, resistance may find form in new spaces and communities of creative play'.[214] Kelman's lift is a contested space, a depiction which illustrates the tension precipitated by the different ways in which adults and children interact with the milieu. As Aitken continues, 'adults almost always see the importance of creating spaces for young people but are often loath to let them do so themselves'.[215]

Harri is aware that the lift is disgusting but for him it is also exciting, his view of the lift as a playful site expunges the disgust, 'I love going in the lift, it's brutal, especially when you're the only one in there. Then you could be a spirit or a spy. You even forget the pissy smell because you're going so fast'.[216] When Harri is alone in the lift, he does not experience loneliness as the protagonist of 'Greensleeves' does. His perspective also overturns the unfavourable claustrophobic association of being stuck in a lift; when he deliberates on how the lift will be used when dealing with invaders, he imagines using its confinement to his advantage, 'While I'm fighting the invaders Lydia or Mamma are calling the police. I'd aim for the eye because it's the softest part. It would just make them blind. Then when they can't see anything I'd push them outside into the lift. *The lift is safe* [emphasis added]'.[217]

Pigeon English is the only text discussed in this thesis in which the disgusting lift is the result of the agency of characters present in the narrative and in which acts which cause disgust take place in the present action – for example when Harri's friend, Jordan, spits on the lift's buttons. In the other works, the deed has happened and we see the disgust*ed* characters deal with the consequences. 'Greensleeves', *Under a Thin Moon* and 'Doreen' are not written from the perspective of characters who piss, shit, vomit, spit, graffiti or vandalise therefore we gain less insight into motivation.

In texts written from the viewpoint of adults who experience disgust or fear, it is often assumed that it is a lack of recreational space which drives children to use lifts and

[214] Stuart C. Aitken, *Geographies of Young People* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 178.
[215] Aitken, *Geographies*, p. 169.
[216] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 5.
[217] Ibid., p. 27.

other common areas, and there is a begrudging acceptance of the reasons why children assert ownership through games, vandalism and graffiti. For example, in Smith's *NW*, a tower block resident says, 'Those lifts are really a disgrace [...] On the other hand they've got nothing else to do, have they, those kids? That's what gets me. That's what someone should say'. [218]

This fictional depiction of a dearth of play space contrasts with the programme of urban modernism which created the tower block. As the architectural historian Roy Kozlovsky writes, in England from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s, 'the architecture of childhood was at the center of architectural discourse in a way that is unique in architectural history' and 'the theme of the child in the city became for a short period a defining medium for theorizing urbanism'.[219] This emphasis was reflected in 'The Brutalist Playground' exhibition in 2015, which recreated large scale (1:1) fragments of three brutalist playgrounds in blocks of reconstituted foam.[220] The exhibition curators expressed their desire to draw attention away from the 'social and structural failures' of tower blocks towards 'the equally important playgrounds found at the feet of these structures'.[221]

Despite this recent attention, the lack of purpose-built play space in the fiction of the tower block reflects the fact that few playgrounds built as part of the brutalist landscape now exist. When the playground does feature in the texts, it is as an inhospitable environment. Harri comments, 'The swings are always broken from the dog bites […] There's always drugs needles around the playground'.[222] In a passage about the climbing frame it is apparent that the decrepit condition of the equipment, due to its improper use, is one reason why the playground is rarely frequented. In this unusual instance, a child is upset by the inappropriate use of space by his elders (albeit only teenagers) and it is the fact that they are *not* playing which upsets him:

> The best thing is the climbing frame but you never get to go on it because it belongs to the Dell Farm Crew. They're always on it. *They don't even play*, they just sit there

[218] Smith, *NW*, p. 112.
[219] Erno Goldfinger emphasised the preservation of space for play and pleasure, writing that, 'The whole object of building high is to free the ground for children and grown-ups to enjoy Mother Earth and not to cover every inch with bricks and mortar'. Nigel Warburton, *Erno Goldfinger: Life of an Architect* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 142; In the design for Robin Hood Gardens, a ten-storey estate in Poplar, London, Alison and Peter Smithson hoped that access decks would encourage a community spirit, a space for neighbours to chat and children to play; Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), p. 1.
[220] 'The Brutalist Playground' touring exhibition was commissioned by RIBA and curated by artist Simon Terrill and the architectural collective, Assemble.
[221] Royal Institute of British Architects, *The Brutalist Playground* (London: RIBA, 2015), p. 3.
[222] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 98.

> smoking fags and hooting the people when they go by. If you go on it after them it just smells of fags and there's too much broken glass everywhere. *I just don't bother anymore* [emphases added]'.[223]

However, despite the conditions, and that we only see Harri use the playground once during the novel, it is important to him. As the equipment burns after an arson attack, he adopts a metaphor of the playground dying, 'I just wanted to be there for when the playground died, so it knew I was there and that I loved it until the end'.[224] At this point, Harri rejects play and assumes a more adult-like responsibility amidst an increasing sense of helplessness:

> Some smaller kids were playing a game to see who could get the closest. They all ran to the fire and the one who got closest before they ran away again was the winner. It looked brutal. I wanted to play but I had to show respect. When you're in Year 7 you have to set an example. Everybody just watched the fire […] The playground was dying but nobody was trying to save it.[225]

This quotation is prophetic and poignant, made more so by the recognition that Harri is moving from boy to manhood; a few pages later it is Harri who is dying, and there is nobody to try to save him either.

Beyond the playground, the council estate is not represented as a place conducive to play.[226] Harri is conscious of restrictions, enforced by both regulation and an unsafe social environment, by which the space around him is governed. A notable constraint, POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS, is found in the opening paragraph when a murder scene is cordoned off, and throughout the novel Harri lists the prohibitive signs he regularly encounters: on the estate, in the playground, in the shopping centre and at school – despite living in an environment in which rules are routinely flouted. This disregard of and resistance to rules by children is similarly illustrated in 'Greensleeves':

> They weren't allowed to play on the grass but they didn't usually pay much heed and the caretaker was forever chasing them. They were always up to something. If it wasn't trampling the grass it was banging about the drying-area upstairs, or running and yelling in the entrance-hall, or playing in the lifts.[227]

Troublesome relationships caused by the failure of children to adhere to rules of appropriate social behaviour in public and common spaces pervade the texts. Tracey Skelton, in her

[223] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 97.
[224] Ibid., p. 250.
[225] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 250.
[226] See also 'Greensleeves', 'Even downstairs, right outside the caretaker's office, where the sign said No Ball Games No Loitering, the walls had been daubed and sprayed'. Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.
[227] Ibid., p. 166.

discussion on the geography of play writes, 'there is often tension, anxiety and anger about children's presence in particular spaces and places', and *Pigeon English* provides an insight into how this conflict between children and adults emerges and how behaviours are experienced differently depending on how people interact with space.[228] The lift is a site of play for boys at the same time as it is a site of antisocial behaviour, violence, fear and disgust for women which illustrates the complexities of social interaction. Lefebvre writes:

> Some would doubtless argue that the ultimate foundation of social space is prohibition, adducing in support of this thesis the unsaid in communication between the members of a society; the gulf between them, their bodies and consciousnesses, and the difficulties of social intercourse […] in an 'environment' made up of a series of zones defined by interdictions and bans.[229]

Harri's perspective on the tower block lift challenges some of its defining characteristics and offers an unexpected angle on others. Similarly, in Alison Irvine's novel *This Road is Red* (2014), based on a history of the Red Road flats in Glasgow, a section told from the third person character perspective of a ten-year-old boy describes the lift as a site of joy and celebration.[230] This passage, in which a group of boys is on its way to watch Scotland in the 1978 World Cup, exemplifies Lefebvre's arguments on the conventions of spatial and social behaviour:

> A lift arrived and the boys surged in. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty boys squeezed themselves into the silver-walled lift that was meant to carry eight adult bodies at the most [...] The lift set off again and a cheer went up. Scotland! Scotland! The boys began to sing and bang the lift walls with their fists. More boys jumped up and down and the lift went on up.[231]

This lift is 'a zone defined by interdictions and bans', a space which the boys 'enjoy and modify' in terms of both the physical and emotional environment; later in the passage we are told, 'The lift was hot and smelled of mud and sweat'.[232] We can imagine the sign referenced in the quotation, *Maximum Occupancy Not To Exceed 8 Persons*, an instruction ignored by the boys. In addition, by cheering, singing and banging on the walls, the boys disregard 'unsaid' rules of social behaviour in public space. Later in the scene, when a male

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[228] Tracey Skelton, 'Children's Geographies/Geographies of Children: Play, Work, Mobilities and Migration', *Geography Compass*, 3/4 (2009), 1430-48, p. 1443.
[229] Lefebvre, *Production*, p. 35.
[230] Alison Irvine, *This Road is Red* (Edinburgh: Luath Press Limited, 2014).
[231] Ibid., pp.102-3.
[232] Ibid., p. 102.

resident tells the boys to let his wife into the lift, the woman – reluctant to enter – says, 'It's all right, we'll wait for the other one', illustrating the 'difficulties of social intercourse' and the dynamics of appropriation and exclusion discussed in Chapter 2.[233] These fictionalised narratives of tower block life echo the discussions of Hanley, Skelton, Aitken and others but draw attention to the specific role of *boys'* rather than *children's* presence in causing the 'tension, anxiety and anger' referred to by Skelton.

While the activities of boys clearly shape the common spaces of the tower block, the narratives also reflect the ways in which these spaces are coded as masculine. This echoes Doreen Massey's reflections on becoming aware of the gendering of space when she was a child. Massey, who grew up on the Wythenshawe Estate outside Manchester, describes her childhood memories of taking the bus into town past acres of playing fields divided up into football and rugby pitches:

> the whole vast area would be covered with hundreds of little people, all running around after balls, as far as the eye could see […] I remember all this very sharply. And I remember, too, it striking me very clearly – even then as a puzzled, slightly thoughtful little girl – that all this huge stretch of the Mersey flood plain had been entirely given over to boys.[234]

While sports pitches – certainly at the time of which Massey writes – are clearly 'given over to boys', I would argue that the common spaces of the tower block, while frequented by boys, are not intentionally 'given over to boys' but instead have been 'taken over by boys' which reflects the use of space in Ward's discussion of the lift. As Cuming writes, and is evident throughout *Pigeon English*, 'things happen on estates for young boys in fiction and film; they are dramatic spaces for adventure and plot development'.[235] Ward echoes Massey and Cuming when he writes, 'Certainly, whenever we discuss the part the city environment plays in the lives of children, we are really talking about boys. As a stereotype the child in the city is a boy. Girls *are* far less visible'.[236]

Harri plays physical games which take place outdoors or in the common spaces inside the tower block; for him the threshold of the flat's front door is not apparent, the common space becomes an extension of the private space of the flat, 'The floor outside my flat is perfect for driving my beach buggy. It's proper shiny. It makes the car go superfast'. [237] As

[233] Irvine, *This Road is Red,* p.102.
[234] Massey, *Space,* p. 185.
[235] Cuming, 'Private Lives', p. 331.
[236] Ward, *Child,* p. 152.
[237] Kelman, *Pigeon English,* p. 220.

with the lift, the only ambivalent perspective on the stairwell is from a boy's point of view.[238] Harri and his friends assert ownership of the stairs through their play, 'Our base is the stairs outside my tower, the ones that go to floor 1. We're safe there. Only the junkies use them and they're too sleepy to even see us'.[239] In the following quotation, he describes drugs paraphernalia as he demonstrates how the conditions of the tower block, perceived as disgusting and dangerous by adults, are assimilated into his childhood world of play:

> People do ease themselves on the stairs, you can smell it from a million miles away. You have to be careful not to go in the puddles. If you jump in a normal puddle you're only a retard but if you jump in a piss puddle it means you're made of piss.
> If you land on a needle and it goes through your foot you'll get Aids.[240]

While the boys in *Pigeon English* incorporate the vertical nature of the space into their play, we encounter two female characters – Lydia, Harri's sister, and an elderly woman known as Fag Ash Lil – who experience the lift as a site of disgust, fear and violence. In these scenes, both characters are portrayed as classic gender stereotypes: a damsel in distress and a disgusting old woman.

When Lydia uses the lift she experiences it, according to Harri, as a site of fear, 'One time me and Lydia were in the lift when it broke down. It stopped for about one hour. It wasn't even hutious [frightening]. Lydia was screaming like a maniac. I had to stop her going crazy with rock, paper, scissors. I saved the day all over again'.[241] Harrison presents Lydia as a hysterical female and he, despite being the younger sibling, as the heroic male, the knight in shining armour who saves Lydia from the tower. Harrison is dismissive when his sister challenges his version of events,

> Lydia: 'Advise yourself! I didn't scream!'
> Me: 'Yes you did. This was Lydia: Make it go, make it go! I hate being stuck!'[242]

Harri's response to his sister's reaction is consistent with his acknowledgment of the responsibility of traditional masculine roles. At the start of the novel he says, 'I'm the man of the house until Papa escapes. He even said it. It's my duty to look after everything'.[243]

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[238] Stairs are perceived by women as physically dangerous in a number of texts. For example, when Harri's mother is talking to his Auntie Sonia, she says, 'Don't forget the lift's broken. Take care down those stairs, you don't want another accident'. Kelman, *Pigeon English,* p. 162.
[239] Kelman, *Pigeon English,* p. 153.
[240] Ibid., p. 166.
[241] Ibid., p. 41.
[242] Ibid., p. 41.
[243] Ibid., p. 8.

Despite Harri's youth and innocence, he is aware that his environment is a dangerous one and he expresses a desire to care for his family. When he imagines how he will deal with invaders he says, 'I'll stand in front of Lydia to protect her. And Mamma as well if she's home'.[244]

The second encounter in the lift with a female character is with Fag Ash Lil. Jordan marks his territory and asserts ownership of the space with his saliva; he transforms the lift into a site of disgust and Fag Ash Lil becomes a victim of antisocial behaviour. Harri says:

> Then I had to hold the lift door while Jordan did a big spit all on the buttons. When he got out Fag Ash Lil got in. We waited for the doors to close. We could hear her when she pressed the button Jordan did a spit on. She didn't know about the spit. [245]

The boys' play, albeit antisocial, contrasts with the extreme violence prevalent elsewhere in the novel but it is an uncomfortable scene: Fag Ash Lil has been targeted, and is the subject of an attack of which she is unaware; she does not have the opportunity to say 'no' to that which disgusts as she does not realise that the buttons are defiled when she touches them. As in the scene in 'Doreen' when Ma Yates doesn't realise the lift is broken, males are knowing and a female is unknowing and therefore impotent. The violence escalates when Fag Ash Lil uses the lift on a subsequent occasion; Jordan kicks a football at her – firstly into her legs and then into her face – just before the lift's doors close:

> Me [Harri]: 'What did you do that for, she go kill us now!'
> Jordan: 'Don't be gay, if she comes after us I'll just shank her, innit.'
> Jordan showed me his knife.[246]

This incident in the lift, while focussing on children at play, is replete with ideas about gender and disgust. The lift is not inherently disgusting but has been made disgusting by boys, and Fag Ash Lil is not inherently disgusting but has been depicted as disgusting through the eyes of a prepubescent boy.[247] Menninghaus writes of her work on disgust, 'This book about disgust is thus, at the same time, a book entirely concerned with the (masculine) imagination of the *vetula*, of the disgusting old woman. Kant's *vetula*, Nietzsche's *vetula*, Freud's *vetula*, Bataille's *vetula*, Kristeva's abject mother,' and, in this case, Harri's Fag Ash Lil. [248] She is

[244] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 27.
[245] Ibid., p. 44.
[246] Ibid., p. 132.
[247] This depiction of Fag Ash Lil is reminiscent of the depiction of Ma Yates, from 'Doreen', who is described by a young, male character as, 'Dog rough […] nasty as a nailfile'. Beard, 'Doreen', p. 59.
[248] Menninghaus, *Disgust*, pp. 7-8.

presented as an old – 'at least two hundred years' – cannibalistic witch: 'That's why her eyes are all mad and watery, it's from eating human meat'. The language used to describe her reduces her to the animal, 'her legs are very skinny like a bird'; 'She only has to scratch me with her claws and I'll get poison [...] If I turned around she'd spit poison in my face and take me away to her den'. [249] This is ironic considering that it is a boy who does the spitting. It is also an inversion of the norm as it is often young men who are depicted in dehumanising terms in the fiction of the tower block, for example when the boys who urinate in the lift in 'Greensleeves' are described as dogs.[250]

Children's gendered responses to the lift appear in a number of the texts I have read. Compare, for example, Harri's evocation of the lift to that of Janey, the protagonist in Hudson's novel *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma*: Janey is acutely aware of the stench of urine and describes, 'trying to hold your breath until the nineteenth floor'.[251] Harri, however, can simply 'forget the pissy smell'.[252] There is little play in the harsh, neglected lives of Janey and her sister but, when it does occur, it takes place not in the common spaces of the estate but within the confines of the flat, as it does with Lydia and her friends in *Pigeon English* when they stay indoors and do each other's hair.[253] The common space we see Lydia play in is the block's launderette, a gendered space predominantly used by women.[254]

However, later in the novel the boys' use of the lift and stairwell changes when the spaces are transformed from sites of play into sites of fear and disgust. Harri endures an uncomfortable ride in the lift with Fag Ash Lil who thinks it was he, and not Jordan, who attacked her with the football:

> I could feel Fag Ash Lil keep looking at me with her eyes all blue and hungry […] I don't even want to die yet [...] From today onward going I can never go in the lift again. I can only use the stairs. The stairs are safe. If I run fast enough the pissy smell can't even catch me.[255]

[249] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p.131; p.167.
[250] Spence, *Colours*, p. 163.
[251] Hudson, *Tony Hogan*, p. 136.
[252] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 5.
[253] Ibid., p. 139.
[254] Ibid., p.51; Laundry in the UK continues to be done predominantly by women with 92% of recorded laundry half-hours reported by women in 1985 and 84% in 2005. Ben Anderson, 'Laundry, energy and time', *Energy, Research & Social Science, 22 (2016),* 125-36.
[255] Kelman, *Pigeon English*, p. 167.

The ‘pissy smell’, which earlier in the novel Harri could dismiss, has now become animated and active, it wants to chase him, to ‘stick’ to him; this illustrates Ahmed’s arguments on the stickiness of disgust and the trails of urine which follow Wanda in *Under a Thin Moon*. Any humour is this scene is tempered by the poignant irony – the trepidation Harri feels when faced with the harmless, elderly woman and his belief that, ‘the stairs are safe’. In the final chapter – echoing the death of Damilola Taylor – Harrison is fatally stabbed at the bottom of a stairwell by a teenage boy.

In this chapter I have considered the dialectic of social space and social practice through a discussion of play. Whereas ‘Greensleeves’, *Under a Thin Moon* and ‘Doreen’, are tower block narratives which offer little hope for female characters, who are often lacking in agency, the paidic use of the lift in *Pigeon English* uncovers the active production of gendered space. The social production of a space which is disgusting and frightening is a consequence of children’s play and the themes examined in this thesis are represented through the eyes of a child, be it the stickiness of the lift buttons or the unsympathetic portrayal of Fag Ash Lil. Harri’s experience of the lift differs from that of the female characters which reinforces the gendered nature of the space, while the characteristics of the lift itself contribute to the overall depiction of the tower block. In the conclusion, I consider how the fictional lives and narratives of characters discussed here contribute to and reinforce a mythology of the tower block.

Conclusion

Through close readings of 'Greensleeves', *Under a Thin Moon,* 'Taking Doreen out of the Sky', and *Pigeon English*, and by reference to numerous other texts, I have highlighted a number of symbolic and structural narrative functions of the lift in tower block fiction. I have analysed the role of liminality, disgust, mobilities, and play to argue that the lift is a highly gendered and mythologised site used to provide a core structuring device for tower block narratives, mirroring the role of the lift shaft in a high-rise block. I argue that in the texts, the disgusting, broken-down lift is not only symbolic of the failure of the tower block but, in addition, indicative of *whom* the tower block is failing.

While Bernard suggests a range of positive roles of the lift in literature, realist authors writing on social housing tower blocks use the lift to depict and reinforce the perceived unpleasantness and difficulty of life within the setting and to prompt the reader to make judgements about residents, including those who are unseen. However, the lift also plays a material role: it shapes and impacts the experiences of those who live in the tower, predominantly negatively. My analysis of the lift, part of the quotidian infrastructure central to the possibility of high-rise living, has proved enormously enlightening in my consideration of the gendering of vertical space.

The fiction I have examined provides a critical perspective on how hard life in tower blocks can be and how these experiences can be gendered – particularly for mothers, girls and elderly women. Female characters are often depicted as having little agency and a sense of inevitability pervades the lack of control they have over their lives. It is evident that men and boys exert power, with degrees of intent, to adversely affect others' experiences and that, furthermore, the broken-down lift disproportionately affects the mobility of women. Men and women use lifts differently: for women and men the lift is a functional space but for men it is also a space to play in, vandalise and appropriate. This points towards the ways in which we discuss and encode the spaces of gendered bodies and practices and how this contributes to the production and reproduction of gender roles.

The representations of the lift virtually always portray a hostile environment and the lift acts as a synecdoche for the failure of the tower block. The fiction suggests that the residents of social housing both shape and are shaped by the adverse conditions of the

environment in which they live. There is a surfeit of narratives – in fiction, media and popular discourse – in which the social housing tower block is characterised as inhospitable.

I have been surprised at just how gendered the behavioural and emotional responses to the lift are and how the portrayal of male and female use of the lift exhibits and reproduces stereotypes. To understand this, the lift can be considered as a mythologised space. As a component of a myth of the tower block, depictions of the lift act as a motif which contributes to understanding both the present and past situation of characters while providing guidance for the future.[256] Such myths are not, however, arbitrary – they are drawn from and reproduce elements of historically situated 'structures of feeling', the phrase coined by Raymond Williams which can be defined as historically situated, the ill-defined inferences derived from reading in 'the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts'.[257] As Roland Barthes illustrates, myths rely on familiarity with a dominant discourse to convey their meaning.[258] Through his discussion, Barthes describes how myths underpin and naturalise taken-for-granted understandings of the world, acting as 'an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation'.[259]

The texts I examine use the lift, in its role as a mythologised space, to embody broader gendered experiences in specific and tangible ways. The lift is a shorthand, an abbreviated form of reference, a narrative device used as a rapid means of representation and communication. The image of the tower block lift is so entrenched in the public imagination that it needs little description – although most authors furnish it with the familiar accoutrements of disgust. It is, in effect, a setting-turned-character, a stock character easily recognised by the reader.[260] It is a particularly useful setting in that it consolidates the social discontent of the tower block into a single, bounded, physical space.

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[256] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 68 (1955), 428–444.
[257] Ian Buchanan, 'Structure of feeling' A Dictionary of Critical Theory. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-675> [Accessed 7 December 2018].
[258] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 115.
[259] Ibid., p. 118.
[260] In a new 2012 introduction to her 1979 dystopian novel, *Benefits*, Zoe Fairbairns describes the tower block itself as an important character. Zoe Fairbairns, *Benefits* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2012), Amazon Kindle eBook.

In *Lifted*, Bernard explores the impact of the space of the lift on characters, focussing on how it shapes their interactions within the space. He does not, however, explore the impact of the characters on the lift, the effect of this impact on subsequent users of the lift nor the role of the lift in the users' broader experience of the building in which it is situated. In the realist fiction of the tower block, there is less direct interaction between characters in the lift than in the fiction analysed by Bernard: confined, staged interactions between characters are less important than the ongoing dialectic of different groups of characters and the lift, of society and space. Bernard states that as 'getting stuck' in a lift is such a useful literary device for forming relationships between strangers in urban settings, lifts malfunction far more often in fiction than reality; this frequent malfunctioning is apparent in the fiction of the tower block but only one of the broken-down lift's roles as identified by Bernard – its symbolism – is pertinent to high-rise fiction. The symbolic role is the most important narrative function of the lift and it is predominantly used to exemplify the difficulty, isolation and fear associated with high-rise living. The tower block lift is not a space in which positive, let alone romantic, relationships are formed nor confessions made, unless they are in the form of graffiti on the walls. Although the broken-down lift is a recurring theme in tower block fiction, when the lift breaks down people do not 'get stuck' together as the lift rarely breaks down when in use. On the contrary, when lifts break down, rather than being trapped with others, residents are kept apart, confined to their flats and therefore even more isolated.

The narratives examined here illustrate how mythologised depictions of tower block space have been naturalised. Similarly, Stephen Graham suggests that, 'myths about the inevitable failure of vertical public housing have been so widely generalised that they are endlessly repeated as accepted facts in many Western societies'.[261] In their exhaustive analysis of British tower blocks, Glendinning and Muthesius suggested that these mythologies played an important role in shaping the real-world meanings of the high-rise and its future promise, 'the fundamental message of our book: a plea […] to step back from the endless clashing of Utopias of housing […] we cannot hide our belief that the polemics of the seventies and eighties, however exciting their style, have had, all in all, a destructive influence'.[262]

[261] Graham, *Vertical*, p.185.
[262] Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, p. 326.

Glendinning and Muthesius' argument drew on the contrast between depictions of tower blocks in architectural critiques and the media, and their conclusions on visiting every high-rise in the UK, after which they 'were surprised to discover how few were in a state of serious dilapidation – in contrast to high flats' general "media image"'.[263] Writing twenty-five years later, Boughton echoes this sentiment, 'it is undoubtedly the case that estates are overwhelmingly now decent places to live. I've […] been struck, in nearly all cases, by their essential decency'.[264] Much of the evidence presented in this thesis can be thought of as part of the mythology and image of the tower block.

The argument presented by Glendenning and Muthesius pointed to the 'destructive influence' of the polemics but did not expand on this; however, in the last two decades a new concern has emerged.[265] As Roger Luckhurst writes:

> By 2015, the London residential high-rise was the container for very different meanings. Newspapers charted the inexorable inflation of a London housing bubble with a paralysed mix of banality, horror and delight. This post-sub-prime zombie economics could be neatly condensed in the emblem of the luxury tower block, entirely transvalued from its associations with sink estates in the sixties and seventies.[266]

Stephen Graham develops the argument, suggesting that there is political and economic gain to be made from the 'prevailing mythology' of the 'abject failures' of tower blocks built en masse as social housing in the 1950s and 1960s. He believes that these narratives have 'produced one of the crucial 'manufactured realities' widely used to justify neoliberal policies for the systematic disassembling of public housing systems and their distribution into private hands'.[267]

As Melhuish, an anthropologist of architecture and the built environment, suggests, 'Writers invent and evoke worlds of the imagination, but they also play an important role in constructing and defining the identity of the real-life, physical places they write about'.[268] Consequently, the conclusions of Glendenning and Muthesius and, more recently, Graham,

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[263] Glendinning and Muthesius, *Tower Block*, p. 326.
[264] John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2018), p.4.
[265] Polemicists include Jane Jacobs, the American activist who campaigned against urban planning in inner city neighbourhoods arguing that it destroyed the culture of cities. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
[266] Roger Luckhurst, 'High-Rise 1975/2015', *Critical Quarterly*, 58 (2016), 63–9, p. 67.
[267] Graham, *Vertical*, p. 184.
[268] Clare Melhuish, 'Escape from mythologised space', *The Architects' Journal*, 17 June 1999, <http://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/home/escape-from-mythologised-space/772221.fullarticle> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

point to the material consequences of the mythologised narratives of the tower block, that they are inhospitable places to live in, especially for women and children.

One perspective often missing from the dominant discourse on social housing is that the experience of high-rise living is varied; Boughton refers to 'the bandwagon criticism of tower blocks' and argues that they have provided, and continue to provide, decent homes for many.[269] Similarly, Ravetz comments, "'innumerable tenants' accounts show that the successes of the estates were in the personal and domestic spheres, and were nothing like as spectacular as its public failures".[270] This echoes Lynsey Hanley's recent comment that 'there is a big difference between how estates are perceived from the outside and how they are seen by those who live there'.[271]

In contrast to the texts, representations of the lift in fiction based on testimony and oral histories offers a more ambivalent and nuanced image of high-rise space. Tenants' accounts of life in tower blocks, in non-fiction and fiction directly inspired by testimonies, offer an ambivalence rarely seen in fiction or the media. Of her novel, *This Road is Red* (2014) – based on interviews with former residents conducted as part of Glasgow Life's Red Road Flats Cultural Project – Irvine writes, 'I wanted to be as truthful as I could to the stories I was told, but I was aware too that I was writing fiction'.[272] In *This Road is Red*, the lift is an important narrative feature of the novel but it lacks the symbolism found in the more clearly fictional work. Its main role is functional and it is mentioned frequently as people move up and down the tower. Although the lift does break down and get stuck on occasion, urine and graffiti are notable in their absence and the lift's use is, at times, depicted as a communal experience, as in this example told from the perspective of a female character, May:

> The lift was full of people when the doors opened. They seemed like her kind of people, happy and friendly and the folk that squeezed in with them seemed like her kind of people too, one man taking all the orders for the floors, pressing the buttons and calling out mind the doors.[273]

Using Irvine's novel as an example, Cuming observes, 'accounts that take into consideration the subjectivity and viewpoints of particular individuals in specific circumstances result in

[269] Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, p. 4.
[270] Ravetz, *Council Housing*, p. 4.
[271] 'Streets Apart: A History of Social Housing', BBC Radio 4, 10 part series presented by Lynsey Hanley 28/08/17-08/09/17, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b092sx21>.
[272] Irvine, *Road,* p. 23.
[273] Ibid., p. 23.

portraits of mass housing estates that, against the dominant narrative, reveal images of heterogeneity, ambivalence and difference'.[274] Such images are prominent in Tony Parker's *The People of Providence* (1983) – transcripts of fifty oral history interviews carried out on a South London estate.[275] Parker's work provides a valuable insight into the multiple narratives that coalesce around a single space: high-rise living is described by residents as both heaven and hell.[276]

As the distinction between literary and oral history accounts shows, the narratives of realist fiction are not necessarily more indicative of 'real' tower block life. As Raymond Williams describes, realism involves "a falsification – false distancing – of the 'fictional' or the 'imaginary'".[277] This does not invalidate realist fiction as a source – as Barthes points out, there is 'no antipathy between realism and myth', and realist literature is itself 'mythical' in terms of its language and narrative.[278] Nevertheless, it remains important to recognise that although authors who use the tower block as a setting and the lift as a leitmotif imagine a fictionalised construction of the space, this imagining rarely strays outside the discourse available to them within our cultural milieu.[279] As Williams writes:

> A dramatist must win the consent of his audience to any particular means that he wishes to employ, and while he may often be able to do this in the course of a work itself, by the power of the effect which the method makes possible, he cannot entirely rely on this, for even if the audience is sympathetic, too great a consciousness of the novelty or strangeness of the means may as effectively hamper the full communication of a play as would open hostility.[280]

The contrast between oral histories and fiction based on resident testimonies, and the narratives of realist novels and short stories merits further exploration. However, it is a reminder that fictional representations of estates and tenants operate within and are limited

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[274] Cuming, *Housing*, p. 212.
[275] Tony Parker, *The People of Providence* (London: Pan Books, 1983).
[276] The Block Capital Project – twenty oral history interviews with people who lived or worked in tower blocks in the Midlands from the 1960s onwards – also provides more nuanced representations. Block Capital Project, *Sharing Storeys*, <https://distinctlyblackcountry.wordpress.com/blockcapital/sharing-storeys/> [Accessed 14 February 2019].
[277] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), p. 147.
[278] Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 137.
[279] Consider, as an example outside the British 'cultural milieu', this description of a woman using a lift in an 'ugly and filthy' apartment block in Naples. 'It was the only place in that huge building I liked […] this one had wood panelling […] two elegant benches facing one another, a mirror, soft lighting [...] Feeling alone in the elevator cage I experienced a sort of quiet pleasure'. Elena Ferrante, 'Delia's Elevator' in *After the War: A Collection of Short Fiction by Postwar Italian Women* (New York: Italica Press, 2004), ed. by Martha King, Amazon Kindle eBook.
[280] Williams and Orrom, *Preface*, p. 20.

by the boundaries of the dominant discourse, the 'structures of feeling' of the times in which they are written. I suggest that this dominant discourse is reinforced through its mythologised reproduction in the fiction of the lift, the tower block and its residents, and, as it 'sticks' to both buildings and residents, shapes the ways in which they are seen by the public, politicians and the media.

Postscript – After Grenfell

> Those who were living now are dead
> Those who were breathing are from the living earth fled.
> If you want to see how the poor die, come see Grenfell Tower
> See the tower, and let a world-changing dream flower.
>
> 'Grenfell Tower, June, 2017' Ben Okri[281]

Seventy-two people – eighteen children, twenty-nine women and twenty-five men – died as a consequence of the fire at Grenfell Tower on the 14th of June 2017.[282] The tragedy realised one of the greatest fears of high-rise living: being trapped in a fire.[283] The horrifying images, broadcast live on television screens for twenty-four hours while the fire was brought under control, were reminiscent of a disaster movie; portentously, the film *Towering Inferno* was released in 1974, the same year that Grenfell Tower was completed.[284] The relevance of the Grenfell fire to this thesis and its conclusions is inescapable. However, given that legal and media discussions of the fire continue to unfold, it is not possible to examine its consequences in the detail they deserve. This postscript serves as the first steps towards this.

In *Concretopia*, John Grindrod describes Ronan Point as 'the block that in effect ended the sixties high-rise boom'.[285] It was the architecture of the poorly-designed, system-built tower which took the brunt of the criticism when Ronan Point partially collapsed after a gas explosion in one of the flats. The majority of high-rise blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s were for use as social housing and it was easier, therefore, to dismiss the concept of the tower block as a failure. Four people were killed and seventeen injured in the Ronan Point incident and it played a major role not only in the thirty-year hiatus in the construction of tower blocks in the UK but also in shaping the discourses and narratives I have considered in this thesis.

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[281] Ben Okri, 'Grenfell Tower, June, 2017', *Financial Times*, June 23 2017, < https://www.ft.com/content/39022f72-5742-11e7-80b6-9bfa4c1f83d2 [accessed 29 January 2019].
[282] Kevin Rawlinson, 'The victims of the Grenfell Tower fire', *Guardian*, 23 November 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/13/grenfell-tower-fire-victims-dead-missing-identified-named-so-far> [Accessed 30 June 2018].
[283] Gifford identified that tower blocks evoke at least six fears: falling or jumping; fire; earthquake; terrorism (post-McVey and post-9 11); close proximity to strangers (i.e. crime etc.), and the rapid spread of communicable disease. Gifford, 'Consequences', p. 2.
[284] *Towering Inferno*, dir. by John Guillerman (20th Century Fox & Warner Bros., 1974).
[285] John Grindrod, *Concretopia* (Brecon: Old Street Publishing, 2014), p. 342.

The narrative landscape which surrounds the tower block fifty years after Ronan Point has changed. As Owen Hatherly writes, 'the association that tall buildings are where poor people live has faded'.[286] As investments built by private developers, tower blocks can no longer be so easily dismissed; in London alone, more than five hundred towers of more than twenty storeys are planned or under construction.[287] In the last year of Boris Johnson's mayorality, before Sadiq Khan took office, not a single home for social rent was built in the capital.[288]

Following the fire, the initial focus was on the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO) and its administration of a £9.2 million refurbishment project which included the external cladding of the building. This cladding is alleged to have contributed to the rapid spread of the fire and its use has raised questions about the adherence to safety regulations, although the efficacy of the regulations themselves is also under scrutiny. Few have spoken out to criticise the architecture of the tower block itself. An exception was Sadiq Khan's hasty comment, 'Nowadays, we would not dream of building towers to the standards of the 1970s, but their inhabitants still have to live with that legacy. It may well be the defining outcome of this tragedy that the worst mistakes of the 1960s and 1970s are systematically torn down'.[289] Tearing down desperately needed homes would not help the housing crisis and it appears that it is not the 1970's architecture that is to blame: concrete does not burn; cheap aluminium-coated cladding with a plastic core does burn although issues such as fire escapes and sprinklers must also be considered. Geraldine Dening, co-founder of Architects for Social Housing, quoted one of her member's responses to Khan, 'No, we wouldn't dream of building to the standards of the 1970s, it's far too expensive'.[290]

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[286] Robert Booth and Owen Bowcott, 'What we learned from day 8 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry', *Guardian*, 4 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/what-we-learned-from-day-eight-of-the-grenfell-tower-inquiry> [Accessed 21 November 2018].

[287] Julia Kollewe, 'London's skyline soars with record 510 tall buildings in pipeline', *Guardian*, 18 April 2018, Construction industry, < https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/apr/18/londons-skyline-soars-with-record-510-tall-buildings-in-pipeline> [accessed 7 December 2018].

[288] Robert Booth, 'Sadiq Khan: London needs to build 66,000 new homes a year, up from 29,000', *Guardian*, 27 October 2017, < https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/27/sadiq-khan-to-raise-target-for-affordable-housing-in-london> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

[289] Kathryn Snowdon, 'Sadiq Khan Says High-Rise Tower Blocks From 1960s And 1970s Could Be Torn Down In Wake Of Grenfell Fire', *Huffington Post*, 18 June 2017, <http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/sadiq-khan-high-rise-tower-blocks-1960s-1970s-could-be-torn-down-grenfell-tower-fire_uk_5946344fe4b01eab7a2e39fd> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

[290] Richard Godwin, 'Towers of strength', *Evening Standard*, 14 July 2017, p. 20.

There is also the question of maintenance budgets; it is alleged that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea was under pressure to use cheaper cladding as a cost-cutting measure due to a government cap on council spending on housing although this has been challenged as the council has usable reserves of £274 million.[291] Ravetz illustrated the importance of maintenance budgets in her discussion of the Housing Act 1980, which not only gave individual tenants the Right to Buy but also allowed councils to sell housing en masse. The dilapidation that resulted from inadequate maintenance is highlighted in the expenditure required to transform former council housing into homes which people wanted to own, 'It was usual for developers to spend more than the purchase price over again on refurbishment, and their improvements showed what was required to make them into desirable dwellings: lifts, central heating, full security systems, warm and inviting entrance foyers, perhaps a porter's lodge, efficient caretaking'.[292] The architect Neave Brown commented, 'High buildings should only be used for the very rich because they're the only ones that can be done with proper lifts, proper services, proper control, proper entrances and the proper environment'.[293]

The first hearing of the Grenfell Tower inquiry opened on the 14th of September 2017 and is ongoing at the time of writing. Amidst a catalogue of safety breaches, evidence presented in June 2018 revealed that a feature designed to allow the lifts to be used in the event of a fire failed to operate; the firefighters' sole access to the building's twenty-three storeys had to be made via the stairs on foot and meant that some equipment could not be transported up the building. Richard Millett, QC, counsel to the inquiry, said the 'failure of the lift to perform as intended is a matter of very serious concern', and Dr Barbara Lane, a fire safety engineer, said that had the fire service not been delayed by the failure of the lifts it 'might have increased the chances of extinguishing the fire before it spread externally'.[294]

A notable narrative to emerge from the media response to Grenfell is the 'revelations' which have emerged about the type of people who live in tower blocks. As David Orr, the

[291] Rajeev Syal and Harrison Jones, 'Kensington and Chelsea council has £274m in reserves', *Guardian*, 19 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/19/kensington-chelsea-council-has-274m-in-reserves-grenfell-tower-budget-surplus> [Accessed 30 June 2018].
[292] Ravetz, *Council Housing*, p. 203.
[293] Jessica Mairs, 'High-rise buildings should only be used to house the very rich, says Neave Brown', *dezeen*, 5 October 2017, < https://www.dezeen.com/2017/10/05/neave-brown-interview-high-rise-buildings-only-for-very-rich-social-housing/> [accessed 30 June 2018].
[294] Booth and Bowcott, 'What we learned' from day 8 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry', *Guardian*, 4 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/what-we-learned-from-day-eight-of-the-grenfell-tower-inquiry> [Accessed 21 November 2018].

Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation said, 'I think we've created an environment where people in social housing have been Othered'.[295] However, an article in the *Evening Standard* pointed out, 'It wasn't long before the survivors themselves began to challenge the narrative that they were representatives of the 'dispossessed', living in some sort of high-rise slum'.[296] Tower block residents knew their neighbours, 'The collective effort of the survivors also defies the common image of tower blocks as engines of social isolation'.[297] There was a strong sense of community, 'It's quite obvious from the residents' response to the Grenfell disaster that there's an enormous amount of social cohesion there'.[298] There was an eclectic social community, 'It's facile to say that tower blocks are full of poor people – they are full of all sorts of people who reflect the mix of contemporary inner London'.[299] Stories about a Blitz spirit abounded amidst slight incredulity: residents loved their homes and had lived there for years, residents tried to save one another, residents had survived the fire because they were out at work doing second or third jobs, residents sat GCSE exams while their homes were burning. Residents had also formed an association which had repeatedly warned of their fears of a major incident. A 2016 blog post, '*Playing with Fire*' stated, 'The Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring to an end the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders'.[300]

The fire at Grenfell Tower has impacted on the narrative of tower blocks and social housing; how this will pan out in the longer term remains to be seen. The tragedy raises a multitude of moral, economic and political questions beyond the scope and focus of this thesis. I leave the final word to John Boughton, who asked in his Municipal Dreams blog, 'Can this awful event please put an end to the demonising stereotypes so frequently and so crudely applied to our fellow citizens who live in social housing?'[301]

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[295] 'Streets Apart: A History of Social Housing', BBC Radio 4, 10 part series presented by Lynsey Hanley 28/08/17-08/09/17, < https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b092sx21>.
[296] Godwin, 'Towers of strength', p. 20.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Grenfell Action Group, 'KCTMO – Playing with Fire!', 20 November 2016, <https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2016/11/20/kctmo-playing-with-fire/> [Accessed 30 June 2018].
[301] John Boughton, Municipal Dreams, 'Grenfell Tower', 17 June 2017, <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2017/06/17/grenfell-tower/> [Accessed 30 June 2018].

Part II

Higher Voices

A collection of linked short stories

Flat 71 – The Aviarist

‘Amen! Amen! Amen!’ screeches Coco the cockatoo. As I sweep the linoleum, dust and dander hover in the air. When the haze clears, Coco’s golden crest is gleaming in the sunlight and even Peter’s pigeon plumage has a sheen. I wipe droppings and down from the dining table; budgie feathers – yellow and green and blue – flurry like iridescent snowflakes. Henny Penny has laid a large brown egg in the armchair. When I go to collect it a shadow falls across the room. Outside, a giant slab of concrete hangs from a crane. It glides through the blue sky, towards the tower block springing up opposite.

My knees buckle and I clasp my hands together. ‘Thy terribleness hath deceived thee the pride of thine heart, O thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, that holdest the height of the hill: though thou shouldest make thy nest as high as the eagle, I will bring thee down from thence, saith the LORD.’

Tweety sneezes and I jump. I pull myself up and lean on the windowsill. The concrete slab no longer blocks the sun and the light is dazzling. The arm of the crane moves closer to the block opposite or is it this block that moves closer to the crane? I wipe my clammy hands on my nightdress. I remember the blast, the rumble, fog, gas, flames, grit between my teeth and in my throat and nostrils. I try to breathe slowly. A door slams downstairs and the floor shudders and I fall to my knees. ‘Dear Lord, you know the struggles that I will face on this anniversary. Be with me as I go through them. Carry me if I am too weak to move. If I stumble in them, forgive me Father. When I succeed in them, I will praise You! You are worthy of all praise and honour. Amen.’

‘Amen!’ screams Coco.

I grab the feed from the cupboard and the birds flit excitedly from the chairs and sideboard to the apple tree branch that I have lodged between the curtain rail and the top of the doorframe. My hands tremble as I scatter seed onto the table and it spills on the floor. The birds flock to the ground and jostle one another as they peck at the food. I open a balcony door just wide enough for the chickens to squeeze through; they strut outside, heads bobbing, and I close the door after them.

Even my beautiful birds – always so cheerful, never judgmental – can’t help me today. I pull my coat over my nightdress and slip on some shoes. I check the cage behind the letter box: empty. Last week I found a soiled nappy in the cage and when I came in from the shop last night, I had to extinguish a smouldering copy of the *Evening News*. I

fear going out: the estate children taunt me and the adults stare. Once a week I collect my widow's pension, my widow's pension! At twenty-seven how old that makes me feel! And I walk to the Indian grocers in the high street because the aisles are so cluttered and dark that I feel safe, though I hate it when the shopkeeper is taunted and stared at too.

My birds and I have lived in this cell for almost ten years. The frosted glass in the window onto the corridor is crisscrossed with wire mesh and although it now hangs from a single hinge there is a barred gate across the front door. When I was made homeless, I prayed to the Lord and pleaded with the council, not another tower block. Anything else, I said, *anything*: a prefab, a hostel bed, I'd even go back to a condemned Victorian slum. I wore a smart skirt and my Mary Quant mac to attend an appointment at the town hall.

'I'm sorry,' said the housing officer. 'It's all we have to offer. Did you see *Cathy Come Home*? And you've got no children. Superb views though.'

'Which block?' I asked, as though it mattered.

We walked for fifteen minutes. The housing officer made small talk and the fat bunch of keys in her pocket jangled. She carried a clipboard under her arm. 'Here we are,' she said. 'It's due a face-lift but its reputation's not deserved. The suicide got a lot of coverage but it's not the block, the woman was depressed.'

I looked up at the tower. The colourful graffiti at the base gave way to dull stained concrete and faded panels and, near the top, six black holes where the windows must have blown out in a fire. We stood at the entrance. The housing officer opened the door and waved me inside. I hesitated.

'This block's stood for seven years,' she said. 'I promise you, it won't collapse. Safe as houses.'

The lift took us to the eighteenth storey and I followed the housing officer along the corridor. The previous tenant had left a coir mat – *Home Sweet Home* – outside the front door. When I stepped inside the flat it smelt like a pub; the walls of the narrow hallway were stained mustard-yellow, a *Who Rolled Mary Jane*? poster stuck on with tape. The housing officer tutted, 'That should have been taken down.' The ceiling was low, the floorboards were bare – just the tacks from the old carpet remained.

'My budgies were killed too,' I said. 'I want to get some more. They were my babies.'

'No pets,' said the housing officer. She riffled through the sheets on her clipboard. 'No animals, reptiles or birds.'

‘What about a goldfish?’ I asked.

‘I’ll show you around,’ said the housing officer.

‘There’s no need,’ I said. ‘It’s all you have.’

Silvery ash from the burnt newspaper quivers in the draft from underneath the door. I jam my dictionary, a school prize but it fits perfectly, into the cage so that the letterbox can’t be opened. I lock the door behind me. The lightbulbs on the corridor have been stolen and the dank passage reminds me of underground caves on a Sunday School trip to Wales. The wind changed direction yesterday; it blew from the north for a week and chilled the building to its core but now a south-westerly wind is warming the concrete and water drips from the ceiling and trickles down the walls.

The lift has a supermarket trolley wedged in its doors so I take the stairs, as quickly as I can without slipping on the sludge of grime and cigarette butts. Half way down I pause on a landing to catch my breath and look out of the window. Two boys are chalking a giant pink penis on the ground at the entrance of the carpark; an old man with a stick shuffles across a testicle.

Outside, a gust of wind reads a discarded newspaper with haste and tosses its sheets into the air. A couple walks towards me, grim-faced, arguing; she is taller and fatter than him and limps a little.

‘ … put up with it’s a wonder I don’t leave you,’ I hear him say.

The woman has pinched features and a black eye but her long red hair gleams in the sunshine. Two little boys, dressed identically, trot behind them. The man catches me looking; eyes down, I hurry across the carpark and into the playground, past a group of girls who are skipping. I stop at a bench at the far end and sit down. I look up at the block. The washing lines on the balconies are laden with terry nappies, like smiles of stained teeth. I look higher: the corner of the tower starts to crack and crumble and I turn away. I listen to the girls chanting as they skip: *Cinderella dressed in yella Went upstairs to kiss her fella Made a mistake And kissed a snake How many doctors Did it take? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ...* The wind blows their dresses up around their thighs.

I take the birdseed from my pocket and scatter it on the asphalt. The play equipment – a witch’s hat, a roundabout, a slide and two swings – is broken or vandalised. Paint has been tipped down the slide and has formed a dried yellow puddle at the bottom from which footprints and pawprints lead.

The girls stop skipping and crowd onto the witch's hat where they sit round the edge, elbowing one another for space as they swing pale, bruised legs. A thin woman pushes a wheelchair into the playground and I stare at the child inside. The wretched creature, God bless her, is no more than a head, a torso, short arms and stumps for legs.

'Hey, flid!' shouts one of the girls to the child, 'wanna come skip with us?' She laughs and blows an enormous pink bubble; when it bursts it leaves a film of gum over her face which she peels off and stuffs back into her mouth. The woman parks the wheelchair and sits on a bench.

The girl who called out marches over to the woman. 'You took that drug, didn't you? It's *your* fault.'

'Piss off!' says the child in the chair. She is older than I thought, not a child at all.

The woman fumbles in her handbag. She takes out a cigarette and a box of matches.

'Don't ignore me,' says the girl, 'or you'll end up spastic too.'

'Stop it!' I shout. 'Don't be so horrid.'

The girl swings round. 'Well, look who's hatched! Mind your own business, you stuck up cow. Why don't you go and get dressed?' She turns away.

I walk towards her. I push her harder than intended and she topples over and lands on her bottom in a puddle. Her friends burst out laughing.

'But as for the cowardly,' I say, 'the faithless, the detestable, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.'

The friends giggle nervously.

'You're bloody mental,' says the girl. She jumps up, cheeks flushed. 'You're gonna regret this.' She spits her gum at me and strides out of the playground, friends in tow.

'Thanks,' says the woman. 'That was nice of you.' She lights her cigarette. 'Fag?'

I shake my head. The lump of gum at my feet glistens in the sunlight.

'What's your name?' says the woman.

'Rebecca.'

'I'm Sandra, Sandy my mates call me. Thanks again but you didn't need to get involved. We're used to it. People have said horrible things from the start. Even Michelle's dad. When we found out what caused it he wrote me a letter. He said that feeling sick's part of pregnancy and if I hadn't been so selfish Michelle would have been normal. We haven't seen him since she was three days old and I hope we never see him again.'

‘Mum, Rebecca doesn’t need our life story,’ says Michelle. ‘Mum’s right though, I can stand on my own two feet.’ She laughs. ‘I usually tell people to fuck off but Mum says I mustn’t, not here.’

Sandra gestures for me to sit down. ‘I don’t want trouble with the neighbours. You lived here long?’

‘Nearly ten years.’

‘Wow. Not seen you around.’

‘I don’t go out much.’

‘Got any little ones?’

‘No.’

‘What floor you on?'

‘Eighteenth.’

‘We’re on the ground. It’s easier with the wheelchair. It’s alright except for the bloody footballs bouncing off the walls and the view of the bins.’ She looks to the top of the tower. ‘Do you like it up there?’

‘It was all the council had.’

‘Where were you before?’

‘Ronan Point. It collapsed ten years ago today. May the sixteenth 1968. I couldn’t stay inside. Not today.’

The first time I saw Ronan Point, from the front seat of the hire van, it loomed like a monster that had emerged from the core of the earth and was making its way to the moon: a soaring hunk of concrete, metal and glass. Mike found a space for the van and we walked across the car park and into a lobby which smelt of paint and disinfectant. Two people got into the lift after us: a girl – who eyed Mike up – with a jaundiced baby in a battered Silver Cross pram and a middle-aged woman. The cabin lurched upwards and the baby screamed. I wanted to scream too. I was thankful when the girl got out. The lift continued and I caught the woman’s eye.

‘Moving in?’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re lucky the lift’s working. It broke down the other day. In a brand new building like this.’

‘I wouldn’t fancy carrying our furniture up the stairs,’ said Mike.

I stared at the floor. The woman had six bags of sugar in her basket.

'This is me,' she said, when the lift stopped at the eighteenth storey. 'I'm Ivy, number 90. I expect I'll see you around.'

The doors closed. 'Folk seem friendly,' said Mike.

When we stepped out of the lift on the twentieth floor and saw the view across London, I fainted.

Mike unpacked most of the boxes. He made me lie down on the settee, as he called it, with my bottle of smelling salts. The sun streamed through the large windows and I shielded my eyes from the glare. The Anaglypta on the walls was painted magnolia and the bathroom suite and gas stove and kitchen cupboards were white. The flat smelt of new carpet and vinyl and glue and gave me a migraine. The noise was tiresome: the roar of traffic, neighbours' voices, hammering, furniture scraping across floors like chalk on a blackboard, the clunk of the lifts.

'It's so roomy here, so clean and bright,' Mike kept saying, 'a fantastic place to bring up a child.'

'That woman said the lifts have already broken. How would I get a pram up the stairs? What would happen in a fire? We could be burnt alive.'

'There's no room for your imagination here, love. We won't lose another one.'

He took his box of Player's to the balcony and I glared at his back.

'It's cold for May,' he said, as he struck a match. 'But when it warms up we can eat and kip, what do they call it, *al fresco*? Come and have a look, love, you can see for miles.'

'Not yet,' I said. 'I'll faint again. If God had wanted us to live in the sky he would have given us wings.' I was desperate to shut out the view; each time I saw it I had to steady myself. We'd brought Mike's net curtains but they were too small.

'We don't need curtains anyway,' he said. 'No chance of Peeping Toms here!'

We tested the underfloor heating and the vinyl and carpet felt warm and soft, no more ice-cold floorboards and drafts between my toes. 'Don't get used to it,' said Mike. 'I've been told it's bally expensive to run.' I chatted to the budgies as I moved their cage from the kitchen to the living room so that they weren't in direct sunlight.

'I'm gonna nip down the builders' merchants, love. Get some stuff to make that cocktail cabinet. You'll be alright, won't you?' He didn't try to kiss me. I locked the front door behind him and stared at the postman's cap hanging on the hook. I took it to the

bedroom and put it on a shelf in the wardrobe. I arranged my possessions: my King James Bible and a vase of silk stems on the bedside table, my shaggy rug on my side of the bed, my vanity case in the bathroom, a dictionary and a few novels and bird magazines on the sideboard. A red rosette, with a 1st and a horse's head printed in gold, fell out of one of the novels – I must have used it as a bookmark. Mike had dotted his horrid Toby jugs around the flat and they leered at me as I walked backwards and forwards. When I put my tennis racket in the wardrobe I wondered if I would ever use it again.

I went back to the hallway and closed the doors leading off it; as there were no windows to the outside I could pretend I was in a house instead of trapped in a tower. Mike had already taped his posters to the walls – the Rolling Stones and the Beatles and Ursula Andress in *Dr No* – I thought of oil paintings in gilt frames at home in the vicarage.

'Guess who I bumped into?' said Mike when he came back laden with sheets of bright orange melamine. 'Mark and Sue. I invited them for a few bevvies at the weekend.'

'Why did you do that?'

'What do you mean?'

'The flat won't be ready.'

'Course it will. Don't matter anyway. They're my mates.'

'They're not my friends. Sue hates me.'

That evening I made beef bourguignon and we had pineapple upside down cake for pudding. We drank Mateus Rose and when we finished the wine I stuck a candle in the bottle and lit it and tilted it so that wax trickled down the glass like we'd seen on the tables in the window of the Italian restaurant. The budgies cocked their heads and watched the flame; they had settled well. As Mike and I got into bed I complained about my migraine.

I needed the loo during the night: it was a relief not to have to go up and down steep rickety stairs. Perhaps Mike was right, perhaps this would be a good place to bring up a child. I stood at the balcony doors – the height didn't feel so frightening in the dark – and studied the silhouettes of unknown characters in the windows of the next block, like watching actors in a silent film. I imagined the silhouettes watching me back, watching *my* film. I wondered what the opening scene would be: the first time I signed for a parcel and thought that I had never seen anyone so handsome or the morning Mike had to swerve when I stepped out in front of his bicycle or the evening he introduced me to his friends and I had overheard Sue talking in the pub loos. 'She's a vicar's daughter. She don't drink.

Don't smoke. Don't swear. Don't shag. I don't know what he sees in her.' I sat on the loo and tears pricked my eyes and something clicked. I didn't want to be a vicar's daughter any more, I just wanted to be me, Rebecca, not 'Rebecca the vicar's daughter', which is how I had been known my whole life. I came out and ordered a Babycham and by midnight I had worked through the rest of Sue's list. And a few months later, when I told my parents I was pregnant, as far as Daddy was concerned I wasn't a vicar's daughter any more.

I took a budgie from the cage. He puffed up his feathers and curled his tiny feet around my finger. He chirped softly as I stroked his head.

The sixteenth of May – the baby's due date had it survived my fall down the stairs. Mike didn't mention it but I think he remembered. He usually set the alarm for quarter past six to get to the sorting office for seven but he got up earlier to make me breakfast. He had the radio on in the kitchen and I half-listened to the forecast: thundery showers and a cool north wind. He turned up the volume when the DJ played *What a Wonderful World*, Number One for the fourth week running. I smelt burnt toast and heard Mike curse. He came into the bedroom with a boiled egg and a cup of tea on a tray. He propped the pillows against the headboard and I sat up.

'Thank you,' I said.

'If you eat it quickly it should be soft.'

I took the top off the egg.

'Perfect,' he said. 'I'm just going to make some more toast.'

The white wasn't cooked and the translucent slime wobbled in the spoon. I put the tray on the bedside table and I got out of bed. I took my dressing gown from the chair. There was a bang. A shudder. The chair toppled over. A high-pitched whine. I covered my ears. I smelt burning. The toast. And gas. Another bang. I opened the bedroom door. I couldn't see through the fog. 'Mike?' I called. 'Mike? Are the budgies alright?' My mouth filled with grit. My heart beat fast. I took a step into the hallway, into a swirling mass. A snowstorm? Midges? Debris stung my face. I wiped dust from my eyes. Nicks of blood multiplied on my hands and arms. I could only see a foot in front of me. My nightdress fluttered in a cold gust of wind. I felt my way towards the kitchen. I could hear muffled voices. 'Mike?' I tried to shout but my own voice was muffled too. I stopped and closed my eyes and crossed myself, 'A day of wrath is that day, A day of trouble and distress, A

day of destruction and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of trumpet and battle cry Against the fortified cities And the high corner towers.' I opened my eyes and as the dust cleared I saw a dark cloud, an aeroplane, contrails, black and white birds flitting between the blocks. I was standing on a precipice. I saw the Thames, cargo ships, dock cranes, wasteland, gasworks, rows of terraced houses. I swayed and took a step backwards. I looked down, down, down at the wreckage beneath me. On top of the smoking pile of rubble, perfectly upright, small as dolls' house furniture, was Mike's bright orange cocktail cabinet. A gust of wind took the dressing gown from my hand and the red satin tumbled and twirled and spiralled like a gymnast's ribbon until it finally dipped and caught in the blossom-heavy branches of a tree. The sirens grew louder. I thought of my budgies and how if they hadn't been caged they could have flown. And I thought of Mike, who had brought me to the tower to save me.

The explosion happened following a gas leak, when Ivy Hodge, fifty-six, cake decorator – the woman we saw in the lift the day we moved in – lit her stove to boil a kettle to make a cup of tea. The block's prefabricated concrete panels weren't strong enough to withstand the impact of the explosion which led to the structural failure and collapse of the whole south east corner of the tower. An architect, who subsequently examined the block, discovered that rainwater had seeped into joints filled with newspaper and that instead of resting on beds of mortar, each concrete panel was supported by just two levelling bolts.

Four people died and seventeen were injured. If it hadn't been so early in the morning and the building not yet fully occupied, the death toll would have been higher. Ivy Hodge survived, as did her gas stove, which she took to her new home. Had I taken another step, I would have fallen twenty storeys to the ground.

'Are you okay, love?' says Sandra.

The sky has clouded over. Birds – pigeons, sparrows, wrens, a large crow – are pecking at the remains of the seed.

'Yes,' I say. 'I'm fine.'

'You're sweating.' She offers me a handkerchief. 'It's just another day, love. Nothing's gonna happen. The blocks were all checked after Ronan. Regs are tighter now. It will be alright.'

I look at Michelle. I have my faith and my arms and my legs and my health and my birds. ‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Yes, I think it will.’

‘Pop in for a cuppa some time.’

‘Yeah, do,’ says Michelle.

I smile. ‘Thank you. I’d like that.’

A few of the girls from the playground come out of the lift and into the lobby. When the girl I pushed over walks past I cower but she smiles at me, a strange, sly smile. I get into the lift and check the girls have left through the main entrance before I press the button to close the doors. Something red is smeared on the metal wall. It looks like blood but it must be lipstick; girls are always writing crude things on the walls in lipstick.

As I walk along the corridor, I wipe away splashes of cold water that drip from the ceiling and run down my neck. Through the half-light I notice that the door to my flat is ajar. I left in a rush. I can’t have locked up. It must have blown open in the wind. ‘Please, Lord, let the birds be safe.’ There is a hole in the splintered wood where the lock used to be. The flat is silent: no cheeping, no clucking. ‘Hello,’ I call, praying that Coco will echo me.

Heart thumping, breath fast and shallow, I make my way into the sitting room. My tennis racket is on the table. Frame smashed. Strings stained, choked with feathers. Scattered across the floor, pulverised into the linoleum, like tiny coloured red-ringed planets, are my budgies. Peter, plucked bare, lies on the ground, my vegetable knife plunged into his pale pink belly, guts spilled.

I kneel, press my hands together and look up at the crucifix on the wall. Coco is speared to the cross, on top of Jesus, a bib of blood on her chest. A bird shrieks and howls but it is not a bird, it is me. I hear a gurgling sound and stagger to the hallway. Henny Penny is a blur, thrashing along the floor, flapping her wings, struggling to her legs, flinging herself in the air, falling with a thud, thrashing along the floor, flapping her wings, struggling to her legs, flinging herself in the air ... She reaches the front door.

I follow her path to the end of the hallway where she stops. Blood trickles from the neck of my still, headless chicken onto the mat: *Home Sweet Home*.

‘Why’s it stopped?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘What’s happening now?’

‘God knows. Doesn’t sound good. Jesus Christ, not again. It only happened the other week. Stop it, Barry! Hitting it isn’t gonna help. Press the alarm.’

‘It won’t press.’

‘Let me try. Tsk. That’s it then. We’ll just have to sit it out. Glad I’m not on my own. I’m gonna make a start on my fish and chips.’

‘What, in here?’

‘I’m famished. I don’t want them to go to waste. They’re horrible when they’re cold.’

‘We can read the wrappings afterwards. Kill some time.’

…

‘Mmm. That’s better. I could eat another portion though. I don’t know, you seem to get less every time they put the price up. When’s the bleedin’ engineer coming? Someone must’ve called him by now. I’m gonna need to spend a penny before too long. Lucky I didn’t have that second cuppa. What’s your paper say? Read the headlines, can you? Mine’s fallen apart all that vinegar I put on.’

‘Let’s have a look. Oh, it’s yesterday’s. *Live snakes threat to firemen at pet shop blaze.* Says they had to resuscitate a suffocating parrot. You couldn’t make it up, could you? Er … *No school on Monday for most local children. Row over wages bogged down admits ILEA.* Bloody strikes. It’s getting worse. *Race slogans daubed on priest’s garage door. Wogs out. KKK.*’

‘Why do people have to be so nasty? You take the Williams. You couldn’t ask for nicer neighbours. And the Khans down the corridor.’

‘There’s too many of ’em though. That’s the problem. ’specially round here.’

‘At least we’re not in the paper this week. The way the Gazette wrote up the bird story made it sound like a terrible place to live. They didn’t mention all the flowers left outside her door, did they now? Or the cards she got. Oh! We’re on the move. Thank heavens for that. I couldn’t have crossed my legs much longer!’

Flat 76 – The Neighbour[302]

Inside my only card Nan has written *Guess what we're doing today? I'll meet you in the car park at 10.* I study the picture on the front: a hippopotamus, a budgie and two sheep. *Hippo Birdie Two Ewe!*

Mum shuffles into the kitchen. The stains on her nightie match the stains on the table cloth: egg yolk, ketchup, oil. She lights a fag and scrunches up the box, aims for the bin. Spaz shot. I finish my cocoa puffs and slurp the chocolatey milk from the bowl. I like chocolate milk but the milk we had at junior school used to make me gag in summer, when the crates were left in the playground and the cream on top turned to cheese.

'I could do with a cup of tea,' says Mum.

I switch on the stove. Mum won't use it; she's scared of an explosion even though our stove's electric. Ronan Point's been in the news what with the ten-year anniversary and it's made Mum more scared than ever. 'I hate living in the sky,' she says. 'I'm not a bloody bird.'

As I wait for the kettle to boil I clear a space on the windowsill.

'Are you really twelve today?' Mum says. 'You make me feel old. I see Nan got you a card.'

I nod and stand it on the sill. The sky's grey as wet pavements.

'I went out yesterday,' says Mum. 'Tried to buy you one. Lazy bastard shut the shop early.'

I don't believe her as she hardly ever leaves the flat. Something red whizzes past the window followed by the whoosh and blur of a black sack; people throw rubbish over the balconies when the dustmen strike and the chute fills up. Mark Taylor got hit by a beer can the other day.

'Scum,' says Mum.

The kettle whistles and I take it off the stove. 'Nan's taking me out today. Got any money?'

'Not till Monday. I'll borrow some though, get something nice for tea.'

We hear a noise in the hallway and look up.

'Surprise!'

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[302] An earlier version of this story, titled *The Tower*, was shortlisted for the Bristol Prize. Sophie Hampton, 'The Tower', in *Bristol Short Story Prize Anthology Volume 7* (Bristol: Tangent Books, 2014).

Mum and I jump.

Nan has let herself in. She never comes up here, says it's too depressing. She's wearing the brown dress with pink flowers that she bought on the market and her special-occasion turquoise eye shadow.

'Happy birthday, sweetheart.' She pants hot, minty breath on my cheek as she kisses me. 'Thought I'd never make it. The lift packed up on the tenth floor.'

'Where you taking her?' says Mum.

'Did you guess?' says Nan. 'From my card?'

'No,' I say.

'The zoo! We're going to the chimps' tea party!'

'Wow!'

'Waste of money,' says Mum, as she taps ash into my empty cereal bowl. 'I wouldn't pay to see bloody monkeys.'

'You've got no money left after your fags and liquorice torpedoes,' says Nan. 'No wonder your teeth are rotten.'

'Least I've still got my own,' says Mum. Her fag sizzles when she stubs it out in the drop of milk at the bottom of my bowl. 'I'm going back to bed.'

Nan and I walk along the landing where Mr Gazillion, our neighbour, is at his front door. He's got elephant ears and lips that have folded in on themselves and sucked-in cheeks where wrinkles run as deep as rivers. He must be older than a hundred. Mark said that gazillion is the biggest number in the universe so that's why I call Mr G what I do.

'Morning,' says Nan but Mr G turns his back on us. His shoulder blades stick out from his white shirt.

Mr G spies on me. He knows what time I leave for school – he comes to his door just as I walk past – even if I'm late. 'Morning,' I say and he grips the bars over his door and stares or puts his hands on the sides of his head and peeps through his fingers. He must press his ears against the walls because whenever Mum's been angry I think he tries to cheer me up: he gives me a smile – lopsided, a bit shy – and nods. I bet he can hear everything; his earholes are big and dark as caves and the walls of the flat are so thin that I can hear him peeing from my bedroom. He pees a lot. Mark says that when you're old you piss yourself and shit yourself and dribble like a baby.

The door shuts and he's gone.

‘Charming,’ says Nan.

‘Mr Gazillion can’t talk. He’s lost his teeth.’

‘You don’t need teeth to talk. What’s his real name?’

‘He hasn’t got one. Doesn’t need it. He doesn’t know anybody apart from me and Meals on Wheels.’

‘Your mum had the baby blues so bad that you didn’t have a name for forty-two days. If I hadn’t marched her to the registry office you wouldn’t have one now.’

‘Oh,’ I say and frown. I wish Nan hadn’t told me that. Especially on my birthday. If I have a daughter I’m going to spoil her with names: Susan Leslie Ursula – unless I marry Mark Taylor. Imagine the graffiti. Mark’s in third year and looks even hotter in his uniform. He’s the best-looking boy in the whole school, even better-looking than the sixth formers. My cheeks go hot when I think about him. It would be good if he could be my husband, ’specially seeing as Mum and Nan don’t have one.

The sun’s out when we get off the bus so I tie my cardie around my waist. Nan finds a lump of bubble gum stuck to her dress and goes in a bad mood. I expect the gum got there when she was in the lift because she leant against the wall. You should never lean against the walls: sometimes the pee is still wet.

‘How disgusting,’ she says. She tries to pull the gum off with a piece of toilet roll but it gets tufts stuck in it.

‘Nobody will notice,’ I say. ‘It’s the same colour as the flowers.’

She tuts and walks faster. Her backside wobbles because her heels are too high.

Nan buys two tickets for the tea party. I try to forget the cost in case Mum asks and gets cross. Nan and I have Mr Whippys. By the time I’ve eaten the flake the ice cream is melting over my fingers.

We squeeze onto the end of a bench near the front of the audience. When I sit down my dress pulls up over my knees; the label says *Age 10* but it’s the only dress I had that was clean. The girl next to me, all tanned and blonde with ribbons in her hair, narrows her blue eyes. Glistening in the sun, the gum on Nan’s dress looks as though it’s still covered in spit.

The zookeeper, who is wearing a black suit and has sweat dripping from under his cap, brings out four chimpanzees and leads them to a platform where a table has been laid.

The animals climb on their chairs and pick up cutlery, except the smallest chimp who refuses to face the table and rocks backwards and forwards. He puts his hands on his head and, like Mr Gazillion, peers through his fingers. The chimps drink cups of tea and munch on fruit except the smallest who doesn't eat anything. When the zookeeper pours tea over the smallest chimp's head everyone laughs except me. People stop laughing when a chimp jumps off his chair and throws a lump of shit into the crowd.

I don't like the tea party but I don't tell Nan because it's kind of her to bring me. I think it's mean to the animals but everyone keeps on laughing so I pretend to laugh too. The chimps remind me of Mr G – his dull eyes and flat nose and turned-in lips and wrinkles – even though the chimps are young and Mr G is ancient. When a chimp flings his iced bun on the ground I think it's wrong for the animals to have a party when poor Mr G has to eat Meals on Wheels on his own and I won't even have a birthday cake.

I'm pleased when it's over. Nan waits with me in the queue for the bus. 'Sit upstairs at the front,' she says, as she hands me my fare. 'You might get away without paying.'

Mark, John and Patrick are kicking a ball against the NO BALL GAMES sign.

'Happy birthday!' Mark yells.

John makes kissy noises and my cheeks burn.

'Where've you been?' says Mark. 'I knocked for you.'

'Nan took me to the zoo. To the chimpanzee's tea party.'

'OOH OOH OOH AH AH AH!' he screeches.

Patrick pretends to pick fleas from John's hair.

'You know John's got nits?' says Mark.

'Ugh!' says Patrick.

Mark kicks the ball. It hits the grille on one of the ground floor windows and makes a loud rattling noise. He kicks it there again.

'Stop it,' says Patrick. 'You'll get in trouble.'

Mark does it again, even harder.

A short, beefy man storms out of the main entrance. He stomps towards us. 'Who fucking kicked that ball?'

'Him,' answer Mark, Patrick and John at the same time. I step backwards. Uh oh, someone's gonna get a clip round the ear.

The man gets Patrick in a head lock, drags him over to the grille and bashes his face against it three times. ‘One for each of you,’ he says and goes back inside.

Patrick drops to the ground. He has blood and crisscrossed red lines on one cheek. Mark and John are white as sherbert. My heart pounds.

‘Jesus Christ,’ gasps Mark. ‘Fucking schizo!’ He crouches next to Patrick. ‘Sorry, mate.’

‘Who the fuck is he?’ says John.

‘Dunno what he’s called but he beats his wife up. She can’t be long for this world if he’s got a temper like that.’

John helps Patrick up from the ground. ‘Come round mine,’ he says. ‘My nan’ll clean you up. No questions asked. Not that you’ve done nothing wrong.’

Patrick glares at Mark as he walks off. I usually have butterflies when me and Mark are on our own and I feel extra shaky after what just happened.

‘Get any dosh for your birthday?’ asks Mark. His voice sounds a bit shaky too.

‘No.’

‘Any prezzies?’

‘The zoo was my present from Nan and Mum.’

‘I wanted to get you something. I tried to nick some sweets but Parker nabbed me. You should try. Girls can get away with anything. Short dress like that. Everyone knows Parker’s a fuckin’ perv. He keeps porno mags under the till. I saw a big tit poking out once.’

My cheeks burn hotter. ‘Stealing’s wrong,’ I say.

‘No, it ain’t. We ain’t got nothing. Our mums ain’t got nothing.’

My heart beats fast. Mark puts his hands on my shoulders. ‘You’re roasting,’ he says. ‘Hot for me, are you?’

‘I got sunburnt at the zoo.’

‘I dare you to nick some sweets,’ says Mark. ‘Everyone nicks sweets. Nicking sweets ain’t even nicking. Buy some chews and nick some chocolate.’ He takes two shiny new halfpennies from his trouser pocket and places them on his palm.

The coins glint in the sun. An ice cream jingle grows louder until a pink van pulls up at the entrance to the car park; it’s got *A Taste of Italy* painted on its side. All I can taste is the stink of used nappies coming from the mountain of rubbish.

‘Fancy him, do you?’ says Mark.

‘Hey?’

‘That bloody wop.’ He nods towards the man opening up the van’s hatch.

‘Course not,’ I say. ‘He’s ancient.’

‘So are you going to nick these sweets or what?’

A group of girls chant in the playground … *to fetch a pail of water. Poor old Jill forgot her pill and came down with a daughter.*

‘You’re chicken, ain’t you?’ says Mark.

My name is Elvis Presley, girls are sexy, sitting on a balcony …

‘Look at me.’

‘I’m not chicken.’

He gives me the coins. His hand is sweaty. I tug down my dress as I walk across the estate.

I say hello to Mr Parker who nods and returns to his football pools. As I wander along the aisle I slip two bars of chocolate into my pocket. At the counter I pick a couple of Black Jacks from the box. ‘Just these please, Mr Parker.’

He wipes his hands on his grubby white coat, takes the money and puts it in the till. ‘How’s your mum? I haven’t seen her for ages.’

‘Says she’s feeling old. It’s my birthday.’

‘Happy birthday!’ He rummages in the Fruit Salad box. ‘Here, hold out your hand.’ He drops a few into my palm.

‘Thank you, Mr Parker.’ I glance under the till. No sign of tits.

‘Easy!’ I say. I give Mark a bar of chocolate.

‘Wow! Flash your knickers, did you?’

‘Just took it off the shelf. Mr Parker gave me some chews as well.’

Mark looks so impressed. He rips off the chocolate wrapper. ‘Race you!’

The chocolate is already soft. We gobble down a bar each, biting off square after square without stopping. My throat feels gloopy and it’s hard to swallow.

Mark! Mark! Mark! A sound like a crow. We strain our necks upwards. Mark’s mum is leaning out of their kitchen window on the sixth floor, small as a doll, hair dyed yellow as custard. ‘Tea’s ready!’

Mark comes up to the nineteenth floor with me. When the lift stops for me to get out, the doors open but Mark presses the button and closes them again. He pins me against the wall. I think of the pee stains and the gum on Nan's dress. He kisses me and I don't stop him; it's quick and dry and hard and smells of sunshine and chocolate.

I stumble along the landing, heart thumping. Mr Gazillion is waiting at his door. He sticks his hand through the bars and holds out an envelope.

'For me?' I say. 'Thank you. How did you know it was my birthday?'

He smiles his lipless smile and stares, the whites of his eyes so dull and bloodshot that they are hardly white at all.

I unlock the door. It's quiet inside. I kid myself that Mum's gone out 'specially to buy food for tea, even though she's scared of the lift and has to take the stairs. She hasn't of course; she's asleep, curled up on the armchair in her nightie.

I open Mr G's card. It says *Happy Birthday to Someone Special* above a picture of a girl twirling a hula hoop. He has written his name inside but I can't make out his handwriting so he could be called anything. The card makes me sad but I put it on the windowsill next to Nan's because on its own her card looks lonely.

I feel even guiltier the second time I nick stuff but after that it gets easier. Mark's so nice to me when I show him what I've stolen and it serves Mr Parker right because he charges rip-off prices even if he did give me a few birthday chews. When Mum sends me to the shop to buy food for tea I nick sweets – or, if I've got my school bag, bigger things: biscuits and cans of pop – as I put bread and tins of spaghetti and beans in the basket.

Mark's smoking in the playground. I sit next to him on the roundabout and take the box of Black Magic from my bag. I thought he'd be impressed but he screws up his nose.

'You're wasting your time nicking chocolate,' he says, stubbing out his fag. 'You're a natural. You should have a go in Woolies.'

'Wouldn't dare. I only get away with it because Mr Parker knows me.'

Mark takes a bite out of a chocolate and spits. 'That tastes like shit.'

'What flavour was it?'

'Shit flavour. They're all shit. Taste like shit look like shit.' He stands up, tips the box upside down and squashes the chocolates into the ground with his shoe. 'Nick something worth it next time.'

I clench my teeth and blink. Mark lurches against the roundabout and I grab the rail. He pushes the roundabout so hard that I almost slide off. He runs round and round, faster and faster, until the tower blocks spin across the sky.

Mark seems cheesed off with me but we still make out whenever we're in the lift. He sticks his tongue inside my mouth – his kisses are wet and squelchy now and I gagged the first time he kissed me like that. Once he put his hand up the front of my tee shirt, like he'd find anything there, and I was so relieved when Mrs Aldridge from our landing got in. I'm too scared to stop Mark doing stuff because Debra Hardy fancies him and even though she's only thirteen, Patrick told me that she's gone all the way. It wouldn't surprise me. She's an evil cow as well as a slag. Rumour has it she was one of the girls who broke into the Bird Woman's flat and killed all her birds.

One afternoon Mark and I are sitting in the stairwell on the top floor. The concrete steps are cold but when Mark kisses me I feel hot down there. I kiss him back using my tongue. I'm getting better at it. I don't feel like I'm going to choke or be sick any more. And I don't pull away my hand when he takes it and pushes it between his thighs. The wind blows a newspaper along the corridor: sheets wrap themselves around the walls and in between the bannisters.

Mark points at the photograph of a Page Three girl. 'I hope your tits grow that big,' he says. 'Debra's will.'

My face burns.

'You know that Debs nicks from Woolies,' says Mark. 'She's dumb and she gets away with it. You pinch stuff, I'll sell it. We'll split the dosh and buy anything we want. John's brother can get us fags. You'd be better off smoking than eating sweets. You're getting fat.'

'I'm not getting fat!'

'Wanna bet?' He lifts my tee shirt and tries to wriggle his fingers inside the front of my trousers but the waistband's too tight. He looks at me: big brown eyes, lashes as long as Nan's when they're combed with mascara, freckles on his nose and cheekbones. 'You'd like my hand in there,' he says.

Should I undo my trousers?

The wind howls.

‘I’ve got to go,’ I say. ‘Mum will be wanting her tea.’

I examine myself in the mirror when I get inside: cheeks the colour of cherry lollypops, chubbier than they used to be. I unbutton my trousers and there are marks where the waistband’s been digging into my skin. My tummy sticks out a bit too. ‘Fat thief,’ I say to my reflection. Tears trickle into my mouth. ‘Fat, slutty, thief.’

Mum calls me. She sounds angry. I do up my trousers and wipe my face.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she says. She shakes the bottle of ketchup over her fish fingers.

‘Nowhere.’

‘Took an hour to walk home, did it?’

‘Stopped in the playground.’

‘Mrs Aldridge saw you necking Mark Taylor on the stairs the other day.’

‘She’s a liar!’

‘You be careful. Get yourself knocked up and I’ll kill you. Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed.’

Debra’s tits have grown bigger than ever and she wears low-cut tops; when Mark’s around she drops things so she can bend down and flash her tits. Thinking about her keeps me awake at night. I hear Mr Gazillion get up and pee and the whoosh of the flush. I hear the cough that rattles his body and makes his bed springs creak. I don’t want him to know I’m a slut and a thief. I worry that his elephant ears can hear me and Mark when the wind swirls around the estate and carries our voices up the stairwells and through the corridors and along the landings before it blows them over the balconies and safely into the muffle of the clouds.

‘Surprise!’ I say on Saturday afternoon. I pull five top ten singles from underneath my cardie and hand them to Mark.

‘You – are – the – best,’ he says. And he kisses me on the lips and squeezes my bum. In the middle of the playground. In front of Patrick and John and Debra.

On Monday morning I try on three skirts to find out which one is the least short and tight. I put the kettle on for Mum’s tea. I take the cereal box from the cupboard but all that’s left are the dusty bits at the bottom so I have cream crackers with marge and jam.

‘Your skirt’s too small,’ Mum says when I take in her drink. She’s sitting up in bed eating liquorice torpedoes, her tongue black as a slug. ‘You look slutty.’

‘It’s not my fault I’m growing! There’s a jumble sale in the church on Saturday. There might be some uniform there. Give me a bit of the child allowance and I’ll go and have a look.’

‘There’s none left.’

‘You only got it the other day.’

‘I owed money.’

‘There’s nothing to eat.’

‘You get school dinners. Here, have one of these.’ She offers me the bag of liquorice.

Half way along the landing I stop and turn. Mr Gazillion isn’t at his front door. Mr G has been at his door when I leave for school every day since we moved in two years ago. He never says anything, just nods at me and I nod back, but he’s always there. I wait for a few minutes, kicking at the mushrooms which grow in cracks in the concrete.

A gust of wind snatches petals from the geraniums in Mrs Aldridge’s window box. Please let Mr G come out before the petals land. I lean over the balcony until the flowers, like red butterflies, flutter out of sight. Still no Mr G. A wrecking ball, which in the distance looks no bigger than a gobstopper, swings from a crane. The ball crashes into the side of a factory but all I can hear is the thud of my heart. A white dust cloud rises from the ground and I watch it until it disappears. I glance at Mr G’s door and window and check the time: quarter to nine. I hurry along the landing.

I run home after school, as fast as I can while avoiding the pavement cracks. If I don’t tread on the cracks Mr G will be there. His door is shut. I press my face against the bars but I can’t see through the net curtain at the window.

‘You just ran straight past me!’

I jump. Mark scowls. He must have followed me up.

‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘I’m worried about Mr G. He wasn’t at his door this morning.’

‘He’s probably gone out.’

‘He doesn’t go out. He gets Meals on Wheels.’

‘Have you rung his bell?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I’m scared he doesn’t answer.’

Mark rolls his eyes. He presses the buzzer. Holds his finger down.

‘He’s not there,’ I say.

He continues to ring.

‘Stop it!’

Mark shakes the metal gate. To my surprise it opens. He tries the handle of the door and that opens too.

I gasp.

‘Coming?’ he says.

‘No! He might be dead.’

‘Someone’s got to find him.’

The flat smells of hospital and shepherd’s pie. Mark switches on the light: the bulb’s dusty and glows the colour of dark wee. We creep along the hallway which has the same lino as ours.

The door to the lounge is open. Mr Gazillion is sitting on a green velour sofa, his back to us, his neck so scrawny that his spine runs up the middle like a bean pole wrapped in skin. He is staring at photographs on the mantelpiece. When a sheet of peeling wallpaper rustles in the draft from the front door I jump and knock against a vase on the table. I try to grab the vase but it topples and smashes as it hits the ground. ‘Oh!’ I yelp. Mark sprints into the hallway.

Mr G doesn’t flinch.

I’ve never seen a dead person in real life.

I didn’t know that you could die sitting up.

Mr G lifts his hand to scratch one of his elephant ears and I scream.

Mark comes back in. ‘What’s going on? Shut the fuck up.’

‘Don’t swear in front of Mr G.’

‘Fuck me!’ says Mark, wide-eyed. ‘He’s deaf! He has no idea we’re in here. Look ... ’ He crouches behind the sofa. ‘Hey, spastic!’ he yells.

‘Don’t be nasty. Let’s go.’

‘Let’s explore. I’m going to check the bedroom.’

I follow him. Mr G has a double bed and I wonder when he last slept in it with someone. When Mark shuts and locks the door my heart thumps faster. He lies on top of the bedspread and takes off his tee shirt. He’s scrawnier than I thought and the untanned bits of his skin are so pale that they glow in the light that shines through the thin curtains.

‘Come here,’ he says and holds out his hand.

Nobody will see us. Mr G can’t hear us.

‘Come on.’

It’s not like doing it in the alleyway behind the garages. It’s not like it would be a one-night stand.

‘Don’t be chicken.’

You can’t get pregnant the first time.

‘It won’t hurt, honest.’

My fingers are trembling so much that it takes ages to unbuckle my shoes. I lie down. Mark undoes his flies and tugs his jeans down to his ankles. His brown Y-fronts are patterned with yellow diamonds. My skirt buttons up at the back and Mark rolls me onto my side, like a sausage in a pan. I hope that it’s too dark for him to notice the stretch marks on my thighs or the birthmark on my hip that looks like a splattered hairy spider.

As he struggles with the buttons I stare at the photograph on the bedside table: a young Mr G and his bride outside a church porch. She’s wearing a dress that stops at her ankles and funny flat shoes. She’s got her arm linked through his. Their smiles are bigger than Mr G’s ears.

‘No,’ I say, and sit up.

‘What do you mean, “no”?’ Mark switches on the lamp.

‘I’m not doing it on Mr G’s bed.’

Mark’s face goes purple. ‘Don’t you fancy me?’

‘It’s not that.’

‘We don’t have to go all the way.’

‘I’m not doing it here. It’s not right.’

‘Debs would. She’s gagging for it.’

‘Do it with her then!’ I get off the bed and Mark grabs my wrist. I yank it away and edge towards the door.

‘What makes you think I haven’t already?’ he says, zipping up his flies. He lunges

towards me and I step sideways.

'Fuck you!' he says. His eyes flicker round the room. I think he's going to grab something, throw it at me, but he turns to the chest of drawers, pulls out each drawer and rummages through the clothes.

'Leave his things alone.'

'Why? You never nicked anything?' Mark lifts up the mattress. 'Fuck all there,' he says, kicking the bed frame. 'Except piss stains.'

I pick Mr G's clothes off the floor. When I go back into the lounge, Mark is taking books, one by one, from the shelf. He fans through the pages and drops each book on the floor with a thud. When I grab his arm he shakes off my hand.

'Yeah!' he shouts. Dozens of banknotes flutter from a Bible: green, purple, brown. Mark gathers them up and stuffs them into his pockets. 'Thanks, mate,' he says to Mr G's back. 'Much appreciated.'

'You can't steal his money,' I say.

'Already have done.'

'You're disgusting. I'm going to find a policeman, tell him what you've done!'

'I'll pound you if you do.' He gives me the finger and leaves, slams the front door so hard that the window rattles. A big flake of plaster drifts from the ceiling.

Mr G turns and stares at me. I try to say sorry but my voice doesn't work. His scared eyes make me retch. He turns back to the photographs on the wall. He is no longer still. He rocks backwards and forwards.

When I smell burning that night I get out of bed and go to the balcony. Someone has set fire to the rubbish in the car park. I listen to the crackle of the flames and watch the shadows of the rats as they run from the burning pile. I tiptoe to Mr G's door and try the gate but it's locked. I wait there until I hear a siren and the blue flashing lights close in.

I haven't seen Mr G since. I write him a letter each evening but I never put it through his door. Mark and Debra make out everywhere: in the stairwells, on the platform at the top of the slide, in the car park, watched by me and a down-and-out with pink, swollen feet who gulps from a bottle of meths.

One night I take a bucket of water and some rags into the lift to wash off the graffiti. Mark's spelling is rubbish: *fat and fridgid*. I wonder if anyone has dialled our

telephone number to ask for *sluty sex with a slag*; the line was cut off ages ago, when Mum lost her job. I rub the walls so hard that sweat trickles down my chest but the words don't even smudge.

On Saturday Nan takes me to Wimpy for a knickerbocker glory; she knows I'm fed up. She says she only wants a cup of tea but she eats my wafers and the glace cherries and then asks for a spoonful of ice cream. I eat up quickly before she steals any more.

'Lost your tongue?' she says.

'Just brain freeze,' I say. 'And I'm tired.' I scrape the last bit of strawberry jelly and sponge from the bottom of the glass. 'Nan?'

'Yeah.'

'How old were you when you first did, you know, it?'

'Did it? Let me think. Eighteen?'

'Yeah, right,' I say.

Nan laughs. 'Why?'

'This boy called Mark wanted to go all the way and I thought I did too but then I changed my mind and now he's calling me a cocktease and doing it with a girl with big tits.'

'Gordon Bennett, you're twelve years old,' says Nan. 'You're a child. What a bastard. He obviously wasn't worth it, was he?'

I shake my head. Teeth clenched.

'You wait till you're ready. I don't want to be a great-nan at fifty. Don't make the same mistake as your mum.'

Nan's trying to be kind but I'm not sure about being called a mistake.

The lift doors open. Mum's chatting to Mrs Aldridge on the landing. Bras and knickers, grey as the sky, flap on the washing line above their heads. Two men come out of Mr G's flat, carrying the velour sofa; the cushion on one side is sagging and worn.

I squeeze against the railings to let the men pass. 'What's going on?' I ask Mum. 'Where's Mr G?'

'He's gone.' She takes a liquorice torpedo from the pocket of her nightie and pops it into her mouth.

‘Morning, Dr Creed.’
‘Good morning. How are you? You’re looking well.’
‘I am, thank you. Home visits?’
‘Yes, I’ve got a few here this morning. I strongly suspect there’s an outbreak of mumps.’

‘Mands, press 19.’
‘Er … 19 … there we go. I wonder what the flat’s going to be like.’
‘It’s got to be better than that one above the butcher’s.’
‘I just want to get settled, make a nice home before the baby’s born.’
‘I know, sweetheart. We’re going to be fine.’
‘They said a very old man lived there before. I hope he didn’t die there.’
‘Oh, here we go, 19 … Whoa! It’s windy up he.

‘Press the button again, it’s stuck.’
‘Oh shit, man! I can’t believe I dropped my burger!’
‘Look, the floor’s been cleaned. It’s still wet. Sniff. Smells of Jeyes or summat. I’d eat my dinner off of that.’
‘Really?’
‘Course. Five second rule ... Your gherkin’s fell out by the way.’
‘Ooh er missus ... I like getting my gherkin out. ’specially when there’s girls around. Mmm.’
‘Taste alright?’
‘Mmm. Mactastic. Wanna bite?’
‘Nah. Off of that floor. You must be joking!’
‘You’re such a git!

‘Oh, Mrs Aldridge, am I glad to bump into you. I’ve got some dreadful news.’
‘What’s happened?’
‘I saw a couple looking round Mr Robert’s old flat. Punks! Spiky pink hair! Both of them, like dinosaurs! And the girl had black makeup on and studs and spikes sticking out all over the place. She had a ring in her eyebrow! And there was a swear word on the back of the man’s jacket. I didn’t sleep a wink last night what with the worry. I’d rather have coloureds than people like that. Drugs and fights and loud music going on at all times of day and night.’

‘Hullo, John. How’d you get on yesterday?’
‘Didn’t get it.’
‘Ah, what a shame.’
‘I know. I would’ve killed for that job.’
‘It was made for you. You’d have been a great bingo caller. The right personality.’
‘It’s hard when you’ve been out of work so long. You lose your confidence. I was shaking when I got up on stage. I forgot 81, clean forgot, and I know them all like the back of my hand. Fat lady with a walking stick. That’s the point it all went tits-up. They gave it to some bloody fairy. He was good though, I’ll give him that. You had any joy?’
‘Nah. I’ve got another interview tomorrow. Poultry man. The world and his dog will be after it. Five-day week. No Saturdays. We’ll see.’
‘Well, best of luck.’
‘Thanks, mate. Listen, I really am sorry about that job. I’ll buy you a pint later if you fancy it.’

Flat 65 – The Mother

I answer the door quickly in case Aurora wakes up; she's had mumps and needs as much sleep as she can get. It's Carol, the gossip from along the corridor, a firework of freckles on her face, a scarlet V of sunburn on her chest.

'Thought I'd pop in and say hello,' she says.

'I'm just …'

She pushes past, a warm draft of perfume and sweat; the stains under her armpits are the colour of a lemon ice.

I peer into the corridor. 'Are the children with you?'

'They're watching *Rentaghost*.' She wipes her forehead with the sleeve of her blouse.

'Would you like a cup of something?'

'A squash would be nice. It's baking out there.'

Sofia is squatting on the floor of the living room, building a tower of red, green and blue wooden bricks. Carol ignores her and slumps onto the sofa; I imagine the hollow her large, shapeless bottom will leave. In the kitchen, a line of ants catches my eye, crawling across the powder I sprinkled earlier. I divide the last of the squash between a beaker and two glasses.

'Mummy, Daddy, 'fia, 'rora, live on sky,' Sofia says as she balances a block on top of her tower. 'Birds live on sky. Sun live on sky.' She takes the beaker, her hand inflamed and cracked. Her eczema flared up as soon as the hot spell began. I must do her cream again, for the third time today. Strip her off and grease her from head to toe and she will scream *no like it* and wriggle and slip across the room and scratch herself until she bleeds.

Carol slurps her squash. 'I needed that,' she says. 'I took the kids to Epping Forest this morning. Heaving it was.'

'Giuseppe's working there today.'

'I was just going to say.'

'You saw him?'

'Yeah. We bought ice creams. 99 Flakes. The girl served us.'

'The girl?' I put my glass on the table, too close to the edge. I push it back – into a beam of sunlight – to stop it falling; bits of orange pulp swim like sperm. Sofia stands up, blocks the sun as she places a brick on top of the tower.

‘Yeah, a girl. You didn’t know, did you?’ says Carol. ‘Been working late, has he?’

‘He’s been busy. With this weather. He can’t serve fast enough on his own.’

‘I’m glad my old man works on the docks.’

Sofia trips over her beaker of squash. ‘Mummy! ’fia’s drink falled over!’ she yells.

‘For f … ’ I pick up the beaker and mop at the spilt liquid with a handkerchief.

‘More squash, Mummy!’

I pass her my drink. My thin gold band digs into my finger. The veins on my hand are plump, quite disgusting really, like earthworms beneath my skin. *The girl*. I don’t want to ask Carol – lips pursed, nose tilted upwards. I don’t want to give her the satisfaction. *The girl*. The baby kicks hard and I spread my hand over my stomach.

‘What did she look like?’ I say.

‘A foreigner. Dark-skinned. Well, they all are, aren’t they? Except the yellow ones.’ She laughs. ‘Her English weren’t great. The kids asked for monkey’s blood on their ice creams and she didn’t have the foggiest.’

I imagine the girl: tall, slim, child-free. Italian. Slender fingers with red painted nails wrapped around a cornet. Smoothly pumping ice cream into a glossy swirl. *Perfetto*, Giuseppe will say as he hovers next to her, brushes against her tight, lean body.

‘The *Giuseppe’s Gelato* was stretched right across her tits,’ says Carol. ‘That’ll get his name noticed.’ She rhymes gelato with potato.

‘Gelato,’ I mumble.

‘You what? Ponytail down to her arse. Mid-riff out. She had a jewel in her belly button, can you imagine? It’d get buried in my flab.’

‘Was she wearing a tee shirt?’

‘Yeah. Same as his only smaller. Much smaller.’

Something as insignificant as a tee shirt. The moment, long ago, of realisation still stings. My heart thumps. The balcony doors are open but I can’t breathe. ‘Mind Sofia, will you?’ I say to Carol. ‘Don’t let her scratch.’

I step outside, squeezing my bump past the chest freezer. Its wire snakes into the flat through the doors so we can’t shut them properly; when I lie awake at night I hear them thump, thump, thump in the wind. I won’t let the girls on the balcony – not with the weight of the freezer. I read a story at school. I can’t remember who wrote it but it was set in Italy: a balcony collapses under the burden of an overweight pig and kills the man

walking underneath. I rarely go on the balcony myself. I used to force myself to hang the washing on the line but the dust of demolition turned the whites to ashen grey.

I look beyond the linear city – canal, roads, terraced houses, railway tracks, factories, towers – to the distant forest, a swathe of green broken up by glistening metallic lakes. Before we moved here, Giuseppe convinced me I would love the views but to see everything is to lose everything. I would rather have a garden with a single tree, to see the veins on a leaf the colour of Chartreuse or the hint of pink blossom peeping from a bud, than look from a concrete tower onto a beautiful forest so far away it could be a field of rotting cabbage. I spent my childhood in those woods, with my friends and my old Raleigh and my much-thumbed *I-Spy Trees*. Years later, Giuseppe – when he was still John Brown and I was Mary Williams – proposed in a clearing, away from the noise and the lights of the city. We marvelled at the clarity of the stars and I cried when my diamond (oh so small, just a touch of disappointment) sparkled in the moonlight.

I hear a thump and the inevitable scream. 'Mummy!' sobs Sofia. 'I got an ouch!' I squeeze back inside. 'She tripped over the blocks,' says Carol.

'Mummy!' roars Sofia, holding her foot up to my mouth. 'Kiss better!' Tears drip from her chin. She has been scratching her arm and beads of blood glisten in the sunlight.

'I'm not deaf!' I shout. 'And how many times have I told you not to scratch.' Sofia's face crumples. I pick her dummy off the floor and stuff it in her mouth; the teat's the colour of earwax. The baby kicks me so hard that I flinch.

Carol stands up. 'About the girl. I'm just warning you. The two of them looked, how shall I say it … cosy.' She clicks the front door shut. Her bottom has left a crater in the sofa. I beat the cushion until it's plump. Dust particles swirl in the sun.

Sofia sits her Sindy Ballerina on top of the tower and it collapses.

The girls climb into their bunk beds, Sofia on the bottom so that when she rolls out she doesn't have far to fall. I glare at the chest freezer against the opposite wall; Giuseppe promised to borrow a cot from his sister and move the freezer to God knows where but with a month to go it's still whirring away, pumping heat into the already stifling room. To my relief, Aurora falls asleep quickly. Sofia asks for a story; I tell her that Mummy's tired but her eyes fill with tears. 'I want story!'

'Sh.'

‘’bout Mummy Daddy’s wedding. Big yummy in my tummy cake. Big dress. Big horsies.’

I describe Princess Anne’s wedding. My mother and I joined the crowds outside Westminster Abbey, not long before my mother died. When the story’s finished I stand up quietly but Sofia’s eyes open and my heart sinks. ‘Hold hand, Mummy,’ she says. I lie on the shaggy rug next to the bed. It hurts my back but it’s cooler on the floor. I hear the man next door pissing, pissing, pissing. Sofia’s damp little hand slips into mine. I squeeze it tightly, to show how much I love her, ache at how every day I fail to show the girls how much I love them. I hold her hand until her breathing settles.

Until the girls are older I will foster the colourful Walt Disney world that exists beyond this concrete tower and its gloomy corridors. The memories of our marriage – even the carnations and the Routemasters – are black and white. It had stopped raining but the sky was slate grey. The drains had overflowed and as the buses rumbled past their wheels sprayed the water that sloshed in the gutters. John and I climbed the steps of Hackney Town Hall. I wore a short white polyester dress, spattered with mud, and white pumps soaked through. I clutched the cheap bunch of flowers. I asked a passerby to take a photo. John looked awkward in his borrowed woollen suit; he tugged the sleeves over his shirt cuffs and turned up the hem of the trousers. We stood on the top step. The passerby clicked and said ‘loverly’. John and I kissed and he hugged me so hard I thought my ribs would crack. He checked that the rings were in his breast pocket and we went inside.

It’s dark when I wake up. My back aches as I creep out of the girls’ room. I pause in the corridor; Giuseppe’s still not home. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and go to the balcony for some cooler air. The fair’s in town and the stretch of wasteland – usually as black as a night sea – glows with flashing coloured lights: spinning, rising, falling. Screams and snatches of number one hits – ‘Don’t Go Breaking my Heart’, ‘Oh, What a Night’ – carry on the wind. Giuseppe and I used to love the fair: my memories before the children are as fluffy as the candy floss. We took Aurora and Sofia last summer. Giuseppe had been horrid all day, all week. I was trying not to argue with him in front of the girls. I wanted to take them on the merry-go-round. Giuseppe wanted to take them on the dodgems even though they were far too young. We went on the dodgems. Giuseppe took Aurora in his car and I took Sofia in mine. We had only been on the ride for a minute when I swung my dodgem round to face his and rammed him head on; I wanted to kill him.

Sofia's head whipped backwards and forwards and her face hit the steering wheel. I gathered her into my arms, pressed her damp cheek to mine.

In the bedroom I switch on the lamp and sit in front of the mirror. Giuseppe's going to suggest that the dressing table, which was my mother's, must go. That it's taking up the only place for the freezer. 'You'll have no time to tart yourself up when we've got *three* kids,' he'll say. I can't look at myself during the day, with the sun streaming in through the large windows, but even in this light it is clear that I have faded, like the pigment of a painting hung in direct sun. My hair is grey at the temples, the only colour in my face is in the circles beneath my eyes and my red-rimmed lids, my jowls are sagging. *Three* kids to get up sixteen flights of stairs when the lifts are broken. Three kids to change, to wash, to dress, to feed, to entertain, to comfort. Three kids squeezed into this concrete cage, this goldfish bowl, this chicken coop, this rabbit hutch with only a balcony for *this* overweight pig to breathe. I will keep my Woolworth's makeup and my almost-empty bottle of Charlie – a squirt or two saved for some special occasion – on top of the freezer. And while Giuseppe drinks Chianti with 'the girl' I can desperately suck any vestige of alcohol from the sickly-sweet ice of a Cider Quench and binge on Funny Feet and Screwballs and Lemonade Sparkles.

I lie on the bed, propped up on a pillow, and stare at my swollen feet and ankles. I run my fingers over the veins – like the red and blue and purple lines of the London Underground map – that course my limbs. The outline of a tiny foot presses against the only taut skin on my body. And then the foot kicks and I want to kick back. Boy or no boy this is my last. I will see a doctor.

It was my fault, this obsession with all things Italian but it started as a joke. When John first mentioned his idea for the business I said, 'John Brown's Ices doesn't work. You must have an alias. Something exotic!' And now we are a family of four with Italian names and if we have a boy, *of course we are having a boy*, he will be Rocco.

We picked up the ice cream van, a Bedford, in 1973 on a cold March day a week after our wedding. We had arranged to have it painted and we chatted excitedly about what it would look like as we walked hand in hand across the garage forecourt. The sky was as grey as the Thames but the van, painted cream and pink, gleamed. John ran a finger along the lettering on the side and I held my breath as I checked the spelling: *Giuseppe's Gelato – A Taste of Italy.* An impossibly angled Tower of Pisa adorned the back door, Pompeii

stretched across the bonnet, and the Colosseum, depicted below the serving hatch, would be seen by customers as they queued. Inside the van, we opened the freezer and admired the space-saving storage units.

'Everything okay, guv?' said the fitter.

'Fantastic. Thanks,' said John. In exchange for the keys, he handed the fitter an envelope containing a wad of ten pound notes – money my mother left me and savings from my Saturday job in haberdashery at Jones Brothers. John hooted as he drove out of the garage and we turned into the Mile End Road. He adjusted the mirrors and fumbled with the gears. When I worked out how to sound the 'Greensleeves' chime he pressed his foot on the accelerator and we whooped with delight.

Ten minutes later, we pulled up in the carpark. I stepped out of the van and John slid open the window of the serving hatch. '*Maria, ciao bella.* What can I get you?'

I stood on tiptoe and leaned in to kiss him. 'It's beautiful, John.'

'It's Giuseppe from now on.'

'Two new husbands within a week!'

Giuseppe opened the back doors. He took my hand and I stepped inside.

'It's cosy,' I said. 'It's like our very own home. Much more like a home than the horrid flat. We can hang a photograph from our wedding day *there*. We can put two stools *here*. I can make some curtains for the windows, red gingham would look pretty.'

Back in the flat we stood on the balcony and smoked Player's. In the midst of the concrete towers, the derelict factories, the swathes of wasteland, the graffitied walls and bridges, the burnt-out cars, the caged stunted trees and the overflowing bins stood our ice cream van, our future, resplendent.

'It's so smart!' I squealed.

'You like it then?'

'Oh, yes. Very much.'

'More than a honeymoon and a two-bed semi with a garden?'

'More than a holiday and a house, for now. But when we grow rich we'll drive the van across the continent and honeymoon in Rome. And we won't live in a tower block for long, will we Giuseppe? I don't want our children to grow up here.'

'Well, the profit margins are excellent and hopefully we'll get a hot summer.' He stepped inside and rested his cigarette on the ashtray. He unwrapped a parcel that had

arrived that morning, took out a tee shirt, unfolded it and grinned. He took off his top and pulled on the shirt; it had *Giuseppe's Gelato* printed across the chest.

'That looks fab,' I say.

'If I could speak the language, I could be mistaken for Italian,' he said as he looked in the mirror and flexed his biceps. 'Swarthy skin, thick black hair, brown eyes.'

I giggled. 'You'd need more than the language. They say the men are great lovers!' I rummaged in the box. To my disappointment there were only two more shirts. I checked the labels; as I had thought, both were size large. 'Did you order tee shirts for me?'

'No.'

'I'll need some for when I'm serving.'

'Unless it's very busy your job will be back office. You did so well at Pitman's. The bookkeeping and the shorthand. And your A level English. Perfect for the paperwork. You know I can't do stuff like that.'

I flushed and rolled my eyes. 'Well, obviously I'll spend some time *back office*, by which I assume you mean stuck in the second bedroom, where you can hear the man next door pissing and the couple upstairs at it, but it won't fill my days.'

'Your days will be full when you have a baby. Enjoy yourself while you can.'

'It's not *18*73. We wouldn't have the van if it wasn't for my savings. And I turned down a good job to start this business.'

Giuseppe glared. 'Don't go all Women's Lib on me. And if you're gonna harp on about how you paid for the van there's no fucking way this is going to work. I thought we were in this together.'

'You said it! I thought we were in this *together* too.'

Giuseppe stormed onto the balcony and I went to the bedroom. I lay down, a flutter in my stomach. An hour or so later he came in, carrying the record player.

'Sorry, sweetheart,' he said. 'I didn't mean to snap.'

He put an LP on the turntable. I thought he was going to play some music, the Carpenters or Marvin Gaye, but he propped himself against a pillow and opened an Italian phrasebook. 'You don't mind, do you?' he asked. '*Preferisco la bistecca ben cotta*.'

We stopped the van in a residential street opposite a small park edged with London planes. The park was empty except for a little girl in a red coat who was playing hopscotch in the playground. The morning was cool but I wiped sweat off my forehead as I polished the

van's windows. The printer had delivered the brightly-coloured menu and I had decorated the hatch with photographs of Zooms and Mivvis and Fabs.

'We should practise doing a few cones,' I said to Giuseppe, as I rubbed at a mark on the softwhip machine. 'I bet it's not as easy as it looks.'

'Piece of piss,' he said. 'I'm not throwing money away before we've even started. Now, are you ready to open?'

'I know we don't want queues today but don't you think it's rather quiet here?'

'It's fine,' said Giuseppe. 'Trust me. Ready?'

I took off my apron and pulled my hair into a ponytail. 'Ready!'

Giuseppe sounded the 'Greensleeves' chime. I wondered if the little girl in the playground might come over but she had vanished. Half an hour later, after renditions of 'Teddy Bears' Picnic', 'The Entertainer', and 'Match of the Day', two teenage girls, one blonde, one dark, walked towards the van.

'Our first ever customers! I'll serve,' I said.

'Let me.' Giuseppe put his hands on my hips and moved me to one side. I glared at him.

'Ciao, bella!' he said when the girls came to the hatch.

'A Mr Whippy, please,' said the blonde girl.

Her friend giggled. 'I thought you said "Whip me, please!"'

'Now there's an offer I can't refuse,' said Giuseppe.

The blonde girl fluttered fake eyelashes.

'I'll have a Mr Whippy too,' said her friend. 'Stick a Flake in it, will you?'

'That's not all I'll stick in if you're not careful!'

'Now who's offering?'

I caught sight of myself in the little mirror I'd hung above the freezer: strands of limp hair had escaped from my ponytail, mascara smudged my flushed cheeks. It used to kill me when Giuseppe flirted with the beautiful girls at school, the ones who got away with pearly pink lipstick and black bras beneath thin white blouses. The more he flirted the more I wanted him. His one-liners seemed cool back then; as the girls ogled him and hitched up their skirts my stomach would churn and my heart would thump but as he chatted up the girls at the van he seemed ridiculous.

Giuseppe took a cornet and held it underneath the nozzle. He pulled the lever. A snake of ice cream shot out of the machine, missed the cone and landed on the floor.

Giuseppe's face turned red as the strawberry sauce. The girls burst out laughing. 'Bloody machine,' he muttered. He tried again but this time a mere worm slithered out so he pulled the lever harder; a second snake squirted over his tee shirt and down his crotch.

'Let me.' I took a fresh cone. As the ice cream pumped out smoothly I moved the cone round and round, my hand trembling ever so slightly. I managed to form a beautiful swirl although the ice cream's peak folded when I handed it to the girl; the second one was perfect.

The girls paid six pence and walked off, sniggering. I turned to Giuseppe. 'Phew, that turned out alright in the end.'

'Don't you ever show me up like that again,' he said.

'Me? Show *you* up? You were flirting like I didn't exist!'

'Flattering the customer's part of the job. If you don't like it stay at home and do the books. What sort of woman works an ice cream van anyway?'

I spent three days a week at my desk. The flat didn't feel so claustrophobic back then, sparsely furnished, before the girls were born. We had no money for furniture so my father gave us an old bed and a wardrobe and Giuseppe's parents, not to be outdone, gave us a dining table and four chairs. One Sunday we drove the van to the flea market in Brick Lane and bought a threadbare sofa and a desk with a cup-stained green leather insert which I would use for the bookkeeping.

Giuseppe marked on the catalogue the items he wanted me to order: large tubs of ice cream, cartons of softwhip mix, lollies, cones, wafers, sticky sauces, chocolate flakes, chopped nuts and rainbow sprinkles; whenever I suggested an ice cream or a flavour he said it wouldn't sell. He insisted that I deposit the previous day's takings, however small, at the bank each morning and I got to know the cashiers and would stop and chat. The rest of the time I went in the van even though there was little to do; business hadn't started as briskly as hoped. I wiped down surfaces that didn't need wiping and kept the softwhip machine filled to the brim. Giuseppe remained cheerful and when we did have a busy day he was in his element: *ciao bella* he would say as he ogled cleavages straining from low cut tops. *Buongiorno*, *arrivederci*, *grazie*, *prego*.

One morning, a couple of months after the wedding, I woke up and vomited. I had already known I was pregnant: I was two weeks' late. Giuseppe was overjoyed. I felt too sick to celebrate.

‘You’d better stay in bed,’ said Giuseppe.

‘I’ll be okay after I’ve had something to eat.’

‘I can’t afford to lose an hour’s trading. There’s nothing for you to do in the van.’

‘What’s the rush? How many ice creams do you expect to sell at nine o’ clock on a Monday morning?’

‘You’d never forgive yourself if you lost the baby.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘It’s unnecessary. Do some paperwork if you must but you should be resting.’

‘It’s my van too. Remind me how much money you put in?’

When I hear Giuseppe’s keys in the door I pretend to be asleep. He doesn’t try to wake me. I doze fitfully, taunting myself with images of ‘the girl’ until she turns into Sophia Loren. The children wake us early the next morning and Giuseppe and I hardly speak before he leaves. He comes home at lunchtime to re-stock. The lift packs up half way through loading and he lugs boxes down the stairs as he mutters about the fucking waste of time and money. I take the girls down to the van and we empty the bins and fill the softwhip machine and unpack ice lollies from boxes to maximise the freezer space. When we’ve finished, the girls clamour to go with him.

‘Can’t you take them?’ I say. ‘Just this once? I’m so tired and they get so grumpy cooped up in the flat when it’s hot. They can help in the van or play in the forest, get some fresh air.’

‘Please, Dad,’ says Aurora.’

‘Why don’t you let them play here?’ says Giuseppe. ‘Watch them from the balcony.’

‘Are you insane? What do I do if Sofia picks up a syringe or a used condom? Yell at her not to put things in her mouth till I get downstairs?’

‘Stay with them then. I’m too busy. I’ll take them when our son’s born, give you some time off then.’

‘Time off? With a newborn? Are you serious?’

‘Dad, I wanna come with you,’ says Aurora.

‘You can’t.’ He opens the lid of the freezer. ‘But I’ll make up for it.’

‘Oooh,’ says Aurora.

‘You can have one Mini Milk each,’ I say.

‘I want a Mr Man,’ whines Aurora.

‘I want Rainbow,’ says Sofia.

‘I said you could have Mini Milks!’

‘No like milk!’ Sofia bursts into tears. ‘Milk is yuck!’

Giuseppe rummages in the freezer and pulls out a Mr Man and a Captain Rainbow.’ I tut and roll my eyes. The girls grab the lollies and jump up and down.

‘Dad!’ says Aurora. Giuseppe ignores her and starts up the van. ‘Dad, play ‘Teddy Bears’ Picnic’.’ Her voice is drowned out by the engine as Giuseppe drives off. ‘Why won’t Dad let me go in the van?’

‘You heard. He said you’d be a nuisance.’ The air is still and the nauseating exhaust fumes linger. I walk across the straw-coloured patch of grass towards the block’s entrance, the girls trailing after me.

‘I’m old enough to be helpful,’ says Aurora.

‘Me too,’ says Sofia and stamps her foot. Her lolly slips from the stick onto a bald patch of earth. She shrieks and tries to rescue the melting pieces from the dust but they slip between her fingers. Her scarlet face crumples.

‘For Christ’s sake,’ I say and pick her up roughly.

The lift is working again but someone has pressed all the buttons so it stops at every floor. Sofia screams the whole way up and Aurora scowls at me. When we get back to the flat I open the freezer in the girls’ room.

‘You can have a Mini Milk,’ I say to Sofia. ‘And stop scratching!’

‘Want Mr Man.’

‘I want one too,’ says Aurora.

‘You’ve just had one.’

‘Sofia’s allowed.’

‘She dropped hers!’

‘It’s not fair.’ Aurora glares at me. Her dark brown eyes are Giuseppe’s eyes.

‘Eat what you fucking want!’ I shout. ‘Just leave me in peace!’ I take a box out of the freezer, rip off the tape and scatter ice creams over the floor.

I wait up for Giuseppe that evening. Usually, when my head starts to slump, I creep into the bedroom. The glow of twilight and the lights of the city rarely keep me awake. Instead, I watch the flickering black and white television, the sound low so as not to disturb the

girls. When I switch off the TV I stare at the block opposite, at the silhouettes framed in squares of light. I think of how I shouted at the girls and my eyes sting. I wonder if Giuseppe will notice my swollen lids and blotchy cheeks.

He comes in and flings his keys on the table. He pulls up his filthy tee shirt and uses it to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. I am struck by how taut and tanned his stomach is; I haven't seen him undress for a while. I wish he had seven pounds of squirming child inside him, pressing on his bladder, making him flinch with every kick.

'Alright?' says Giuseppe. 'What's for tea?'

I shrug.

'What's that mean?'

'It means I haven't cooked. I'm exhausted and I wasn't hungry.'

'I'm fucking starving.'

'Shh. You'll wake the girls. And don't swear at me.'

'Have they eaten?'

'Yes.'

'What did they have?'

'The wrappings, and vomit, would suggest that between them they ate a Crime Squad, a Dalek Death Ray, an Orange Maid, half a brick of raspberry ripple and three choc ices.'

'Jesus Christ, Maria. I work twelve-hour days for you, the girls, our son, and you can't even put a sodding meal on the table. I've half a mind to start sleeping in the van.'

'That would work well for you, wouldn't it?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I don't *ask* you to work twelve-hour days. I hate being cooped up with the girls, waddling around fat as you like, tripping over bloody boxes and freezer wires and toys.'

'Stop having a go! The money's rolling in. We've got a baby on the way.'

'It's not rolling in anything like it should the hours you're doing. And the hot weather's not going to last. It's not '76. That's the only year you made anything. Please, Giuseppe, sell the van. Get a proper job. Join a union. Clock off at five. Do you remember weekends and holidays and sick pay?' My eyes fill with tears.

Giuseppe kneels by the sofa and takes my hand: rough skin, fat veins, bitten nails. He's wondering how I've managed to let myself go when I spend all day at home doing nothing.

‘If the summer carries on like this we’ll have enough for a deposit,’ he says. ‘We’ll have to move further out, Essex way, but we’ll be able to afford a two, maybe three-bed house with a garden. I promise. And we’ll have the van re-sprayed, to celebrate the baby, *Giuseppe & Son – Gelato – Established 1973*. Sounds fancy, doesn’t it?’

‘Listen to me! How many three-penny ice creams do you think you need to sell to get rich?’

To my immense relief both girls take their afternoon nap the next day. As soon as Sofia settles I change from my tight clothes into my nightdress and lie down.

I wake up with pains in my stomach and go to the kitchen to fetch a glass of squash. The sink is filled with dishes. Bloated cocoa puffs and dead ants float in the film of grease from Giuseppe’s breakfast. I make a drink and shuffle back to the bedroom. As I am about to manoeuvre myself onto the bed, the baby gives the most almighty kick which is followed by a popping sensation. A rush of warm liquid cascades down my legs and flows onto the ground. I sway and grab the bedstead as the waters gush, gush, gush. Fluid pools in the depressions in the uneven floor. I remember the puddles on our wedding day. The muddy water swirling in the gutters. The dark grey clouds. I stagger to the front door, my waters running down my legs, and walk along the corridor in my bare, wet feet. I knock at Carol’s door. Her husband opens it.

‘It’s Maria, isn’t it?’ he says. ‘You okay, love?’

‘It’s the baby,’ I gasp. ‘It’s on its way. I’m on my own with the children. Can you phone an ambulance?’

‘I’ll knock at Fletcher’s. Phone box on corner’s bust.’

Carol appears behind him. ‘Oh my God, it’s coming.’

‘Will you stay with the girls?’ I ask.

‘Course. Is your bag packed?’

‘I have to get hold of Giuseppe.’

‘Don’t fret, love. Our Kelly can stop with the girls. I’ll find Giuseppe. Is he in the forest?’

I nod and wail as my womb contracts.

‘If the car don’t start I’ll take a taxi,’ says Carol. ‘I’ve got a pound note in my purse. Don’t worry, love. Everything will be okay.’

The washing on the balconies of the block opposite flaps angrily in the hot wind. Curtains, flashes of faded floral, twist and twirl out of open windows. The balcony door thumps against the freezer wire. The stack of unsorted paperwork on the table rustles in the breeze.

'Hello? It's only me, love,' Carol calls from the hallway. 'How you doing?' She comes into the living room, slippers slapping on the linoleum.

'I'm okay, thank you.'

'I've bought custard creams,' she says, brandishing a bag of seconds. 'Giuseppe took the girls out then? I've bin on at him. It's all well and good throwing himself into the business but you need a break.'

'They've gone to Southend,' I say. 'I think it's going to rain. It's so depressing there, in the rain. Grey sand. Grey sea. Grey sky.'

'You need a cuppa.'

Carol busies herself in the kitchen while the kettle boils, slippers slapping on the floor. She makes the tea and brings it through, placing the cup next to the bag of broken biscuits on the coffee table. An invoice from the pile of paperwork blows across the room; Carol glances at it as she picks it up. 'That's a big order,' she says. 'Expecting the hot spell to last, is he?'

'Gambling on it.'

She takes Sofia's nappies off the rack and folds them into neat squares. When she finishes the nappies she starts on the clothes.

'Leave them,' I say. 'I'll do them later.'

'You should rest, love. I can't believe how quick they sent you home.'

She picks up the torso of a Tiny Tears doll. The head and limbs are scattered across the floor; Aurora ripped them off this morning. Carol gathers up the body parts and sits at the table to fit them back together. 'I've got something to tell you,' she says, eyes down. 'I've not slept for days. Dan says I'm not to gossip but I'd want to know if it were me.'

An ant, carrying another ant on its back, crawls the length of the coffee table.

'Giuseppe was with the girl,' I say, 'when the baby died. He was, wasn't he?'

Carol comes to the sofa and takes my hand. 'I'm sorry, love.'

'Did you see them together?'

'Yes.'

'Doing what?'

‘The van was closed up. Giuseppe was sat on a rug, opening a bottle of wine. I didn’t see the girl at first, lying on her front, in a bikini she was. Giuseppe looked like a rabbit caught in headlights when he saw me. “Maria’s gone to hospital,” I said. “An ambulance took her. Her waters broke. She’s in a lot of pain.” That made the girl sit up, I tell you. Tanned she was but she turned white as bone. “Your wife’s pregnant?” she said. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me she was pregnant?” She got dressed, stuffed her things in a bag and stomped off. Giuseppe shouted after her, Elena her name was, but she never looked back.’ Carol passes me her handkerchief. ‘I’m so sorry, love.’

With my deflated sack of a stomach it is no longer such a squeeze to get past the freezer onto the balcony. In the distance, a wrecking ball swings backwards and forwards. It forms clouds of debris as it chips away at the stubborn façade of a disused factory. A gull screams as it swoops past the block. I follow its flight. It lands on the canal. A flare on the dark water. A police car is parked on the other side of the railings. Two policemen walk up and down the towpath, talking into their radios. A second car pulls up.

I open the freezer, neatly stacked to the brim with tubs of ice cream and boxes of lollies. I go back inside and inch the sofa away from the wall. I lean over the back and switch the freezer off at the plug. I go to the girls’ room. I switch the freezer off at the plug. I pack three bags, one for each of us, and hide them underneath the bunk bed. I go to the desk in our room and take out the cheque book.

The familiar jingle of the ice cream van wakes me up. Giuseppe’s playing ‘Teddy Bears’ Picnic’, the girls’ favourite. I mutter along to the music: *Beneath the trees where nobody sees they’ll hide and seek as long as they please, ‘cause that’s the way the teddy bears have their picnic.* Standing on the balcony I watch Giuseppe reverse the van into a parking space. I lean on the railing and stare across at the forest. I wanted to bury Rose under a fir tree, a symbol of immortality, but now the forest is defiled I will choose somewhere else.

I climb onto the freezer and stretch out on top of it, arms by my sides. It would be big enough to take the body of a woman, somewhat slimmer and a little shorter than me, knees bent perhaps, chin on chest. It would be so cold in there, in a bikini, for a woman used to a hotter climate.

Rose is still in a freezer. Still still. Born still. Stillborn. Stillbirth. Still birth? Writhing. Sobbing. Jerking. Howling. Thrashing. Screaming. Still. Stillbaby. Stillgirl. My stilllittlegirl.

I swing my legs round and climb off the freezer. Sixteen storeys down Aurora and Sofia jump from the van. Small as dolls the pair of them. Giuseppe locks the door and takes their tiny hands. They skip, he walks, across the car park. He glances up at the balcony. I turn away.

My body has left marks in the thick layer of gritty black dust on the lid of the freezer. I write E L E N A with my finger. And then I rub the letters out, one by one.

L E N A

E N A

NA

A

‘Mum, there’s a fish!’
‘Sh! Don’t wake your brother!’
‘Why are they called goldfish?’
‘I don’t know. Don’t touch it!’
‘It should be called an orangefish.’
‘This is us. Grab that bag, will you?’
‘Is the fish asleep?’
‘Yeah. But you’ve woken your brother up. Where’s his dummy gone?’
‘Can we take it home?’
‘What?’
‘The fish.’
‘No.’
‘Oh, Muuuum. Please.’
‘No.’
‘Why not?’
‘Because it’s a friggin’ dead fish! Now come on.’

‘My mother was a fish … ’
‘Room for a little one?’
‘Afternoon, Mrs Smith. Yeah, squeeze in … She worked at Billingsgate, filleting. Smell of my childhood. She couldn’t shift it. Nothing could shift that smell.’

‘I must pop into the bookies on our way back.’
‘What the hell’s that? My word, it’s a goldfish.’
‘Poor sod. How’d it get there? That three second memory thing. It’s a myth, you know. They can remember things for months apparently. What was I saying …’

‘What you got down your blazer?’
‘Dunno. What did we have for dinner?
‘Oh, I think it’s pink custard.’
‘I like it when it’s just us two in here.’
‘Us two and a fish.’
‘A fish? Oh yeah, how random. Someone must’ve won it at the fair.’
‘What do you call a fish with no eyes?’
‘Don’t know.’
‘A fsh. Ha! Made you laugh.’
‘You always make me laugh.’
‘Why you looking at me like that?’
‘Because … I love you.’
‘Come here … I love you too.’

‘The thing is with questioning, there won’t be a soul in this building doesn’t have something to hide, even that goldfish down there on the floor. Everyone’s got something to hide. The trick is to work out if the thing they’re hiding is the thing you want to know. Eighth floor, this is us. Let’s see what Steven Mulstrade’s got to tell us … Afternoon, lads.’

‘Fuck! I thought they were here for us!’
‘Me too. Fuck fuck fuck. Thank fuck they didn’t search us.’
‘You went bright red, man.’
‘No, I didn’t.’
‘You did! You’re such a berk. Look at you, you’re shaking.’

‘Rocky! Drop it you filthy bastard!’
‘What’s he eaten?’
‘I don’t know, something orange. That dog’d eat his own shit.’

Flat 41 – The Accuser

Donna Dixon's dared me to walk along the canal with her at midnight. Said it'd show I've got balls and she ain't interested in necking a boy without balls. I told her it wouldn't prove nothing; I swear I'd rather walk through the graveyard where the bodies are buried safe in the ground. Imagine if a barge churns up the mud? Suppose we find the puffed-up face, sherbert-white in the streetlamp glow, eyes and lips scoffed by pike, strands of weed tangled in his or her hair. Can't imagine Donna would want to do much necking after that.

Me and Mum seen the frogmen from our balcony; the towpath was taped off but the police couldn't stop us watching from up high – till they put a tent up for the gruesome bit. The frogmen did look like frogs, crouched on the bank in the rain, skinny-legged in wetsuits and flippers. They jumped in between the bits of old furniture that stick out of the oily water opposite our block – rather them than me. I've seen everything in that canal: baths, sofas, prams, bikes, TVs – there's a toilet in there at the moment! And I swear that water turns things mutant: algaes that glow green as zombie slime and injured ducks with mangled beaks and wings that won't lie flat. A boyfriend of Mum's fell in once. He was biking along the towpath when some kids threw stones at him from the bridge and he swerved. He came back to ours, dripped stinking water on the carpet and stained the towel; it's still green where he wiped his ugly mug.

There's not just dead people in that water, there's puppies and kittens as well. Pets are banned on our estate but no one pays attention to the rules so people keep or sell one or two from a litter and drown the rest. Somebody graffitied JESUS RULES across ten garage doors but it got changed to FUCK RULES and the NO BALL GAMES sign's for kicking balls at. PLEASE DO NOT FEED PIGEONS has been ripped off the wall and PIGEONS now says PIGS. The sign's been dumped on the bare patch under the swings and even the birds ain't got no respect – it's splattered in pigeon shit and if there were pigs on the estate they'd shit on it an' all.

A few days after we seen the frogmen, Mum came home from her shift at the chippy with cod and chips twice (her boss gives them her free once a fortnight) and a copy of the Gazette. 'You'll never believe it!' she said, and put the newspaper on the table. I glanced at the front page: HEADLESS BODY FOUND IN CANAL. You could tell the photograph was taken opposite our flats because of the toilet bowl. Mum went to the

window while I unwrapped the food. ‘That’s the spot,’ she said, ‘right there. Could be one of the neighbours. Perhaps the Ripper’s come down South.’

‘Who could be a neighbour? The body or the murderer?’

‘The body. It hasn’t been identified yet. I wonder where the head went?’ She fiddled with her necklace. ‘The rubbish chute smelt so bad yesterday I almost threw up. It could’ve been dumped in there.’

‘It’d be worse if a neighbour was the murderer,’ I said as I squeezed the ketchup bottle and squirted sauce over my chips.

Mum ignored me. Fair enough she didn’t want to think about living so close to a killer. ‘We might not notice if somebody went missing,’ she said. ‘When did we last see Mrs Baker – men in and out all times of day and night she has. Or it could have been a domestic. We haven’t heard the couple upstairs fighting for a while. Or what about that poor woman on the ground floor, the one with the twins; her old man’s a nasty piece of work. Or maybe the Bird Woman’s got her own back. I wouldn’t blame her. She’s always been a weirdo but now she wanders round in her dressing gown looking like the living dead. I think it’s destroyed her.’

‘Rumour has it,’ I said, ‘that even though her chicken had its head ripped off, it walked out the front door and died on the mat. Reg Blunkett, bloody cheapskate, picked it up, plucked it and boiled it for his tea. It was very tasty, apparently.’

‘That’s disgusting, who told you that? Actually, I don’t want to know. I don’t want to think about those poor birds again, it’s bad enough with this body. I might knock on a few doors tomorrow, ask a few questions. I bet the dogs on the street know who did it.’

‘I think you’re getting a bit carried away, Mum. Best not get involved,’ I said. I dunno who she thinks she is sometimes.

The news makes everyone nervy, even me, believe it or not. And things reach fever pitch when the police do door to door enquiries. Each night before she goes to bed, Mum pushes the chest of drawers against the front door and I hear the jangle when Mrs Brown, our neighbour, puts on the chain. Mum turned grey as chewed gum when we heard screams the other evening but it was just some kid breaking his leg when he jumped from a first-floor balcony; the scrawny little bastard bounced so high he somersaulted off the pile of old mattresses and onto the concrete. I start seeing things, especially when I’m in the lift: the stains on an old woman’s laundry bag, and Pervy Paul’s shirt, could’ve been washed-out

blood, easy. Nobody trusts nobody round here so there's plenty of suspects and the weirdos are having a hard time of it. Mr Hooker – who smokes next to the climbing frame and looks up girls' skirts – gets eggs smashed over his flasher mac and dog shit through his letter box. Poor old T-T-T-T-T-Terry Burdett got his van tyres slashed – he saw the boys from the other side of the carpark but nobody heard his stutter for h-h-h-h-h-help.

Me and Donna have arranged to meet outside the lift at ten to midnight. I move the chest of drawers away from the front door and unlock the bolts. Outside, I lean over the railings on the walkway and stare at the black water: the circles of light from the streetlamps make me think of pale bloated faces and I shudder. But it's not the head I should be scared of, it's whoever cut it off; I'd be a spaz to miss out on a chance with Donna: Donna with brains and boobs and blonde hair down to her arse, Donna with the sexiest laugh you'll ever hear.

She looks cute as ever but tired, a bit upset maybe. I wonder if her dad's been giving her a hard time. You do not want to mess with Donna's dad. The black stuff she wears on her eyes is smudged and she's got marks on her cheek where she must've been lying on her pillow and her hair's all mussed up. When she presses the button to call the lift I hope it don't come quick. I like standing here with her, whispering, her breath all tobacco and toothpaste and warm in my ear.

The doors open: a tramp lies slumped in a pool of piss, next to a rusty pram filled with junk and a mangy dog chewing a bone. Sometimes I fucking hate this place. The woman's face is red-rough. She drops the can she's been clutching and moans as beer froths up white on the floor; she lunges at it a couple of times but misses. She points a crooked, black-nailed finger at me, 'You,' she says, 'you.' 'What you on about?' I say. She looks up, dead-eyed, and I step across her legs – over the filthy, swollen feet – and pick up the can. When I give it to her she downs it in noisy gulps. She empties it and lifts her finger again. 'Let's take the stairs,' I say to Donna.

I smell Ian Taylor's aftershave – the knock-off Brut he buys on Chapel Market – when we get to the second floor. The smell usually lasts long after he's gone so hopefully he ain't still lurking around. We push through the swing doors on the ground floor: Ian's waiting in the lobby, all six foot of him, thumbs in his jeans' pockets, pointing at his dick like they do in cowboy films.

'What you doing here?' I say.

'What the fuck are you doing here?' says Ian.

‘Who invited him?’ we say together.

‘I did. I wanna find out who’s got balls,’ says Donna.

‘I’ll drop my trousers,’ says Ian, fiddling with his flies. ‘Waste of time walking along the canal, you know.’

Donna narrows her eyes. ‘We’re not *just* gonna walk along the canal.’

I’m still livid when we get to the towpath. The gate’s locked so Ian takes the opportunity to give Donna a leg-up and feel her arse. I clamber after her but Ian yanks me off the gate and knees me in the bollocks; I catch them up a minute or two later. I want to walk next to Donna but the path’s dark and narrow and I wouldn’t put it past Ian to shove me in the water. He almost drowned a first-year last week, rammed the poor sod’s face in a toilet bowl after he’d pissed in it.

Donna turns round. ‘Why did you give that tramp her beer?’ she asks. ‘Well?’

I shrug.

‘Hope you didn’t catch nothing.’

‘If you could have anything in the world,’ I say, ‘what would it be?’

‘Me,’ says Ian.

Donna ignores him. ‘To go back in time.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘You said anything.’

‘I ain’t Doctor Who.’

‘Okay ... To win seventy-five grand on the football pools.’

‘I can’t make that happen either but that tramp wanted that beer more than anything.’

Ian sticks his fingers down his throat and makes gagging noises. I glance at Donna but she don’t say nothing, until a rat scuttles out from the warehouse and she screams so loud it gives me the jitters.

‘I speared a rat once,’ says Ian, ‘with a poker. Then I roast it on a bonfire. It tasted like my sister’s rabbit.’

‘That’s disgusting,’ says Donna. ‘Why did you eat your sister’s rabbit?’

‘She ate it too,’ says Ian. ‘Didn’t realise till afterwards though.’ He laughs and hurls a stone into the canal. I’d never noticed how big his hands were before.

The wind rustles through the bushes that grow out of the warehouse's smashed windows, at least I hope it's the wind – and not an axe murderer – until Ian slips his hand into Donna's back pocket and then I hope it is an axe murderer and that he chops off Ian's fucking head.

'There's girls working in there,' says Donna, 'and dealers. Even during the day.'

The roof's fallen in and the metal beams frame giant rectangles of sky. I point out the Plough.

'Can't see it,' says Ian. 'What, that? It looks nothing like a cow! Fuck! I've cricked my neck. You're not into astromony are you? That's for geeks.'

'Course not.' How could you live in a tower block and not be into stars?

'And blokes with small dicks,' says Ian.

'What you carrying on about?' I say.

'The telescope. It's like a big dick.'

'You're a big dick.'

'I've got a big dick, more like. Still can't see the cow,' says Ian. 'Where's its head?'

'He said plough, not cow,' says Donna.

'What's a bloody plough?' says Ian.

'It's seven stars,' I say. 'It looks like a … '

'Here,' says Donna. 'This is where the body was pulled out of the water.'

A few bunches of flowers have been tied to a bench next to the towpath. It's hard to see what colour they are in the dark. Yellow? White?

'This is where the killer stood,' she says.

'You don't know that,' says Ian. 'The body could've drifted miles up the canal.' He sounds pissed off now.

'Actually I do know that,' says Donna softly, 'because I saw him here.'

'Fuck off,' says Ian.

'Saw who?' I say. 'When?'

'The man dumping the body. I couldn't sleep that night. I was on the balcony having a fag. It was late, so late it was early – the sky was that purply Milk Tray box colour – and it was dead quiet. I saw this man drop something in the water. A suitcase or something. Then he climbed over the railings, walked up and down the street, turned left across the bridge, came through the carpark and into our flats.'

‘Our flats?’ I say.

She nods and we all look up. The narrow windows of the service tower are lit like a hundred shining eyes. When Mum walks home from a late-night shift at the chippy she thinks the block looks like a monster. A few lights are on in the main building and a shadow moves across a window on the top floor. I try to work out which flat’s ours.

‘Did you call the cops?’ I say.

‘Why would Donna call the fucking pigs?’ says Ian. ‘She ain’t a grass.’

‘I didn’t know it was a body!’ says Donna. ‘I thought it was a litter of pups or kittens. People always dump stuff in the canal.’

‘What did he look like?’ says Ian.

‘I don’t know. It was dark.’

‘How do you know it was a man then? Could’ve been a woman. What did he look like?’

Donna walks over to the railings and takes the flowers off the bench. She crouches next to the canal and rips off the petals, dropping handfuls into the water. ‘I dare you to jump in,’ she says. ‘Swim to the boat.’

Ian claims it was him torched the barge moored underneath the weeping willow, a half-sunk wreck that’s hidden each year until autumn, when the tree loses its leaves. The owner lost his dog in the fire, scarred himself for life trying to save a blind three-legged mutt.

‘I’m not going in,’ I say.

‘What’s it worth?’ says Ian.

‘What do you want it to be worth? I’ve got the flat to myself. Dad’s away.’

‘The water’s cold,’ I say. ‘We’d cramp. And there’s a headless body, I mean a bodiless head, in there.’

‘If there is the police didn’t find it,’ says Donna.

‘You jump in then.’

‘Okay.’ She walks to the bench and takes off her jacket, shoes, frilly white ankle socks like a little girl’s.

‘You’re nuts,’ I say.

Ian gawps as Donna takes off her tee shirt and jeans. She must be freezing in her bra and knickers but she don’t let on. She folds her clothes, tucks her shoes underneath the bench. She stands on the bank, collarbone and hip bones sticking out; when she turns

towards the water, the bumps of her spine stick through her hair, up to her long neck. Her skin's as pale as the flowers in the dark, except for the bruises which, in the murky light, look like countries on a map. As she gets into the canal the petals bob around her. She gasps as the water rises over her waist and when it's up to her shoulders she pushes herself away from the edge: the gold D on the chain around her neck glints and her hair floats on the surface, surrounding her head like an octopus's tentacles.

She's a strong swimmer, Donna; there's not a splash when she does breaststroke. She glides to the opposite bank where the branches of the tree hang into the water. 'Which of you's coming to save me?' she calls. She swims through a floating barrier of plastic bags, bottles and cans and disappears behind the fronds.

'Donna, come back,' I shout. 'Don't get on the boat. It might go under.'

Donna screams.

My stomach lurches.

I turn to Ian who looks like he couldn't give a toss. I rip off my jacket and kick off my shoes.

And then Donna laughs. That sexy laugh. 'I said who's coming to get me.'

'Fuck this,' says Ian. 'I ain't pissing around no more. She's mental, you know. Seen the murderer, my arse.' He turns and marches along the towpath to the gate, onto the street, left across the bridge. Donna's words go through my mind … *he turned left across the bridge, came through the carpark and into the entrance of our flats*. Ian could have done it. Rats and rabbits and all that. I once read that kids who pull off butterflies' wings and spiders' legs become serial killers. Saying that, I used to chop worms in half and set fire to ants with my magnifying glass.

I hear a moan. 'Donna,' I call. 'Come back.' I stuff my hands into my pockets to stop them shaking. A whiff of sewage makes me retch. Donna's face appears, white through the leaves. 'What the fuck are you doing?' I say. 'Why did you bring us here?'

She disappears under the water.

'Donna?'

'Over here,' she says.

I turn. She's popped up by the toilet bowl and clings to it with both hands. Her teeth are chattering.

'Donna, get out. It's dangerous in there. You're freezing.'

'I'm so tired,' she says. 'I don't want to get out.' She sounds like a child.

‘I’m coming in.’

‘No,’ she says. ‘Please don’t.’ She sounds likes she means it. She splashes towards the tree, her head dropping below the surface.

‘Donna, come back!’

I pull off my trousers and top and jump. I swim across the canal, get one arm round Donna’s chest and use the other to skull us back to the bank. She hardly weighs a thing. I get her to the edge and tell her to cling to the side while I clamber out. I take her by the hands, bob her up and down and lift her onto the towpath where I grab her clothes from the bench and help her get dressed. Her jeans are so bloody tight they won’t pull up over her wet thighs so she wears her jumper, jacket and shoes. Her bare legs are so thin I could snap them in two easy as a wishbone.

‘Have my coat,’ I say.

‘But you’re shivering as well.’

‘I wasn’t in for long. Come on. Let’s get you home.’

Donna gives me the key and I unlock the door and fumble for a light switch. An ugly staffie, pink and white, bald as a pig, jumps up at me. His claws rip across my bare stomach.

‘Rocky! Down!’ says Donna. The dog hurtles along the corridor, clattering on the vinyl. ‘Put him out, can you?’ she says. ‘He’ll need a piss.’

The stink suggests he’s already had one. I grab the dog’s collar and he growls and tries to nip me as I drag him onto the walkway. I go back inside and shut the door. ‘He doesn’t like you,’ Donna says. I follow her down the corridor. The wallpaper, that lumpy Anaglypta stuff that Mum stripped off our walls, reminds me of chicken pox.

‘Are there any blankets?’ I say.

‘On the sofa.’

‘And something to change into?’

She nods towards a door. ‘There’s clothes in Dad’s room.’

I turn the handle.

‘I’ll get you something in a sec,’ she says.

‘I’m freezing. I’ll get something now.’

It’s like walking into the Mucky Duck. The room reeks. Fag butts everywhere: on the carpet, on the chest of drawers, floating in the cup of tea on the makeshift bedside table

– a stack of *Exchange & Marts* and *Playboys*. I knock my head against the bulb which hangs from a dusty cord and glance at the mould growing from cracks in the Artex ceiling and mushrooms which have sprouted from a hole in the wall. Last year's *Sun* calendar hangs from the back of the door: December's boobs are bigger than her face. When I open the wardrobe the empty coat hangers jangle and I find a tee shirt and a pair of shorts on the floor and a pullover on a chair. I hold my breath as I pull the BO-stinking shirt over my head; at least the pullover smells of washing powder.

Donna's curled up on the settee, dressed in pyjamas, wrapped in a blanket. She looks up.

'What's wrong?' I say.

'Why did you choose *that* jumper?'

'First one I saw. Can I wear it?'

'S'pose.'

'We need something hot to drink,' I say. 'And I'll switch the fire on.'

The kitchen surfaces are piled with crap. There's no kettle so I choose a saucepan that's had beans in it as it looks easiest to clean. I squeeze the washing up liquid but all that comes out is a farting noise so I use Vim to scour at the dried tomato sauce instead. As I boil a pan of water I rinse two chipped Silver Jubilee mugs and put a tea bag in each. My belly stings and I pull up my shirt and pullover: red marks are coming up where the dog clawed me. The water boils and I make tea and add a load of sugar but the half-full bottle of milk on the side's curdled.

'Sit here,' says Donna, when I take the drinks through. 'Warm me up.' I could never of imagined that sitting beside Donna could be so un-sexy: freezing my balls off, settee springs sticking up my backside, stinking room – dog piss, canal water, and dust burning off the heater – and even Donna don't look her best, white as a Polo mint with pond weed in her hair.

'Why did Ian leave?' Donna asks.

'He went a bit funny when you said you'd seen the murderer.'

Donna opens her mouth to say something but doesn't.

My hands are blue and my fingers are numb. I wrap them round the Queen's smirking face on the mug and throttle her. 'We should have a bath,' I say. Warm us up. Not together or nothing, but ...'

'There's no hot water,' says Donna.

The dog barks. ‘Let him in, can you?’ she says. ‘There’s kids asleep next door.’

When I sit back down Rocky licks my foot. I push him away and he growls, red round his muzzle.

‘Look,’ says Donna. ‘You’ve cut yourself.’

Blood’s oozing down my shin and onto my foot; there’s a gash below my knee and the dog’s fucking loving it. Donna goes to the bathroom and brings back a toilet roll, hard as tracing paper, like the stuff at school. I tear off a length, fold it a couple of times and press it against the cut. The Toby Jugs on the sideboard eyeball me through the dim light and I shiver. I half-expect to see a severed (I thought that rhymed with weird till I heard it said last week) head perched among the ornaments.

Donna switches on a lava lamp. ‘Turn the big light off, will you? It’s so depressing in here. I can’t stand it. Mum kept it nice: she used to wipe the condensation off the walls and polish the furniture – Pledge, I miss that smell – and starch the tablecloth and clean the windows with vinegar till you wouldn’t know the glass was there. I tried to keep it clean at first but Dad’s a pig and I got fed up of cleaning up after him. And then he got the dog so I just keep my bedroom nice now. Anyway, I’ll move out in a couple of years.’

‘You’ll be lucky to get a flat,’ I say. ‘There’s tens of thousands on those waiting lists. Mum’s got a friend waited nineteen years.’

Donna looks at her bitten nails.

‘Unless you have a baby,’ I add. ‘Or better still, twins.’

‘You offering?’ says Donna, and smiles. ‘Dad would kill you. Anyway, I don’t mean a council flat and I’m not gonna be a dolly mum. I don’t want a baby until I’m at least twenty-five. I’m going to get a grant, go to university. As far away from here, and Dad, as possible.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Up North, thank God.’

‘What’s he do?’

‘This and that. He’s got an HGV licence.’

‘You alright on your own?’

‘Better off on my own.’

‘When’s he coming back?

She puts her empty cup on the table and pulls the blanket up to her chin. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps he won’t.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Swear you won’t tell.’

‘Course.’

‘On your mother’s life?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I haven’t slept since he went,’ she says.

‘What’s up?’

‘You know I saw a man drop something in the water?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Dad came in ten minutes later. I thought he was asleep when I went on the balcony but he was out all along. He had a bath when he came in. He never has a bath at night – he doesn’t bath much at all – and there wouldn’t have been any hot water. And he washed some clothes. That jumper you’re wearing.’

I pull the jumper over my head and drop it on the floor. The lava lamp is warming up and the red blobs of wax float up and down.

‘You don’t think your dad had something to do with it?’ I say. ‘I thought it was Ian!’

‘Ian? Why?’

‘Because he acted suspicious when you said you’d seen a man drop something in the canal. I thought he thought you were on to him. Do you really think it was your dad?’

‘I don’t know. Since Mum died I get weird thoughts. I know it sounds mad but it adds up, what I saw and what Dad did afterwards. He gets angry when he’s had a drink, goes too far, gets in fights. He was inside before he married Mum, GBH. What’s the difference between that and murder? A harder punch? A tighter squeeze? He’s got a girlfriend – she’s only sixteen, it’s disgusting – but he’s been with a few other women recently. I know one ripped him off. He went crazy at her. I went to her flat to check she was okay after they found the body.’

‘When did he leave?’

‘A few days after they found the body.’

‘How was he?’

‘Seemed fine. Barged into my room. Gave me a tenner. Said if I got knocked up he’d kill me and better not give the council any reason to evict us. Left like he always does,

“See you later, alligator.” *In a while, paedophile*, I said. He didn’t like that. Shouldn’t have a girlfriend the same age as me, should he? It’s not right.’

I stare at a dark stain on the carpet. ‘Do you think he killed somebody here?’

Donna laughs, ‘That’s not blood. Dad dropped a chicken chow mein when he was hammered. Nope, he doesn’t bring them here. There’s plenty live on this estate do it from home: single mums when the kids are asleep, wives whose husbands work away, a girl in our year when her mum’s on nights. People say it’s degrading but what’s worse? A shag that’s over before you know it or eighteen hours hunched over a sewing machine for an arsehole who treats you like shit? There’s a machinist next door who never goes out. Her kids are at it too. The bloke she works for’s a bastard; shouts at her if she doesn’t finish on time, docks her wages.’

I’ve never heard Donna speak so much. She sounds old but looks young with her makeup all washed off. I reach over and take the pond weed out of her hair and she blushes. I wonder if she’s ever done it for money; she’d have them queuing round the block.

‘Why did you want me and Ian to swim to the boat?’ I say.

‘Dad stores stuff there, between trips up North. It’s a good hiding place because everyone thinks the boat’s about to sink – it isn’t, it’s wedged on a load of tyres – and it’s hidden by the tree. He gets to it from the other side, goes through an empty warehouse and climbs out of a window onto the deck. I wondered if he might have cut the body up there. I don’t think the police searched it. I didn’t want to find the head on my own.’

I try to get the image of chopping off a head out of my head but I can’t. Two red blobs of lava bounce off each other. ‘I’d better make a move,’ I say.

‘What, now? Don’t you want to stay?’

‘Mum’ll worry if she wakes up and I’m not home.’

‘Just for a bit?’

‘Maybe tomorrow.’

‘Tonight. Please don’t leave me on my own tonight.’

Donna’s bedroom smells of roses and lemons and damp. There’s a stack of library books on the shaggy rug next to her bed and photographs of her and her mum stuck to the wall with peeling Sellotape.

‘She looked like me, didn’t she?’

‘Yes,’ I say. I try to remember how Donna’s mum died. Lung cancer I think. She was in hospital for a while. Donna missed a lot of school that year but still came top of her class. She pulls back her pink patchwork quilt and a few green army blankets and climbs into bed.

‘Turn out the light,’ she says.

It feels too easy. I get into bed and she turns towards the wall. I stare through the window, at the almost-full moon and the smoggy, orange sky lit up around it. I listen to the *ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch* of a train. ‘The trains sound loud here,’ I say. ‘You only hear them from our flat if the wind’s in the right direction.’

‘It’s not a train,’ says Donna. ‘It’s a sewing machine. The woman I told you about.’

‘Does she work all night?’

‘Seems to. You can hear everything through that wall.’

I shift closer and she presses her slim, cold back into my stomach and her bony arse into my crotch.

‘The noise used to drive me insane,’ she says. ‘But now it sends me to sleep.’

I put my arms round her and feel the bones of her ribs and her hips and her elbows. I run my finger along her spine and up her neck. The gold-coloured chain is thin and short. A choker I think they call a tight-fitting necklace.

‘I pretend that I’m on a train,’ she says, ‘and that in the morning I’ll wake up far away.’

Her body’s warmer now. I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t jumped into the canal. If her body would be cold. Cold and stiff and bloating. Bloating like a blow-up doll. Floating like a blow-up doll.

ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch

‘Don? Don!’

The dog’s barking. I sit up, heart pounding. Donna leaps out of bed, elbowing me in the face. ‘Shit!’ she says. ‘Don’t say a word.’

‘Don? You awake? I’m back.’

‘Yeah, Dad. I heard,’ says Donna and goes to the bedroom door. ‘What’s the time?’

‘Half five. I drove through the night.’

‘Thanks for waking me.’

‘How you doing?’

‘Fine.’

‘Anyone been looking for me?’

‘No. Not when I’ve been in.’

‘What a shithole.’

‘Yeah. Just how you left it.’

Donna’s dad stomps around, banging cupboard doors. ‘Is there anything to eat?’

‘No, I ran out of money.’

‘We’ll go shopping later. I had a good trip. Come here, I want to show you something.’

‘One sec, Dad,’ she says. ‘You’ve gotta get out *now*,’ she hisses at me. ‘Or he’ll kill you. I’ll keep Rocky in the lounge. Quick!’ She wraps the quilt round herself and hurries out of the room.

I grab my clothes and creep into the corridor.

‘Look,’ I hear Donna’s dad say. ‘Today’s Gazette, hot off the press. They’ve arrested someone for the canal murder. Someone from our block. Someone we know.’

I frown. Rocky barks. I open the front door and shut it quietly behind me.

‘Let’s go play on the roof. Sharon, press 20. It’s good you’re our friend now ’cause you’re tall.’

‘What we gonna play? I’ve got chalk and my skipping rope.’

‘I’ve got my jacks in my pocket.’

‘Let’s play tag first. It’s so cold. Then skipping. Then hopscotch. Then jacks.’

‘Who wants a Tic Tac?’

‘Me.’

‘Me.’

‘Me.’

‘Who’s gonna be it? Eeny meeny miny moe, Catch a nigger by the toe, If he hollers let him go, Eeny meeny miny moe. It’s you!’

‘It’s not nice to say nigger.’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s a mean word. When people say it at my mum and dad and sister they get sad.’

‘But you see it everywhere.’

‘I know, but you see lots of bad words everywhere.’

‘It’s true. Once the really really bad C word was on the wall in our corridor and my dad painted over it.’

‘I don’t say Eeny Meeny like that anyway. I say tigger not nigger.’

‘And you can say tinker.’

‘When we lived in Birmingham we said it Eenie meenie macca racca, Ie rie dumma racca, Ticka racca lollipop, Rum pum push.’

‘And my cousins in Scotland go Eeny meeny maca racar, Er I domeraca, Ali Baba sugaraca, Om tom toosh.’

‘I didn’t mean to make you sad, Sharon. I didn’t know nigger was a bad word. We can do your Birmingham one in future. I like the lollipop bit. Would you like another Tic-Tac?’

‘Ooh, yeah.’

‘Orange or green?’

Flat 68 – The Babysitter

‘Penny for the guy!’ A small boy stands at the entrance to the tower, next to a bloated figure with a ghoulish face. ‘Please, Miss. Penny for the guy!’ He holds out his hand. ‘Took me hours to make he did.’ I put my cases down, take out my purse and drop a few pennies into his palm.

The lift doors open. I try to stand as far from the tramp and her pram of junk as possible – which isn’t far at all. I put my heavy cases on the floor and press the button for the seventeenth storey. Lumps of gum cling to the control panel like snails. I scan the graffiti on the walls as the lift grinds upwards: 249 2602 for steamy sex with lusty Lynda; STEVEN M MURDERER crossed out and INOSENT written in a different-coloured pen.

The tramp gnaws at a polystyrene cup; with swollen hands she turns the cup as she bites around the edge with the tooth that protrudes from the cleft of her harelip. She uses her thumb and forefinger to remove the pieces of polystyrene from her mouth and places them on the floor like a pile of sacrificial teeth. She bites around the bottom of the cup and a drop of tea dribbles down her chin. A scrap of a dog, some sort of terrier, emerges from the V of her overcoat and licks hungrily at her face. She pushes the dog away; the wound on her chin is bleeding.

The lift stops at the seventeenth floor. I pause on the landing before I turn as the plaque instructs: ← Flats 68-71. Raindrops blow through the broken glass in the window at the end of the corridor. I inhale but the tainted air of the lift clings to me. The passage is dimly lit, only one lamp works and a spider is silhouetted in the centre of its chrome yellow orb. Something brushes against my head and I drop my bags; a wire dangles from the ceiling. My crammed suitcase has sprung open and as I bend to close it a rat scuttles past.

‘The block’s not very nice,’ said the fellow student who took pity on me when she found me sobbing in the library, the student who knew of a room ‘going cheap’ in an already sublet apartment. ‘But the flat’s okay. It will give you a chance to get away from everything till you find something more permanent.’

Flat 68. The 8 has fallen off; at some point the black front door was painted red. I knock, a hollow-sounding knock. A baby is crying inside the flat. I didn’t know there was going to be a baby. I look up and down the corridor. The tramp has followed me out of the lift. Her shapeless form looms at the end of the passage, eyes glowing. Is it the tramp? Or

is it the pile of sacks dumped beside the overflowing rubbish chute? The tramp howls. The tramp is a fox. The baby's cries grow louder when a thin woman in a scruffy oversized jumper opens the door. The circles beneath her eyes are as dark as mine and emphasise the pallor of her skin. She looks at me blankly.

'Hi,' I say. 'I'm Elena. I'm renting the room.' I can see my breath in the air.

The woman nods. 'Come in. I'll get key.'

I wait in the hallway. The flat smells of beef stew and cigarettes and damp. The wallpaper is patterned with a light and a dark blue stripe. A dart board on the end wall has a piece of forgotten tinsel draped over it.

The woman returns. 'Don't lose it.'

'There's only one key?'

'Building entrance ain't locked.'

'Isn't there a key for my room?'

'No. This flat's for a family. It's got to look like a family live here case council come in.' She gestures. 'That's your room. I've got the double.'

'Who has the third?'

'Friends of mine use it sometimes. Other people come and go. I've bin jittery since they found a body in canal, just across way. They arrested someone. Steven Mulstrade. He's got it in him for sure but he got let off so murderer's still at large. I push cot against my door at night. Ange'd scream if someone tried to get in. If she weren't fucking screaming already. How come you've ended up here? You're not from these parts.'

'I'm from Italy but I'm studying medicine. My dad's English and I was born here but we moved back to where my mum's from when I was little.'

'But why do you need a room here?'

I was living in a big house share but it got too much. I had to leave. Have you been here long?'

'A year or so. I still have nightmares that Ange, me daughter, falls off balcony.' The baby's crying builds to a shriek. 'Give me a break,' yells the woman. 'I'm coming!' She turns her back but continues to talk. 'Rent's due Mondays. Cash only. Don't do drugs. Heating's off; there's blankets in wardrobe. Keep baths short and shallow. Tidy up after yourself.' She slams her door behind her.

My room, clean but as bare as a cell, has the same cell-like wallpaper as the hallway and an acrid stench. The council would never believe that a family lives here. I run

my hand over a bulge in the wallpaper and crumbling plaster scurries down the wall. The window is naked except for a green velour pelmet bereft of its curtains. I look out of the window; the rain running down the glass blurs the lights of the city. Bonfires glow orange, flames darting in the wind. A single bed is placed in the coffin position – feet facing the door – against the wall. The stained mattress has a rip in the cover and the foam inside is powdering. A wardrobe – empty except for a pile of rough blankets – fills the other half of the room; when I open the doors the metal coat hangers clatter, a cold unwelcoming sound. The drawers at the bottom of the wardrobe are lined with brittle, yellowed newspaper.

I open the suitcase and unpack my bedding: a pillow, two sheets, two blankets and the brightly-coloured bedspread knitted by my grandmother, the grandmother who, when I was seven, told me that if I didn't make my bed each day the devil would slip into it. I have made my bed every day since: hospital corners, sheets taut. I take hold of the bed's metal frame and inch it round ninety degrees so that it no longer faces the door but sticks out across the room, leaving barely enough space for me to squeeze past. I catch my reflection in a mirror; the gold cross around my neck, a present from my mother, glints in the light from the bare bulb. I unpack my bags: clothes in the wardrobe, textbooks stacked high on the floor, a box of Price's candles on the stack of books; there is neither lamp nor bedside table.

The baby finally stops crying. I thought it would be quiet at the top of a tower, far above the traffic and the bustle of the street, but I hear the news jingle of a radio station and the stop and start of conversation and the thump of feet and what sounds like birdsong and a distant train and noises I can't identify: knocks and scrapes and creaks and groans and gushes. I stack my empty cases and bags neatly against the wall. The wallpaper is mottled with black mould, visible only on the light blue stripes. Something on the floor, in the corner, catches my eye: round, beige, soft. At first I think it is a dead mouse but I realise that a mushroom has spawned from underneath the thin strip of skirting. I stare at the grotesque fungus, at the wart-like dots on its cap. I imagine inhaling its spores as I sleep.

In the kitchen I fill the kettle for my hot water bottle and switch on the electric cooker. The child resumes her bestial scream: urban fox, feral cat. I wonder when she'll stop. I have to sleep. The last thing I want to listen to is a baby's cry.

A door slams and the woman stomps into the room and drops a baby's bottle, a dummy and a teething ring into the sink. 'I swear the day colic stopped teething started,' she said.

'You must be exhausted.'

She sits at the table and lights a cigarette. 'Witching hour they call this. When babies cry. It's too much for them by end of day. Go in corridors any evening and you'll see mums walking up and down with their prams. Trouble is, Ange's witching hour lasts all night.'

The kettle whistles and I take it off the stove.

'Your room alright?' asks the woman.

'I found a mushroom. There's a mushroom growing from the skirting board.'

'Won't hurt. Unless you eat it! It's the wet weather. We get them in bathroom too. Scrape it off. There's Vim in cupboard under sink.'

'And the room smells funny. Like burning.'

'There were a fire in flat downstairs. In night, a few week back. We got evacuated. I could feel floor warm on my feet. It were bloody lovely. Firemen were alright too.' The woman laughs. 'Lucky it weren't this time last year or they would've bin on strike. I shouldn't joke about it. We could've died. The old fellow did, bless him. I carried Ange down all them flights of stairs and she slept through whole thing but she'll wake at creak of door. Downstairs flat's boarded up now. REST IN POVERTY someone's wrote on boards. Sums it up really.'

I clutch the hot water bottle to my stomach but it does not ease the cramps so I take a couple of Anadin. I hardly sleep. Nor does the baby. Nor the tower: it grunts and breathes and sighs and farts as though it is alive. I light a candle and take *Grays Anatomy* from the top of the pile of books. I listen to the lift grinding up and down as I read. I imagine people stepping into its oral cavity, the oesophagus propelling them down the intestinal tract, excreting them onto the ground, their shoes soiled with saliva and vomit and urine and excrement. Noise attacks me from above and below, from the north and the east and the south and the west. I drop the book on the floor with a thud.

I get up early. Too cold to contemplate taking a bath, I creep into the bathroom and splash water on my face and clean my teeth. I dress quickly. I glance at the corner of the

bedroom before I leave. The mushroom has grown; its stem is longer now. Two smaller mushrooms have spawned.

The library is warm and quiet. I sit at a table for eight hours but achieve little. I fiddle with my necklace as I remember long evenings, tanned skin dappled with the sunlight breaking through the trees. 'You make me feel young again,' Giuseppe would say. The attraction had been instant: I bought an ice cream from his van and he offered me a summer job. On the evening of my first day we became lovers. It was purely physical at first – we would pray for the queue of customers to end so we could close the hatch – but as the weeks went by, and we spent day after day together, I fell for him. I knew he was married with children but he said the marriage was over, as they always do. I had no idea there was a baby on the way – they hadn't slept together for years he said – until I found out that his wife was in labour. Giuseppe grabbed me but I pulled away and ran and ran through the forest until I couldn't run any more. Every time I hear the jingle of an ice cream van my stomach churns. Sometimes I think that I should go back to the woods to find him. I wonder what he is doing, whether he is making a fresh start with his family, the new baby ... I sit up straight and force myself to write some notes but my eyes close and my head slumps. I wake up mid-sentence, ink on my fingers, the tail of a y elongated where my hand slipped. I rummage in my bag for the Anadin.

I had planned to walk back to the apartment, to save money and get some air but it is still raining and my stomach hurts so I take a bus. The lower deck is full so I climb the stairs and step into the fug of the top deck. I make my way along the aisle, on a carpet of grease-stained wrappings and cigarette butts, to an empty seat near the front. I doze, waking only when my head knocks against the steamed-up window. I ring the bell and grab my things and stumble down the stairs. I have missed the stop I planned to get off at and I don't know where I am. I try to get back onto the main road but I take a wrong turning, down a street of terraced houses, most of which have been demolished. Large pools of water have formed in the craters in the ground.

A horse and cart stands at the side of the road. The rag-and-bone man is rummaging through the rubbish dumped underneath a street lamp. 'Excuse me,' I call, and ask for directions. He says nothing but points to one of three concrete towers and gestures for me to go back the way I came. I thank him and re-trace my steps to the bus stop and set off in

the opposite direction. I end up at the back of the tower and walk between its stilt legs, into its giant piss-stinking groin.

I open a can of tomato soup with the rusted tin opener I find in the drawer. I can't get the lid to open all the way round and cut my hand on the jagged edge as I try to prise it up. As I wait for the soup to heat I swallow a couple of Anadin with a glass of water. I sit at the table and taste the soup – which has cooled quickly – disliking the sweetness. The bread is stale, the margarine tasteless and as yellow as the sunflowers in the fields opposite my parents' house. There are two chairs and a highchair. I stare at the highchair and tears splash onto the table's scratched Formica surface.

I should have lied to my flatmates when they suspected I was pregnant, quoted some medical condition to explain away the symptoms. Instead I told them that I had met up with an ex-boyfriend from home when he was in London one evening. The morning after the abortion, after a painful, sleepless night, I came out of my bedroom to find – scrawled on a piece of A4 paper Sellotaped to my door – *mother of murdered child*. I was shaking by the time I got to the kitchen and when I saw the baby doll sitting in my chair at the dining table I went upstairs and packed my things.

I pour the soup down the plughole and throw the bread in the bin. The cut on my hand stings as I wash up with cheap, sudless liquid and stack the dishes on the draining board. I go to my room. There are five mushrooms now. A cluster. A cluster of spores. A cluster of cells. I am afraid to get rid of them in case they burst so I take a scarf from my drawer and tie it around my head to cover my mouth and nose. I sit on the bed to take off my boots and there is a knock at the door.

I leap up and pull the scarf from my mouth. 'Come in.' It is a moment or two before I recognise her. Long glossy hair parted in the centre. Thick, curled eyelashes. Pink pearl lips. The merest hint of a stomach protruding through the tight, cowl necked sweater dress underneath her coat. The smell of Charlie is so strong that it makes me cough.

'I've got to go out,' the woman says. 'I need you to look after Ange.'

'I can't do that! I don't know you. I don't even know your name.'

'What's it to you?' She looks in the mirror and smooths her eyebrows, checks her teeth for lipstick. 'It's Moira. Mo. Or Mum. That's all I get called now. Mum, Mum, Angie's Mum.'

‘I don’t know anything about babies.’

‘You don’t need to. I’ve just fed her and she’s asleep. Change her if she shits. You’ll know about it. There’s a tin of Carnation in cupboard. Water it down. She’s got dummy. If you take her out of cot put her back in on her front. Stops ’em choking if they’re sick.’

‘I’m exhausted. In no fit state to look after a baby. I haven’t slept since … I just can’t. I’m about to go to bed.’

‘That’s fine,’ says Moira, buttoning up her coat. ‘As long as you’re stopping in. Social workers and all that. I’ll make it up to you.’ She turns and closes the door. Her platform heels click-clack on the lino in the corridor. My room is filled with the nauseating scent.

I am about to take my hot water bottle to the kitchen when I decide that I won’t risk waking the baby. I take off my boots and climb into bed fully-clothed. I get a tickle in my throat. I need to cough but I don’t want to wake the baby. I worry that the mushroom spores are invading my lungs and I pull the scarf back over my mouth and nose. I lay my head on the pillow, sink into the softness, and a flurry of fireworks explodes outside; the baby begins to cry, a plaintive mewl that stops and starts. I ignore the whimpers to see if she settles herself; surely a stranger looming over the cot will only distress her. But each time the crying starts it grows louder. And then the crying becomes a screech and the screech becomes a howl and I get out of bed. I turn on the light in the hall and open Moira’s door. Her room is bigger than mine with more furniture and filled with clutter: clothes, dirty dishes, toys, stuff for the baby. The cot is in the middle of the room. I peer into it and recoil as the baby emits an earsplitting wail and kicks off her blankets. Trembling, I slip one hand under her head and another beneath her bottom and scoop her up. She is so light. How can something so young, so small, make so much noise? She stops sobbing and it is only then that I realise I have been holding my breath. I breathe out and clasp her tightly; her body is warm but her hands are cold. When my teeth start to chatter, I place her back in the cot. I pull the blankets over her and tuck them underneath the mattress but she starts to cry again. I take her out of the cot but this time it aggravates her and her cries crescendo and the caterwaul rings in my ears. Again, I put her back in the cot. I push her dummy into her mouth but she spits it out. There is a bottle of milk on the floor beside the bed. I take her out of the cot and offer her the teat but she clamps her mouth shut. When she opens her mouth the volume increases. I place her back in the cot. I take

her out again. I use one of her blankets to clumsily swaddle her. I pace the room with her in my arms. I rock her and I sing to her: *Hush, little baby, don't say a word. Papa's gonna buy you a mocking bird*. Her screams grow louder, so loud that I cannot bear to have her in my arms so I lay her back in the cot. When I pick her up again I wrench my back. I swear and she flinches, a split-second's silence before she cries again. I take her into my room and lie down on my bed with her. She yells in my ear and wriggles to the edge of the mattress; worried that she will fall I take her back to her room. *You'll still be the sweetest little baby in town*. I am shouting the words now. I squeeze her, a little roughly, and drop her into the cot with a thud. Her screams reverberate and incarcerate me. *Don't say a word. Don't say a fucking word,* I yell. I pick her up and grab her blankets. I put her in the pram in the hallway and open the front door. I march up and down the corridor. The wind howls. Doors open and slam. The baby screams. The screams echo. The tramp appears at the far end of the corridor with her pram. She trudges towards me and we pass one another half way along. A baby is wailing in her pram too. Or is it her dog? Or the wind? Or her? Or me? Am I wailing? The next time I walk past the flat I go back in; the noise inside is magnified and intolerable. I drop the baby into the cot and switch the light on. Her wretched face is purple and mottled and wet. Her eyelids are scrunched together, red and swollen. She beats her fists against her chest and she shrieks and shrieks and shrieks until I do it. I cup my hand over her mouth and her nose. The screaming stops. As she writhes I feel the hot wet of her tongue, the hardness of her gums, the softness of her lips, the cut of her two front teeth. She blinks: two flashes of blue. I pull my hand away, breathing fast. She screams, so loudly, so powerfully, that the bars of the cot vibrate and the bulb that hangs from the ceiling swings back and forth. I place my hand back over her mouth. A few moments respite, that's all I need. The baby moans. I press my palm harder over her mouth loathe to relinquish the peace. A few more moments. Her skin has a bluish tint. Her body is still. I've done it again. First a foetus, now a baby.

The door opens. The light goes out. I try to turn but stand transfixed, my hand clamped to the baby's mouth. The door slams shut. A hand clasps my mouth; the putrid smell makes me want to gag but my mouth is clamped shut. Another hand wraps itself around my throat. With a swift, violent action I am pulled backwards. I hit my head on the floor.

I wake to the sound of the wrecking ball and the ashen light of dawn. I stand slowly, cold and stiff and sore. The baby is asleep, lips parted, cheeks flushed a perfect pink. I watch the rise and fall of her belly under the blanket until the sun comes up. I return to my room and I sleep.

Moira is clattering in the kitchen when I wake up. I get out of bed and look in the mirror. My necklace is missing; a serrated red line marks the lie of the thin gold chain. I must look for it in Moira's room when she goes out. I wrap the scarf around my neck to hide the purple bruises. I can smell a lingering stench.

Moira is sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of black tea and a cigarette.

'Good morning,' I say. 'What time did you get in?'

'Not long ago. I didn't plan on staying out. I owe you one. I just checked on Ange. She's so beautiful when she's asleep. Did she wake up much?'

'No,' I say. 'No. Not at all.'

'You can have her again tonight! Look at your face. I'm joking. Her dad's got her. Once in a blue moon he takes her. Works out this time it suits me too.'

'Was anyone using the third room last night?'

'Not that I know of. But like I say, they come and go. It's not my flat. Why?'

The library is dark and the air is thick with dust and students spy on me from the stacks. Books are not where they should be. Pages turn themselves. Words swirl on the pages. A librarian asks me if I am okay. I go to the bathroom and look in the mirror. I do not look quite myself. I sit on the toilet. There is still some bleeding. It could last a week or two, they told me. Don't let it happen again.

It is a relief not to hear the baby screaming as I walk down the corridor. Tonight, with the flat to myself, I will sleep. I have to sleep. I unlock the front door. Moira is singing and splashing in the bath. As I open my bedroom door I am hit by a blast of chilled air. I drop my bag and switch on the light. I frown as I close the window. I opened it this morning, as I did yesterday, to rid the smell of burning, but I shut it when I left. I hang my damp coat on the hook on the door. I am about to sit down to take off my boots when I notice that my bed has been slept in. The blankets are pulled back and the bedspread has fallen on the floor. A head has left an impression in the pillow and when I look closely I see that the

hollow is lined with downy hair. The sheet is creased and although unsoiled to the naked eye, I imagine the millions of skin cells that have been shed.

It must have been Moira! Who else could it have been? How dare she use my room and sleep in my bed! I looked after her baby all night! And why didn't she at least disguise the fact? I thrash the pillow against the wall. I wait in my room until I hear her go to the kitchen. She is tarted up again. Like the women who strut up and down Pancras Road. I have been so preoccupied I didn't realise. 'How was your day?' I ask, as the kettle boils for my hot water bottle.

'Okay.'

'What have you been doing?'

'Signed on. Met a friend and her kids. Had burgers in Wimpy. Then took Ange to her dad's mum's. That way I don't have to see him.'

'Is anyone else here?'

'Where?'

'In the flat? In the third bedroom?'

'No. Why?'

'Because ... ' I tip the kettle but I miss the neck of the hot water bottle and boiling water splashes onto my hand. I scream. Everything clatters to the floor.

'Shit! You okay?' asks Moira. She rushes over. 'Hold your hand under cold tap for ten minutes. I'll put another kettle on for you then I've got to go.'

'Forget the kettle,' I say. 'I'll use an extra blanket.'

I tug at the undersheet but it's tucked in too tightly to free with one hand. My scalded hand is red and swollen and I wonder if it will blister and scar. I try to straighten my fingers but my hand remains cupped, curled like a paw. I remember my hand clamped over the baby's mouth, the hand clamped over my mouth. I go to the bathroom to wash my face and clean my teeth. While I am in there the toilet cistern stops filling. I don't notice it until it stops, the trickle of water as unobtrusive as the gurgle of a stream on a woodland walk. But I haven't used the toilet. And Moira left half an hour ago. Is there a third person in the flat? I clean my teeth with difficulty, using my left hand. Someone must have drawn on the glass when it was steamed up because I can make out faint marks on the mirror. An ex of mine used to do it: hearts and kisses and *I love you*, sentiments as transient as the mist in which

they were written. When I look closely, instead of hearts and kisses there are tiny handprints. How did a baby get up there?

I go back to my room. My limbs are covered in goose-bumps and my angry hand is scarlet against the blue-white flesh of my arm. The defiled sheet disgusts me but after another vain attempt to pull it off, I climb into bed. The bed is warm! Instinct tells me to jump out but the heat is alluring. I pull the blankets and the bedspread over my shoulders and curl into the mattress. After a few minutes the warmth becomes my own. I wonder if it always was.

The crying begins as it did last night, intermittent at first, so that I doze between whimpers and doubt them each time I wake. But the whimpers become cries and the cries become howls and the howls become shrieks, shrieks so high-pitched that the windowpanes vibrate. I sit up abruptly. The glass of water on my bedside table shatters and the screams stop: silence, except for the drip, drip, drip of water as it splashes onto the floor.

I lie down. The screaming starts again. I jerk my head from left to right. I get out of bed and pace the room. I crush my ear against each wall. I open the wardrobe and yank the drawers from the chest. I go to Moira's room but the cot is empty. I stand outside the third room but it is quiet in there. I dare not go in. I crouch on the floor of my room; the baby's screams crescendo: she is in the flat downstairs. She is coming to punish me. For what I did last week. For what I did last night.

Tap, tap, tap. The sound is coming from the corner. I stand up. There are two or three dozen mushrooms now, giant puffballs, knee-high, a cluster of conical caps advancing like an army. Tap, tap, tap. The baby is knocking on the ceiling beneath, a slow rhythmic knock in time with her screams. Each time she knocks a puffball explodes and a cloud of spores fills the air. I pull my scarf over my face. I take a glove from my coat pocket and pull up the mushrooms. They come up with such ease! I tug at a peeling linoleum tile and the bare boards beneath are revealed. I glimpse a movement through a knothole in the floor. The light goes out. I grope around to find the box of matches. I light a candle and hold it above the hole. Something is glistening underneath: saliva on a small, red tongue. The candle wax drips onto quivering tonsils. The mouth closes and teeth, as white and sharp as I have ever seen, gnaw round and round through the concrete and the wood. The hole is bigger now and I can see the baby's face; she looks at me then drops her chin to her chest and pushes her head through the hole as though she is being born. Tufts of

dark hair sprout through the crusty yellow scales of cradle cap on her scalp. And then a puffball unfurls from her head and another and another. Using my gloved hand I swipe at the mushrooms which explode – the baby's face disappears in a cloud of spores. When the dust settles I feel a sharp pain. The baby is biting me. I try to pull my hand away but she grips it like a ratter would a rat. My glove is wet with blood. The light goes on. I shield my eyes and I scream. The strangler is back!

'Elena! What the fuck are you doing?'

I cower on the floor. Moira looms above me, pale-faced, wide-eyed.

'There's a baby in the flat downstairs,' I say. 'She won't stop screaming. She's gnawing her way into our flat.'

'Elena,' says Moira, kneeling. You've had a nightmare. Flat downstairs is empty. *You* were screaming.'

'I heard a baby.'

'It's Ange. You heard Ange and you screamed. Her dad let us down. We came home.'

'Someone's been in my room. The windows were open.'

'I opened them this morning. You said smell of burning were giving you a headache.'

'My bed had been slept in. I always make my bed.'

'You were tired this morning.'

'And the toilet cistern. It was filling. I hadn't used … '

'It's weather. Basement's flooded. Council probably switched water off.'

'And the mushrooms! The mushrooms!'

'I scraped them off this morning. Four or five there were. I cleaned your room, to say ta, for minding Ange.'

I scan the floor. There are no mushrooms. No hole. No baby. Ange is crying in the next room. The cut from the soup tin on my finger is bleeding.

'It were just a nightmare,' says Moira. 'I'll leave door ajar and corridor light on. Wake me if you get scared.'

Moira has explained all that happened tonight: the window, the unmade bed, the cistern and the screams. There is no ghost and now I must sleep …

Sunlight streams through the window and I turn over to face the wall. As I pull the bedspread over my head I hear the jingle of an ice cream van, Giuseppe's ice cream van. *Beneath the trees where nobody sees, They'll hide and seek wherever they please …* Giuseppe has come back. He's come to look after me, to take me away! I leap out of bed and hurry out of the flat.

I call the lift. The tramp is waiting inside. She looks up. I press the button for the ground floor and the doors close. I stare at the graffiti: ELENA is splattered in red paint on every wall. I touch the letters; they are still wet. I take off my scarf but however hard I rub at the writing it will not smudge. The tramp stares at me, not at my face but at my neck. I put my hand to my throat. She puts her hand in her overcoat pocket and takes out a cross on a thin gold chain.

A teenage girl sits on the top step of the stairs which lead to the landing of the sixteenth storey. It's cold but she forgot to take her keys with her and her mum won't be home from work for half an hour. She takes a paperback from her school bag, a 1977 Panther edition of J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise*. She found it yesterday, down the side of the back seat on the top deck of the bus. The front cover features a woman wearing a long red coat – unbuttoned to expose her naked torso and bare breasts – and a black mini skirt; the woman in the picture stands in front of a crumbling tower block. The girl has only read as far as Chapter Three – 'Death of a Resident', which reminded her of the body in the canal – but she is disappointed by how little sex there has been given the image on the front cover. Although she thinks *High-Rise* is a strange book she liked the beginning about the man eating the dog so she persevered. The girl's boyfriend, Ian, claims to have killed and eaten a dog although she doesn't believe half of what he tells her. The girl is wearing woollen gloves so she turns the pages with difficulty, sometimes turning two at the same time and having to separate them. On page 40 she re-reads a line: 'Togetherness is beating up an empty elevator.' She likes that sentence; she takes a red Rimmel lipstick from her bag and underlines the words, masking the sentence below. It would be exciting to smash up the lift with Ian. And then have sex in it. Or to have sex in the lift and then smash it up. She knows that Ian would be up for it. She thinks about what she would wear, something warm but easy to take off. The girl stares at the image on the front cover: she possesses neither long red coat nor black mini skirt but she does have a long black coat and a red mini skirt which she thinks would be perfect. She hears footsteps, closes the book and slips it back into her bag.

Flat 75 – The Father

‘Made it,’ says Dad. ‘Worse luck.’

I wake up as he swings the car into the carpark. I try to stretch my legs but Mum’s pushed her seat right back. ‘Mary’s Boy Child’ is playing on the radio and the windscreen wipers squeak and swish in time to the music.

‘I hate this bloody song,’ says Dad. ‘I wish the Lord would send His son to save me.’

I wind down my window. Wow! The tower’s humungous. Hundreds of windows glow in the dark and fairy lights flash red, blue and green. A blow-up Father Christmas hangs from a balcony; he’s all lit up too. I look at the tower blocks in the distance: the whole sky’s filled with lights from shadowy buildings. Me and my best friend Luke saw *Superman* at the pictures last week. It was awesome, the best film we’ve ever seen. We’re going to see it again when I get home. I wish Luke was here now because where we live’s like Smallville and this is like Metropolis. I half-expect Superman to land on our bonnet. The top of the tower’s so high it must be in the clouds. I crick my neck as I look at a white light flashing above the building; it looks like it’s hanging from the sky.

‘What’s that light for, Dad?’

‘To stop planes crashing into the tower.’

‘Paul,’ says Mum.

I hope we don’t get hit by a plane while we’re here. I wonder if there’s a helipad, like on the roof of the *Daily Planet* office.

‘Shut the window,’ says Mum. ‘The rain’s blowing in. It’ll ruin my perm.’ Her new hairstyle’s so awful that the rain could only make it better. ‘And put your coat on. It’s cold out there.’

I find a half-sucked Murray Mint stuck to my sweater. It must have fallen out of my mouth when I fell asleep. While Mum and Dad faff around I try to count how many storeys there are but I keep losing track. My Auntie Rosie and her girlfriend live in a squat almost at the top. Back in the summer, when Dad agreed to spend Christmas with Mum’s sister, she had a boyfriend called Barry, ate meat and lived in a house with a snooker table. Dad’s hoping that Auntie Rosie gets evicted over Christmas so we can go home early. When Rosie and Barry stayed with us in the summer holidays, Luke spied on Rosie through a

hole in my tree house; it's not as gross as it sounds because Rosie's ten years younger and skinnier and prettier than Mum and when she sunbathes she wears tiny bikinis. I know Luke still likes her because he was going on about her when we came out of *Superman*.

'Your Auntie Rosie looks just like Lois Lane,' he said. 'And she wears pink underwear like Lois Lane. I saw it with my x-ray vision.'

'No, you didn't,' I said. 'You saw it because her dresses were see-through and you didn't stop staring at her all week.'

'I wasn't the only one,' he said. 'Your dad was getting an eyeful too.'

I told him to shut up and gave him a dead arm.

Mum peers out of the front window. 'Well, this will be different.'

'Your choice,' says Dad. 'Don't say I don't ever do anything for you.'

I burp. It tastes of Happy Eater breakfast. Dad had extra bacon, extra sausages and extra black pudding. The Happy Eater logo looks like someone sticking their fingers down their throat to spew which I don't think's a very good way to advertise your roadside restaurant.

We trudge through the car park, past graffitied walls and a burnt-out van and piles of rubbish; it's just like the back streets of Metropolis where Lois gets mugged and Clark saves her from the bullet. When we get to the tower I'm a bit disappointed that there aren't revolving doors like in *Superman* but it might have been difficult to get through them with all our stuff. In her letter, Auntie Rosie said best not to leave things in the car. Dad said there was no bloody way he was traipsing up to the eighteenth floor twice so we're all weighed down with bags, bedding and presents.

The entrance has round moon lights on the walls and two silver doors which turn out to be lifts. Dad presses a button. There aren't any Christmas decorations in this bit of the building and it smells of bleach. The wrinkliest and most bent over old woman I've ever seen – she must be at least a hundred – comes out of a corridor. She smiles and says Merry Christmas as she shuffles past.

'Just as well we didn't leave anything in the car,' says Dad. 'Looks like she's off to jimmy the lock with that walking stick of hers.'

I giggle.

Mum rolls her eyes. 'I wonder where she's off to, poor old dear. She shouldn't be out on her own at this time of night.'

The lift arrives and we step inside.

'Don't put the bags on the floor,' says Dad. 'I'm not sure that's rainwater.' He catches me reading the graffiti on the walls. 'And don't you dare read that.'

It's no different to the stuff in the toilets at school. There are only a couple of words I don't know and I try to remember them in case Luke knows them. The lift lurches upwards; I haven't been in one before but it's not very exciting. I thought it would whoosh like a spaceship but it grinds and sputters and clunks like our car. I lose a grip on one of the bags and as I try not to drop it Auntie Rosie's girlfriend's present falls on the floor.

'David,' groans Mum. 'I spent ages choosing that. I hope it's not damaged.'

I pick it up. The wrapping paper's a bit soggy.

'What did you get her?' asks Dad.

'A tin of Quality Street.'

Dad snorts. 'Thoughtful.'

'It's difficult choosing for someone you've never met.'

'Especially when they're … '

'This is it,' says Mum. 'Eighteenth floor.'

There's a window on the landing in front of us.

'Bloody hell,' says Dad. 'You really can see for miles. There's the Post Office Tower.'

'I don't like it,' says Mum.

The view makes my head spin. We could be on Krypton looking down on earth. We stop at a sign and turn left down the corridor. Mum knocks on the door of flat 75. There's a smell of incense coming from inside. Dad winks and pretends to walk away. 'If I put my foot down I could still make it home in time for last orders.'

'Paul,' says Mum.

'Don't you go getting any ideas while we're here,' says Dad. 'I hope it's not inherited.'

Mum rolls her eyes as the door opens. It's Auntie Rosie! Her hair's longer. And she's even skinnier than she used to be. Except her belly and boobs which are bigger. She's wearing a tight tee shirt and purple bell bottoms and ...

'Rosie, are you … oh my goodness, you're pregnant!' squeals Mum. 'Oh, David, you're going to have a cousin! Paul, isn't it wonderful? Paul?'

'Er, yeah, great,' says Dad. 'Congratulations.'

Luke will be so disappointed. He said that although eleven and twenty-three was a bit dodgy, once he was sixteen and Rosie was twenty-eight it would be fine. It's not like she was his teacher. But now when he's sixteen and she's twenty-eight she'll have a snotty five-year-old in tow.

Mum pats Rosie's belly. 'Why didn't you tell me? How far along?'

'Five months.'

'Shit!' Dad drops one of the bags. He drops another one as he tries to pick up the first. Mum gives him a look.

'I wanted to tell you in person,' says Rosie. 'It's Barry's, obviously. That's why we split up. He didn't want to know. The baby will be much happier with two mothers. I'm so done with men. I'm hoping it's a girl.' She glances at me. 'But a little boy would be lovely too. How are you, darling? Haven't you grown!'

Duh. She always says that. It's not like I'm going to shrink. 'Alright, thank you. Your flat's very high up.'

'It's rather liberating. Closer to God. I feel free as a bird. You can't hear the traffic at all. I lie with my hands on my belly and feel baby kick and gaze at the clouds. Tallulah's a cloud diviner. I've discovered some interesting things about my future, all good. We're hoping for a home birth in the sky.'

Dad clears his throat. 'I could do with putting this lot down.' He's gone bright red from carrying so much stuff.

'Oh, sorry. Do come in,' says Rosie.

The flat's a bit upside down: the floorboards are bare and the rugs are on the walls.

'Tallulah's just popped out to get a u-bend,' says Rosie. 'We've got a leak under the kitchen sink. She won't be long ... This is your room. There's a double mattress … Potsie, get off.' She shoos away a large, fluffy cat. 'Sorry there's no frame but me and Barry bought the bed together so we had to split it in half. David can sleep on the futon in the lounge. It'll mean late nights but I'm sure he won't complain! Me and Tools are across the corridor.'

Tools?

In the lounge there's big doors onto the balcony. I press my face against the glass. I can see thousands of lights but not a single star, even though it's stopped raining and the clouds have gone. The sky's sort of orangey, not black like it is at home. I step back from the window. The room's not very Christmassy except there's tinsel everywhere – like an

invasion of giant hairy caterpillars. There's a smelly stick burning on the table – next to a pile of cookery magazines called *Spare Rib*.

'Christmas Eve and not put your tree up yet?' says Dad. 'It's not Christmas without a tree.'

'That was our tree,' says Auntie Rosie, pointing to a pile of gold-sprayed twigs, 'but Potsie jumped on it. Do watch where you put your feet. She's toilet trained but … well, you know how it is. She does tend to use the corners though. And they're solid. Tools just scoops them up and pops them down the chute in the corridor; out of the door, turn right, through the double doors, in case you need it. Anyway, Christmas is about more than a tree. It's about celebrating the birth of Christ with the people you love. Can I get you a drink?'

'I'll have a beer,' says Dad.

'We're alcohol-free at the moment.' Rosie strokes her bump. 'Drinking too much gets me into trouble. There's some apple juice or dandelion and burdock.'

'Sorry,' says Dad, sounding as un-sorry as humanly possible, 'but I am not not drinking at Christmas. No bloody way. Where's the nearest offie?'

Dad stomps off and slams the front door behind him. Rosie makes Mum a cup of tea and brings me a glass of apple juice.

'Nice flat,' murmurs Mum. 'Quite spacious.'

'Yes, it's fine. We've got some friends planning on opening up another squat soon though. It needs work but it's a Georgian house with a big garden. It could fit ten of us. A real community. There's loads of women's squats round here. Ahh, baby just kicked. Sweet.' She places her hand on her belly.

'So, the baby wasn't planned?' asks Mum. 'Is that what you meant about drinking too much?'

'No. Yes. I mean, I've always wanted children. I suppose I thought I'd be married to the father but … what can you do? It happened in the summer, on the night of your barbecue actually, the last night we were there. I'm not used to all that fresh air. And it was so hot. And way too many Moscow Mules. Never again. I haven't drunk since that day.'

Rosie starts to cry. Happy bloody Christmas.

Dad's on his second can of London Pride by the time Tools comes home. My first thought is that she doesn't look like Barry. Luke said that his sister's *Jackie* magazine said that

women have a type so we thought that Rosie's type was Barry: dark hair, dark eyes, short and fat which is what Luke looks like too. But Tallulah isn't Rosie's type at all: she's blonde, blue-eyed, tall, thin and American.

'Hallo, I'm Pat,' says Mum. 'Lovely to meet you.' She flaps at dad – who's flicking through a *Spare Rib* magazine with a look of horror on his face – to come over. 'And this is Paul. And David.'

Tallulah makes mwa mwa noises and pretends to kiss my parents. She ignores me which makes me think that she doesn't like children and isn't going to be a very good mum and or dad to Rosie's baby. 'Rosemary has told me so much about you,' she says. I can tell from the way she looks at us that she thinks we are very uncool: Pat and Paul versus Rosemary and Tallulah. At least Dad isn't frumpy like Mum.

Rosie and Tallulah have invited two punk friends – who bring a tiny baby asleep in a cardboard banana box – to eat with us. I've never met a punk in real life but Adam and Amanda aren't at all angry or violent like the punks in the newspapers or on TV; they touch and kiss each other a lot for a start.

We're having what Tallulah calls 'takeout' for dinner. She gives Mum a menu from Happy House Chinese restaurant and says to pass it round and tick off what we want. 'I'd prefer it if meat and fish weren't brought into the flat,' she says.

'Pork chop suey and beef fried rice for me,' says Dad marking the menu with large crosses.

'I don't ac-tu-al-ly find that funny,' says Tallulah.

'It wasn't supposed to be,' says Dad.

Tallulah opens her mouth.

'Who's next?' says Rosie.

Everyone else chooses vegetarian: spring rolls and vegetable chow mein and egg foo young and mushroom fried rice. I really want prawn crackers but then I remember that prawns are fish and a girl at school said that fish have feelings too. Dad says he'll go and collect the food so he can get some air and I wonder how many times he'll need air over Christmas. When he comes back – carrying two big grease-stained paper bags – he says that the Happy House was a rip-off and the Chinky back home would have been half the price.

There are only two chairs so everyone sits on bean bags and cushions in a circle on the floor, except Dad who sits on his own at the table. Adam tells me how he dyes his hair pink and how he gets it to stay in a Mohawk and how he has to shave the bald bit every day. I ask him if he's seen *Superman* (he has) and if there's a helipad on the roof of the tower. He says that although there's no helipad there is a transmitter and if I'd like he can introduce me to his friend who runs the pirate radio station!

Rosie, Tallulah and Amanda are chatting about squatting. At first I think they mean squatting the flat but when I hear them talking about pushing a football through the vagina I realise they mean having a baby. Dad moans about funny foreign food and food poisoning and how his chop suey's probably got dog in it. Everyone smokes strange-smelling roll-ups, except Dad who smokes Player's, and Mum who doesn't smoke at all. Amanda gets her boob out to feed the baby when it starts crying. I'm quite close-up to the boob and it's not at all like the boobs in *The Sun*. It's blue and veiny and I don't know where to look. When the baby poos we hear it squirting out in lots of goes and it stinks so badly it makes me gag. Luckily Amanda says it's time to call it a night. Adam fist-bumps me goodbye and says to pop round to theirs and he'll take me up to the roof.

I'm so tired after we've tidied up that I can hardly keep my eyes open but Tallulah asks if I can put the 'trash' out. The corridor's freezing. I go to the end and through the double doors. I can hear faint music and voices and a sound like the chugging of a train. I open the door of the chute and drop the bags down it. On the way back, I take the wrong set of doors and end up on a different landing. When I hear a loud, scuttling noise I jump. I turn to see an animal hurtling towards me, a manky little dog, fat and bald. It leaps up at me and I push it off. It growls, trots over to the wall, cocks its leg and pisses.

'Rocky!'

I jump again. The dog sniffs at my shoes.

'Rocky! Rocky, come here!' A skinny girl in a pink dressing gown is standing at the end of the corridor. She sees me and disappears back inside. The dog hurtles up the corridor after her. I watch the steam coming off the puddle of piss as I work out the way back to the flat.

Tallulah says it would be easier if I could sleep on the sofa bed without unfolding it. Mum says that's fine and I give her a dirty look. Tallulah moves a wicker screen across the room and puts it up next to the sofa to wall it off. I curl up inside my Snoopy sleeping bag which

smells like it's never been washed – which it hasn't because Mum says it would fill a large machine and would be a waste of money. The futon's so hard I might as well sleep on the floor – at least there'd be more room – and the cushion I'm using as a pillow's covered in cat hair and makes my eyes itch.

Mum goes to bed. Tallulah and her whiny American accent go to bed. I can see Dad and Rosie through the gap between two panels of the screen. Rosie sips at a peppermint tea and watches an old film on the television. Every now and again she says how beautiful Audrey Hepburn is. Dad sits at the table and works his way through his six-pack of London Pride as he reads the paper. Each time he finishes a beer he scrunches the can and chucks it into the wastepaper bin with a clatter.

I must have dozed off because when I wake up the film has finished. Church bells ring out at Midnight Mass from Darlington, wherever Darlington is. I open my eyes. My mouth's very dry and I'm just about to get out of bed for a glass of water when Rosie stands up.

'I need to talk to you about something,' she says to Dad. 'Does David sleep soundly?'

'Yeah, usually. He'll be shattered. Always is by the end of term. And zonked from bloody weed fumes no doubt.'

Rosie walks towards me. I close my eyes and keep very still.

'Fast asleep,' she says.

The lounge door clicks shut. I open my eyes. Rosie sits back down on her bean bag.

Dad downs his last can of lager. 'What do you want to talk about?'

Rosie fidgets with her bracelet. 'It's your baby,' she says, very quietly.

My belly heaves and my mouth fills with sick. I swallow it back in.

Dad crunches his can. His knuckles are white. 'Why the hell didn't you get rid of it?'

'Because I want it.'

'How can you do this to your sister?'

'Sh! How could you do it to your wife and son? My sister is never going to find out. Barry knows it's not his. I told him it was a one-night stand. I've told Tallulah it was a one-night stand. I won't name a father on the birth certificate. I don't want to see you again. I'll see Pat and David on their own. I don't know why the hell she stays with you anyway.'

‘Is it too late?’

‘Is what too late?’

‘To get rid of it. I’ll pay. I’ll pay anything to get rid of it.’

‘Sh! Keep your voice down. I’m not getting rid of it.’ Rosie’s taken the bracelet off her wrist and is fiddling with the beads. ‘That night ...’

‘What about it?’

‘I didn’t know what was happening until, until it ... I was drunk, very drunk.’ She stretches the bracelet and the elastic snaps: brightly coloured beads scatter across the floor. ‘I … I had a lot of bruises.’

Dad doesn’t say anything for a long time. ‘I don’t know where you’re going with this,’ he says. ‘But you fucking well know that you came on to me. Strutting around all week with your tits and arse hanging out. Giving me the eye.’

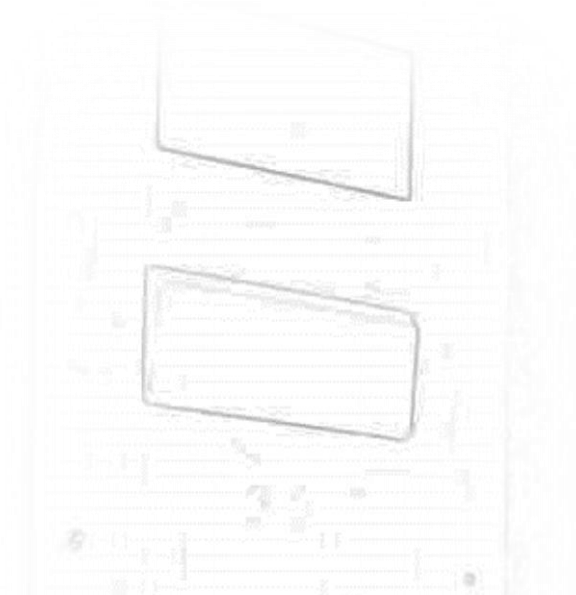
Rosie opens her mouth and closes it again. She looks very sad and very tired. Dad tries to drink from his empty can, hurls it into the bin and leaves the room. The television broadcast ends and the announcer says good night and happy Christmas. The TV screen goes blank. When Rosie leaves the room I sit up. My belly heaves again and I throw up over the side of the sofa, spewing out the Chinese takeaway, the egg sandwiches we had in the car, my greasy Happy Eater breakfast.

I have no idea where I am when I wake up. My hair’s soaked in sweat and my heart’s thumping and the room stinks of sick. I have been dreaming about Superman. Dad was Lex Luthor and Rosie was Lois Lane and Adam was Superman but it was all confused because it was Rosie’s baby who was put in a spacecraft on Krypton and landed in Smallville.

I sit up and see the lights of the towers through the glass doors and for a moment I think I’m in Metropolis but then I remember that it’s London. And then I remember what Rosie told Dad and my belly heaves again.

I get out of bed, avoiding the sick on the floor, and walk over to the window. I press my forehead against the cold glass and it makes my headache a bit better. I think about Mum and I start to cry. Poor Mum. Fat, frumpy Mum. My classmates have been making *Your mum’s so ugly that … your mum’s so fat that …* jokes for years. She’s wanted another baby for ever but Dad’s always refused and now her sister’s got it instead. I struggle to work out what Rosie’s baby will be to me, a cousin and a half-brother or sister

too? And then I wonder what the baby's dad will be to me and I think that he is no longer going to be anything at all.



‘I do not want you skating on the canal! Kelly? Do you hear me?’
‘But, Mum, everybody’s doing it. And I love skating.’
‘I don’t care what everybody’s doing! You do it again and you’ll be grounded for a month. Do you know how dangerous it is? I read a warning in the paper this morning. The ice might look thick but it ain’t thick everywhere. Paper said that the factories pump water in and out and the boats churn up the ice.’
‘The boats are stuck in the ice so how can they be churning it up?’
‘You watch your tongue.’
‘It’s not fair. You never let me do anything. All you want is to make my life miserable. You don’t care about me!’
‘Why do you think I don’t want you to skate on the bloody canal?’

‘Did you hear that old Mr Roberts moved out.’
‘Did he really?’
Yeah, ages ago now.’
‘Is he alright?’
‘Some kids broke in. In broad daylight. Stole his life savings. Scared him witless. I don’t know what the world’s coming to. There’s no discipline these days. Do you know there’s talk of banning the cane? Bearded left wing loons. It never did me any harm and ...’
‘So he’s gone?’
‘He has, sadly. Couldn’t have asked for a better neighbour. Deaf as a doorpost though. Gone to live with his daughter in Margate. She’s been on at him to live with her for years. Better for him really. Sea air will do him good.’

‘Alright, Kel?’
‘Yeah. Did you borrow me your sister’s skates?’
‘Yeah. I just nabbed them.’
‘Fab. I’ve no idea where Mum’s hidden mine. *Oooh, it’s so dangerous*. She’s probably sold them knowing her.’
‘Ha ha. Did you bring money for cider?’
‘Oh, yeah. I’ve got plenty of money for cider.’

Flat 79 – The Aspirant

I step off the bus, careful to avoid the salt and slush pooled in the gutter. It's not yet three o'clock but snow's forecast and the sky's leaden. My feet are numb with cold even though I've been on the bus for half an hour. I should wear woollen tights but they look so ugly and as the girls say at work, the lower the denier the higher the tips. And that's where it all starts: shorter skirts, higher heels, bigger benefits. I can tell at once the girls who'll end up working in the flat above the café. 'From teas to striptease,' one of them said to me the other day. 'Not really the promotion I'd dreamed of.' 'Don't knock it,' I'd said. 'There's plenty'll do it if you don't.' Sluts, the lot of them.

The shop fronts are almost hidden by the sodden cardboard boxes and sacks of rubbish stacked high against them and there isn't enough space for the crowds making their way unsteadily along the pavement. An old woman creeps along in front of me, eyes fixed on the icy ground. I try to squeeze past but she blocks my path and I tut loudly; I imagine her falling, snapping her brittle bones.

Outside the entrance to the hospital, a group of pickets – men in flat caps and donkey jackets, women in big coats – huddles around a brazier, hands outstretched to the flames. I slow down to relish the warmth. A gust of wind blows a placard onto the ground: COHSE IT'S THE STAFF THAT SUFFER. I resist the temptation to leave a footprint, step over it and walk on. I go as quickly as I dare – I've already taken my time: the first two buses trundled past without stopping, passengers spilling out onto the platform – but the last thing I want to do is slip and break a leg; it's miserable enough with Vin out of work. I hope he's alright. He was in a bad way this morning. Didn't touch his breakfast. Scarcely said a word.

I trail a mum and her two kids across the carpark. The kids are wearing red hats and yellow scarves, bundled up like Russian dolls. One boy shoves the other who bursts into tears and shoves back. They fall on the ground, rolling in the snow. The mum yells at them to stop fighting and drops her handbag as she pulls them apart. She bends awkwardly as she picks up the bag; she is heavily pregnant. Both kids are blubbering now and she takes them by the hand and drags them towards the block. Something flutters on the ground and when I get to the spot where the kids had their scuffle I realise it's a bundle of banknotes. I glance round: a man's jacking up his Cortina, a girl in the phone box has her back to me, only a snowman watches through deep-set black eyes. As the mum and her kids disappear

through the swing doors, I pick up the bundle and slip it into my pocket. The woman wouldn't be so bloody careless if she needed it.

The notice on the lift says Out of Order. I check that the money's still in my pocket and take the stairwell door. Whenever I have to use the stairs – which isn't very often – I stop on the tenth storey and trace my finger along the paintwork where, one night after a few too many, Vin took his penknife and scratched VIN + VAL 4EVA in large letters. We hung out of the landing window, smoking, looking at the stars and the reflection of the moon on the canal, and then Vin stood up and said he couldn't wait for me any longer and if we didn't go upstairs we'd have to do it then and there, on the gum-stained concrete, underneath the Fire Exit sign. The stars were beautiful. And I felt sick from too much cherry brandy. But I followed Vin up to our flat. For a year or so afterwards I loved seeing that childish graffiti. It cheered me up on my way home from work if we'd had a row the night before or if Vin was in one of his moods.

When I reach our floor I stop on the landing to catch my breath. A gust of wind swirls through the window and I crouch on my haunches to get out of the draft. I take the money from my pocket and count it out: two tens, four fives and five ones! Forty-five quid! I check the notes aren't fakes – we pass enough of them through the till at work to know what I'm looking for. There's one counterfeit, a tenner. It's been done well though. Easy to pass on. I stand up and look out of the window as I decide whether or not to tell Vin about my find. The pane of glass is missing and icicles hang from the frame. I snap off the longest icicle and try to throw it like a spear into the gloom but it sticks to my glove. I shiver. I'd kill for a steaming cup of tea so I hope the milk's thawed. I left a bottle on the kitchen windowsill last night and it had frozen by this morning. The milk had popped up an inch or two and pushed off the lid, a white tower with a silver roof. I took a knife and sliced off the lump of milk and dropped it into my tea. I ate my cereal dry while I marvelled at the beautiful frost feathers on the window.

Another gust of wind stings my face. I haven't had to use the stairs since the summer. Last time I stopped here the windowsill was thick with dead ants – pest control had been in. The air smelt of cooking – liver and onions and cabbage and curry – as it does when it's hot and everyone cooks with their windows open. I'd done overtime at the café so my legs were throbbing. It was Craig's first day and he had instantly made quite the impression on me so when one of the waitresses phoned in sick I offered to stay late. When I got home I had to stand at this window to gather my thoughts; I felt quite giddy. The

crowds below scurried like ants themselves, workers, desperate to be somewhere else. Never-ending trains of traffic glinted in the sun. I could feel the throb of a pneumatic drill as it dug up the ground or was it just my heart beating a little faster than usual? A row of terraced houses crumbled into a cloud of dust which clogged in my mouth and stuck to the sweat on my skin. Red and yellow diggers, like children's toys, jerked backwards and forwards in the great holes opening up in the ground. Girls chanted and jumped as a skipping rope swished and boys in the football cage darted this way and that. And above the funfair, a big wheel turned in the sky, its cabins rising into an orange smog.

But now everything is still and sluggish and black and white – except for post boxes which look like drops of blood in the snow. Ugly mounds of rubbish have turned into the beautiful snow-covered hills of a Christmas card. The wrecking ball no longer wrecks. The workers have downed tools, the building sites transformed into soft, mysterious shapes. One of Vin's mates told us that a JCB had struggled to dig the frozen ground and that the diesel was starting to gel. Cars and lorries crawl along the main roads, the smaller ones blocked by snow. The barges are static, their hulls frozen into the canal. I wonder what else is buried beneath the thick sheet of ice. I remember the mutilated body; the head still hasn't been found.

I hang over the banisters and stare down the spiralling flights of stairs – not a soul. I'll tell Vin I found a fiver, treat ourselves. I've half a mind to go straight back out, buy beer to celebrate. Vin can fetch a takeaway later – madras for me and 'a vindaloo for Vin' we'll joke because he can't handle anything spicier than a korma. I glance at my watch. I'd better go in now, tell him the good news, otherwise he'll worry.

I'll hide the rest of the money in the bain marie at the back of the kitchen cupboard. It must be a couple of months since Craig decided the money should be stashed at mine; he'd had a tip-off, the café was being watched. 'Touch a penny of it and I'll kill you,' he said. 'I'm not joking.' And then he laughed. He'll be happy with another forty pounds for our pot. What with his manager's wage and my wage and tips – not to mention everything else we're bringing in – it can't be long before we're ready. Spain he thinks. He's got a cousin manages a bar out there. I don't care where we go as long as it's hot and out of this frozen, dead-end, hell-hole of a country. If the Tories get in, Craig's going to buy his council house at a massive discount, rent it out, make a profit. I've only been there once but it's lovely where he lives. A new town it's called even though it was built in the forties. He's got a garden and his own front door. I have to get rid of Vin – it's bothering me now,

I've hardly slept the last couple of weeks – but he's not right in the head at the moment. Then again, Craig's not going to hang around forever. He's getting twitchy. Says things are closing in. Says I need to be ready to go.

I roll up the notes and put them back in my pocket. I fling open the heavy swing doors and hurry along the corridor. A drink and a curry will do me and Vin good. I'll get change for the TV meter, there might be a film on. We can plug the fire in, just for half an hour. We haven't used it this winter; it's been thermals and jumpers and even overcoats inside. We might take off some layers and what with the beer and the glow of the fire who knows how I'll feel. I should make the effort.

I turn the key in our front door. It's dark in the flat and I switch on the light. 'Vin!' I shout. 'Vin! You'll never guess what I found.' And then I worry that a neighbour might hear so I click the door shut. 'Vin!' He doesn't answer. Perhaps he's asleep. I hope he went to the job centre today. He was so low this morning. We had words. He asked how I thought it made him feel to be stuck at home on his own with nothing to do, living off tax payers' money, while I was out earning, working longer and longer hours, with men staring at my legs in that short, tight uniform, smiling at them with that red gunk on my lips.

I told him that I loved him. That I only had eyes for him. 'There's one and a half million out of work,' I said, 'you're not on your own. Even if you had a job you'd be on strike. Everyone is. It said on the radio they're not even digging the graves in Liverpool.'

'I've been out of work a year now,' he said.

'Give me a cuddle,' I said, but as I went towards him he turned away.

The bathroom door's open. He's not in the lounge. He's not in the kitchen. The bedroom door's closed and as I turn the handle, my chest squeezes tight. The curtains are drawn and I hurry over to the bedside lamp and switch it on. I run my hand over the pile of blankets and it crumples. 'Vin!' I shout. Vin, are you here?'

The bottle of milk in the kitchen is still frozen. It's been placed on a folded piece of squared paper, torn from the notebook I use to tot up our spending what with food prices rocketing. Vin has written Val on the front. I move the bottle and open the note. At the top, where I wrote last night, it says *corner shop, pint milk, 13 ½ p*. And underneath …

Vin has left me.

I read the note again and slump onto the kitchen floor, hug my knees to my chest. My breath comes out in racing clouds. I drop my head and stare at the hideous pattern on the linoleum: I see snakes and skulls and spiders. In the gap between the cooker and the cupboard there are egg shells, a bus ticket, used matches, ring pulls, a gold milk top, a shrivelled pea, a ha'penny, and one of those fortune teller miracle fish that curls up on your palm. Each item makes me think of things that Vin and I did together, our relationship remembered in the filth down the side of a cooker. I slip my hand into the gap and pull out the red plastic fish. It came out of a Christmas cracker: Vin was a 'dead one' and I was 'fickle'. The fortune telling did little to add to the Christmas cheer. I place the red plastic fish on my hand: a moving head and tail. I am in love.

I realise how little stuff Vin had, how little impact he's had on anything since he's been on the dole. A few coathangers jangle in the wardrobe when I open the doors. He's cleared his drawer except for a stack of rejection letters and job cards. He's taken his suit, and the smart shoes he wears to interviews, and the shoe shine kit his dad bought him when he got his first apprenticeship. I take his Slade poster off the wall. In the bathroom, on the sink, the chipped mug he kept his shaving brush, razor and toothbrush in is empty save for an inch of slimy water. A mottled hair from his shaving brush is stuck in the cracked bar of soap. He has left black hairs around the plughole; he hadn't shaved for almost a week. His flannel is scrunched up in the corner of the bath. He has left a tidemark, a grey tidemark, as though he didn't want to disappear without a trace. I imagine the goosebumps on his gaunt body as he washed in the shallow, lukewarm water.

I take off my hat, scarf and coat and pull on some Marigolds. I sprinkle Ajax over the bath, the sink, down the toilet. I shake the container until it's empty and the bathroom is covered in white powder flecked with blue and then I scrub until there is no trace of Vin. I empty the ash trays. I make the bed with clean sheets and pillowcases. I do the washing up and clean the kitchen. I clear out the gap between the oven and the cupboard. I take the bin bag to the rubbish chute. I open the window in the lounge and switch on the vacuum cleaner. Snowflakes blow through the window and settle on the rug but I am warm. When I switch off the vacuum cleaner I realise that I am singing. And then the lightbulb flickers and dies. Shit. A power cut. I feel my way to the kitchen and open the top drawer. I strike a match and light a candle. I read Vin's note one last time before I hold it to the flame. The

damp, cold paper burns slowly. The orange ember turns to ash which falls softly, like snowflakes, onto the work surface.

I take the candle into the bathroom. In the gleaming mirror I apply two coats of bright red lipstick. I'll phone Craig, tell him I'm free, then I'll catch a bus up Oxford Street for late night opening. Treat myself to a new sweater before I meet him, there's that lovely one in Littlewoods I saw in *Woman's Own*. I count the money again and set aside the fake tenner for my purse. I check I have change for the telephone. In the kitchen I pull a saucepan and the colander out of the cupboard and reach for the bain marie.

The money has gone. Every single note. Gone.

The fucking bastard's taken everything! When I've worked so hard! Overcharging and shortchanging, passing off fakes to dotty old women, sleep-deprived mums, fat businessmen more interested in my tits than their change. And the tips: fake smiles, holding my tongue, giggling when dirty old men brushed against me or pinched my arse. I've worked so hard for that money and now it's gone! And I never once gave into the temptation to go upstairs, sell my soul like the rest of the sluts at work! I earned that money the hard way! I hurl the bain marie across the kitchen; it hits the wall and clangs to the floor.

I have to tell Craig. I have to tell Craig that our money is gone. The ice-cold air from outside creeps inside me.

Engineers are working in the lift; their shouts echo up the shaft as the lift grinds and screeches. I push through the swing doors and run down the stairs. On the tenth floor I walk over to the wall and stop next to VIN + VAL 4EVA. I take out my keys and I scratch out the letters, big scrawls, up and down like mountain peaks.

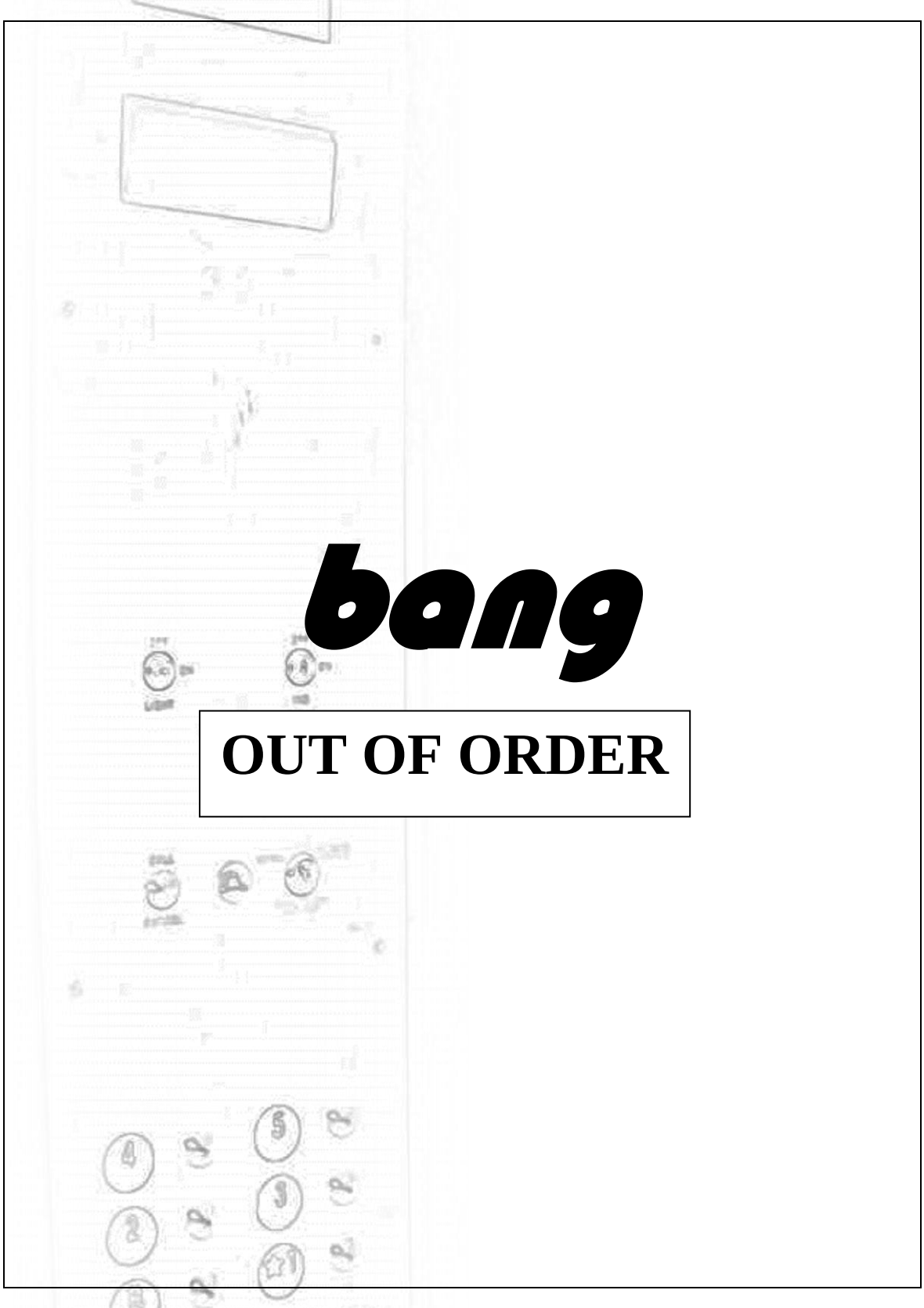
The mum and her kids are in the lobby. The kids stare at me through the large, dark eyes which peep out from underneath their hats; their faces are tearstained and the woman looks like she's been crying too.

'Are you okay?' I say. It would look suspicious not to ask.

'I've lost some money,' the woman says. 'I'd drawn a lot of money. We've re-traced our steps and searched far and wide and the poor twins are beat. My husband's left me and the baby's due in …' She starts to sob.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, ‘but you’re not the only one. I’ve lost money too. No one’s got any fucking money these days.’ I walk towards the door.

The woman’s sobs echo round the lobby. I pause. I put my hand into my pocket and it brushes against the notes. I think of Craig, of Spain, of running our own business, of making something of myself, of getting out of here. I will not turn round. But I cannot go forwards either.


bang
OUT OF ORDER

Flat 74 – The Homeworker

Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ... I push my fingers hard in my ears but the noise is stuck in my head. Like the sound of a train that never stops or Mum's ex-boyfriend's Cortina that never used to start. It's still dark out but Mum's on the sewing machine. She's always on the sewing machine – when I wake up, when I go to school, when I get back from school and when I go to bed. On the days she has black bags under her eyes she sews over pins and they snap or she sews the needle through her finger; there's so many drops of blood on the tablecloth they've joined like a dot to dot to make Maggie Thatcher's face. It looks just like her: big hair, big teeth. Once Mum caught her hair in the sewing machine and I had to cut some of it off. She was left with tufty patches on her head same as on the stray dogs that prowl between the gypsy caravans on the wasteland.

April rolls over and steals the blanket. Alan's snoring on the floor. My head hurts and I wish we didn't have to share everything, Alan, April and me. April even took my name; I was going to be April but I got born in March by mistake when Mum fell down a flight of stairs when the lifts were broken. She stood on a not-finished portion of chips cos she couldn't see over her belly and the chips were mushy and the newspaper was slimy with vinegar and she slipped; she's got a scar on her forehead to prove it. I'm glad she didn't call me March. April was born in December but Mum called her April cos she said there was no bloody way she was going to have any more but there was a bloody way cos three years ago today she had Alan.

Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch. I wriggle under the blanket and elbow April, a bit by accident, in the back. I cover my ears but the sounds stuck in my head turn up loud: howly wind whooshing down the corridors; rain hitting the windows like it's angry it can't get in; Mr Scrutton, Mum's boss, banging at our front door; druggies and drunks shouting in the stairwells. Mum never hears a thing: c*h ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch* ...

The graffiti in the lift says STEVEN M MURDERER with MURDERER scribbled out and INOSENT painted in red. I always think of the body in the canal as the lift clanks up and down. April's scared of the lift. I tell her that at midnight it turns into a coffin that drops and drops and drops until it gets to hell. She thinks that dead people smell of pee and sick and beer.

Cheep cheep cheep. The birds are awake. The mad bird woman next door keeps budgies – yellow and blue and green – that fly round her flat like it's a giant cage. *Imagine*

the shit, says Mum. The woman used to keep all sorts – budgies, pigeons, chickens – but some girls broke into her flat last year and killed them all. Mum was in when it happened but she didn't hear a thing. One of the chickens died on the woman's doormat; I saw the blood while it was still wet. It was so sad. I made her a card to say how sorry we were and put it through her letter box. She only got her new birds a couple of months ago. She locks them up now – in a big, heavy cage with a padlock – when she goes out. When she leaves her windows open feathers drift out of her flat and onto our balcony, like rainbow snowflakes. I collect them and keep them in my special-things box that's private or else. I made April hold one of Mum's needles while she sweared she'd never look inside it. *Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.*

Sssssssssssssssssss. The man that lives on the other side's got up. He pees a lot and the first pee of the day's always a long one. I'm sick of the sounds in the flat and my head. Except the birds. When they go quiet at night and I stick my fingers in my ears sometimes they keep on singing in my head but I don't mind cos their cheeps are beautiful and loud and the whooshes and the knocks and the screams turn down.

I step over Alan – who's rolled off his bit of foam and curled up on the floor – and creep out of the bedroom. It can't be as early as I thought cos the wrecking ball's at work: crash and thwack and the noise of falling rubble. Mum's at the sewing machine, shoulders sore, head held funny, so close to the lamp that her mousey hair looks blonde. Her grey dressing gown used to be white but nothing's white in this flat no more. Dust from the building sites gets on everything: clothes on the washing line, curtains, the walls and floors, even us – the bathtub rim's blacker than it used to be, takes a lot of Vim to scrub it off.

There are five hundred teddy bears piled up against the wall. We've got to pack them into boxes by eleven o'clock when Mr Scrutton's coming to get them. Yesterday, me and April stuck a thousand eyes on the bears and left them to dry; it was the glue that gave me my headache. Why there's so many kids into sniffing glue round here I've no idea. I open the curtains. It's not dark outside, the sky's just grey as concrete.

A woman in the flat below's screeching along to 'Bright Eyes' on the radio and I stomp across the kitchen floor. I put the kettle on the stove and while I wait for it to boil, I pour out bowls of sugar puffs for Alan, April and me. There's only half a bottle of milk so I fill it to the top with water. A fat bluebottle buzzes round the kitchen. I swat at it with the dishcloth. *Zzzzzzzzzz*. Missed.

I put Mum's cup of tea on the table. She takes her foot off the pedal. 'Be a love and iron these,' she says, passing me a pile of skirts. 'April can pack up the bears.' She takes the last fag out of her box of Player's and lights up.

I plug in the iron and as it gets hot I eat my sugar puffs. Sugar 'puffs of air' more like; I'm starving! I lay the first skirt over the ironing board. I'm in charge of pressing all Mum's work. April says I'm going to end up with muscles like Popeye's, on one arm anyway. I'm always careful not to scorch the clothes but once when I was bursting for a pee I left the iron on a skirt and it left a big mark. Mum went ballistic and when Mr Scrutton docked her wages she grounded me for a week.

Mr Scrutton's always docking Mum's wages but all she goes is 'Yes, Mr Scrutton, no Mr Scrutton, fancy a cup of tea, Mr Scrutton?' He's a Very Nasty Man, aka a BASTARD. Mum used to machine sixteen skirts an hour but when he realised she could do that he made her do twenty. He knows she can't go out and do normal work and he takes the mick. I used to think that cos Mum was always angry, her not being able to go out was something to do with aggro phobia but then a social worker left a pamphlet and I saw how it was wrote.

'It's Alan's birthday,' I say.

'I know,' says Mum.

'What we doing?'

'Nothing till we've finished this job and Mr Scrutton's paid me. Then we can get some nice food to celebrate.' She stubs out her half-smoked fag. Her tea's gone cold. *Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch* ...

No one mentions Alan's birthday when him and April get up. It's lucky that he's too young to know what a birthday should be like.

When I've finished ironing, I get a few things from the kitchen and go to our bedroom and shut the door. I cut out two bits of card from the cereal box and stick them together with double-sided tape so that the back and front are plain. I fold the piece of card and draw a budgie on the front; it's quite good except that the green and yellow felt tips are a bit dried out and the too-close eyes look evil. I wriggle under the bed and pull out my special-things box. I choose five blue feathers and stick them to the budgie. On the outside of the card I write HAPPY BIRTHDAY ALAN and on the inside I write HAVE A NICE DAY and my name and XXX, quite small so there's space for Mum and April to write too.

I rummage in the bottom of the box and peek at the photograph that I found behind the settee two years ago. I think it's my dad. Mum's got a massive belly bump and a man's got his arm round her and on the back it says NYE 1967 – three months before I was born. The man's got bright blue eyes like me and he's very handsome. He's the only one of the dads that Mum's never spoke about. I asked about him once but I'd never ask again.

There's a card in the post for Alan. I say to Mum it would be nice if we gave him his cards at teatime but she glares at me and holds out her hand for the envelope. Her mouth goes twisted when she opens it and she stuffs it in her dressing gown pocket. Later, when she's got dressed, I sneak into her room and pick the dressing gown off the floor. The card's still in her pocket. It's a picture of Scooby-Doo and there's a badge with a 3 on it. Inside it's written *Happy Birthday Son Love Dad*. He was alright, Alan's dad. He bought me a brand new pogo stick for Christmas the year Alan was born. He used to visit quite a lot till he got a job in Scotland on an oil rig in the middle of the sea. It's a long time since he seen Alan now. My headache goes into my teeth and I swallow and shut my mouth tight.

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. Mr Scrutton's at the front door. My heart thumps louder and faster than the banging. Mum fiddles with her hair and blouse. April stuffs the last few bears into a box. I undo the bolts and the chain and turn the key. Mr Scrutton pushes past in a stink of aftershave, gold chains jangling. He carries two large boxes – our next job – and I hope it's not more bears.

'Good morning, Mrs Baxter. How are you today?'

'Very well thank you, Mr Scrutton.'

He puts the boxes on the floor. He has flakes of dandruff on the back of his overcoat. 'One hundred dresses. Hems and buttons. I'm on a tight schedule. I'm taking them to the market at Hackney Wick first thing in the morning. Everything finished?'

'Yes, Mr Scrutton.'

'Did you appreciate the quality of the bears, Mrs Baxter? Made in Great Britain. None of this foreign tat.'

'No, Mr Scrutton. I mean, yes, Mr Scrutton.'

'Eyes stuck on firmly? You wouldn't want to *bear* the responsibility of a child choking to death.' He laughs and his chins wobble.

'Of course not, Mr Scrutton.'

He fishes around in one of the boxes and pulls out a teddy. He tugs at an eye with his yellow fingers and I hold my breath ... Phew.

'All five hundred in the boxes?'

'Yes, Mr Scrutton,' says Mum.

April makes a noise, like an animal in pain. We turn and look at her. Her cheeks are bright pink circles, like Aunt Sally's off *Worzel Gummidge*.

'Every single one?' says Mr Scrutton.

April doesn't answer. Mr Scrutton stares at her. I glance at Mum. Surely April wouldn't nick nothing. Mum's always told us it's not worth it unless you rob a bank.

'Perhaps you should count them,' says Mr Scrutton. 'Empty the boxes and we'll count the bears back in.'

April's hands are shaking.

'Empty the boxes, please.'

Me and April tip the bears onto the settee. The budgies next door are going mental. The woman must be feeding them. *Cheep cheep cheep.* April starts counting but each time she loses her place Mr Scrutton tuts at her and makes her jump.

'Stop,' says Mum. I don't know if she's talking to April or her boss. 'April can't count that high. I'll do it.' But around three hundred she gets muddled as well.

'No rush,' says Mr Scrutton. He lights a fat cigar with a long match. He looks like he's smoking a shit.

'Where was I?' says Mum. 'I'm sorry. It's those bloody birds, I can't think straight.' She keeps on counting but when she gets to four hundred and ninety-seven she stops. Her eyes go red and wet and I hope that no tears squeeze out; the scar on her forehead goes pink and the little veins around her nose go purple. I hold my breath and shut my eyes.

'Four hundred and ninety-eight, four hundred and ninety-nine ...' says Mr Scrutton.

I open my eyes and breathe. The cigar smoke stings and stinks.

'So there is a bear missing,' he says. He looks at April, 'Do you want to tell me something?'

April starts to cry. 'It was a birthday present for Alan.'

'Is it my birthday?' says Alan.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Scrutton,’ says Mum. ‘I tell a lie. I remember now. I told April to take the bear. I didn’t think one would matter. It was a dud. It had an arm missing. You couldn’t have sold it.’

‘Where is the bear?’ says Mr Scrutton.

‘We threw it away.’

‘Your daughter said she took it for your son’s birthday. Why would you throw it away? What have you done with the stolen bear, Mrs Baxter?’

‘We threw it away, didn’t we, April?’

April stares at her feet.

‘Where did you put the bear, April?’ says Mum. April stands up slow, like Nan used to with her arthritis, and goes into the kitchen. Everyone follows. She climbs on a stool and carefully opens the cupboard door that hangs on one hinge and takes out the biscuit tin. She takes off the lid. A bear that’s got cream cracker crumbs round its mouth stares at us with creepy orange eyes.

‘Perhaps you’d like to count the arms?’ says Mr Scrutton. ‘I can see two.’

A bit of chocolatey sick gets into my mouth.

‘You’re a bunch of thieves and liars,’ says Mr Scrutton. ‘When I get back to the warehouse I may well telephone the police station.’

‘Nee-naw, nee-naw, nee-naw,’ shouts Alan.

‘You’re fired,’ says Mr Scrutton to Mum. ‘And you won’t be paid for the bears. Do the dresses. Six am sharp. I’ll bring your last pay packet.’

He brushes the biscuit crumbs off the teddy and puts it in the box. ‘I’ll show myself out,’ he says. I clench my teeth and squeeze my hands into fists. I wonder if Mark Taylor on the sixth floor really does have a gun.

Mum goes into her bedroom and slams the door. April goes into our bedroom and slams the door. ‘Nee-naw, nee-naw, nee-naw,’ says Alan, much more quiet. ‘Is it my birthday?’ I kiss the top of his head. There’s no chance of a nice tea now Mr Scrutton’s stealing all the money that we should of earned on the bears. He’s the one who’s actually a thief, not April, and I want to kill him. I go to the kitchen and take the breadknife out of the drawer to see what it feels like to get ready to do a murder. I want to kill him so bad but if I get caught I’ll get banged up in Holloway and then I’ll never get a good job and be able to move into a house that’s not got noises coming at me out of every direction.

I have to make Mr Scrutton have an accident, like what Mum had with me. If I can smash up the choose-what-floor control in the lift, when Mr Scrutton comes to collect his boxes in the morning he'll have to carry them down the stairs. I can put a not-finished portion of chips on a step so he'll slip on it and bash his head and his brains will splat out and if he's not already dead from that me and Mum and April and Alan can stamp on him and finish him off.

I take the breadknife with me as I can't think what else to use to wreck the control. When the lift arrives it's empty. I press the button to close the doors but Mrs Cooper from our corridor squeezes in; her fat bum gets trapped but she manages to wiggle it free.

'What in the good Lord's name are you doing with that knife?' she says.

'My little brother threw it out the window so I went to get it.'

'But you're on your way down.'

'I thought we were going up.'

'It's lucky it didn't kill someone.'

'Depends who.'

'That's a shocking thing to say. You take that knife straight back home, young lady.'

I don't dare break the lift now but I don't want to go back to the flat so I sit on the bottom step of the stairs up to make plans; the concrete's cold on my bum. I stare at the graffiti: GO HOME and RENT REVOLT and EAT THE RICH and I ♥ KENNY P with S written after the KENNY and ENIS written after the P.

A page from *The Sun* blows along the walkway and flaps round my legs. I stare at the huge pair of tits and wonder if mine will grow that big. A leaflet, with a muddy footprint stamped across the back, flips over in the wind. It's a photograph of Maggie Thatcher and says *Don't just hope for a better life. Vote for one.* Mum won't vote. I know she won't. Perhaps she'll just hope. Or perhaps she's given up on hoping too. I look at the two women and wonder if it would be better to be a Page 3 girl or a prime minister. Perhaps I could be both.

I pick up a ring pull and scratch a skull and crossbones into the flaking paint on the wall and write SCRUTTON but it looks a bit lame. I pick up the knife and think of what weapons we have in the flat. I could drop the sewing machine from the balcony onto Mr Scrutton's head or I could make a bomb and put it under his fancy motor like what the IRA

do. I once heard Mark Taylor telling someone how to make a bomb from a milk bottle. I wish I'd concentrated more like what they tell me to do at school.

We have bread, marge and a can of spaghetti hoops for dinner. Mum says she ain't hungry but that's because there's only three tiny slices of Nimble bread left. She starts pinning dresses and when April's finished eating she takes over the pinning and Mum sits at the sewing machine. *Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch.* I plug the iron back in.

'Mum, I wanna go swings,' says Alan.

'We've got a job to finish.'

'Swings!'

'Don't start.'

'I wanna go outside.'

'Don't be stupid. I can't mind you from up here.'

'I'll take him,' says April.

'I can't do a hundred dresses on my own.'

'All we ever do is work,' says April. 'Work and go to school. It's not fair!'

'You've got a bloody cheek,' says Mum. 'I haven't heard you apologise yet. Do you realise the trouble you've caused?'

'I ain't done nothing. Get a proper job. It's your fault we're poor and have to buy our clothes at jumbles sales and ain't got enough food. I had to nick a bear just so's Alan would get a present.'

Mum ignores her and sews faster. *Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ...*

'We're children. We shouldn't have to work. It's against the law!'

'Shut your mouth, April,' I say. 'You know Mum can't go out.'

Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ...

'Swiiiings!' says Alan.

'No!' says Mum.

Alan's face scrunches up and his bottom lip sticks out and he starts to cry. A dark patch spreads across the front of his trousers. I swear he does it on purpose. Pee dribbles onto the old army blanket we use for a rug.

'For fuck's sake,' says Mum.

I pick Alan up and take him to the bathroom. I change him into clean pants and a pair of not-too-dirty trousers while Mum and April scream at each other.

‘I hate you, weirdo!’ shouts April. The front door slams. *Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch* ... Mum sews quicker and quicker. Alan charges back into the lounge. ‘Swiiiiings!’

‘Take him out,’ says Mum. Her voice is like it’s been turned down, all quiet over the sewing machine and the budgies who sound like they’re fighting too.

‘Yeah!’ says Alan.

‘What about the ironing?’ I say. ‘Where’s April gone? She’s got dresses to pin.’

‘I’ll do them,’ says Mum.

‘Mr Scrutton will go mental if they’re not finished. He might not pay us anything.’

Mum takes her foot off the pedal. ‘Here,’ she says and hands me a one pound note.

‘Where did you get that?’

‘Alan’s dad sent it with the card. Buy a cake. And I need some fags. Use the rest to get something for tea.’

April’s in the playground, watching the boys doing wheelies. I plonk Alan on the ground, swing April round by the shoulders and slap her face. ‘You’re a little bitch,’ I say. ‘You know Mum’s not well. If I was her I’d put you in a children’s home.’

‘Bitch,’ says Alan.

‘Catfight!’ yells one of the boys.

But April won’t fight back. She wants to cry but she won’t, she just won’t talk to me for a week.

‘Alan’s dad sent a birthday card with a pound in it,’ I say. ‘Come on. We’re going to get some food.’

We trudge to the row of shops on the edge of the estate. They’re all boarded up except Mr Parker’s grocery store and the Chinese and one that’s become some hippy-dippy church where they play the recorder.

The bell on the door chimes when we open it. The shop smells of mouse pee.

‘Cos it’s your birthday, you’re allowed to choose a cake,’ I say to Alan.

‘Is it my birthday?’ he says.

‘Yes,’ says April. She touches the finger marks on her cheek. ‘You’re three years old. We made you a card and we’re going to have your favourite things for tea.’

I spot a half-price Battenberg cake that’s after its sell-by date. ‘Alan, what about this one? You love marzipan.’

We work out that leaves enough for Mum's fags, two pounds of potatoes and a can of beans but when we get to the till we're five and a half pence out – April must of weighed the potatoes wrong. When I tell Mr Parker it's Alan's birthday he lets us off.

I find a plate on top of the cupboard and wipe the dust off with my sleeve. I unwrap the Battenberg, make four beakers of weak squash and take everything through to the lounge. April's not talking to me or to Mum and Mum's not talking at all. There's a dark patch of pee on the blanket. The fat bluebottle's floating in Mum's cold cup of tea. We give Alan his cards. He takes my one first. 'Bird!' he says and pulls off the feathers. He doesn't even look inside. 'Scooby doggy!' he says at his dad's card. April pins the badge to his jumper and he looks proud. I sing *Happy Birthday* as I cut the cake. April doesn't join in until I give her a nudge and then she sings the *squashed tomatoes and poo* version that makes Alan giggle. Mum moves her lips in time to the words. Alan eats Mum's cake as well as his own and April's marzipan; ten minutes later he's running around like a maniac.

'The three of you should go out and play,' says Mum. 'Give me some peace.'

'Yeah!' says Alan.

I can't be bothered to go out and from the scowl on April's face neither can she but we're not going to risk pissing Mum off again. When we get downstairs, April sees her coloured friend, Lorraine, and chats to her as she pushes Alan in a swing. I sit on a wall and chew the skin round my nails as I watch a group of girls playing clapping games. *I went to a Chinese restaurant, to buy a loaf of bread bread bread* ... The sky's so grey it's already getting dark and the lights in the tower are switching on one by one. On the lower balconies you can see swirly smoke and the red-tipped ends of fags. The smells of cooking make me starving: burgers and curry and spag bol and stew. Different songs and music on the radio blare out of windows and muddle with each other and the clapping songs.

I look up to where I think our balcony is. It's hard to tell when your head's tipped back and the flat's in a middle of a row and three floors from the top. I count along but I get it wrong because the one that I think's ours has got someone leaning over the rail. I count again. And again. My heart thumps. Mum? Mum's never been on the balcony that I can remember, not in all my life; she's so scared of heights she won't even look out the windows. I run into the lobby and race up the stairwell as quick as I can but I have to keep

stopping every few flights to catch my breath and my legs seem slow like when they don't work in nightmares.

The balcony doors are open. 'Mum?' I say. I'm panting so much I can hardly speak. 'Mum?' She turns. She looks old, like Nan did before she died.

'Mum? Are you okay? Why are you out here? You scared me.'

She strikes a match and lights a fag.

'It will be alright, Mum. You'll get another job.'

She doesn't answer. She stares at the girls chanting in the playground.

When Susie was a teenager she said Ma, Ma, I lost my bra, I left my knickers in my boyfriend's car.

Mum leans further over the concrete window box. She pulls a face and rubs at her back.

'Alan liked his cake,' I say. 'So did I. It was yummy.'

'Good of his dad to remember his birthday.'

'Yeah.'

'He's the only dad who does.' She scratches at a nail and flakes of red varnish drop into the window box. The mud is dry and cracked. It's covered in fag stubs, dropped from the flat upstairs, and budgies' feathers. 'I planted bulbs when I was expecting you,' she says. 'Daffs. Didn't think they'd grow but they were blooming when I bought you home.'

'We could plant some bulbs.'

'What's the point?'

'They'd look pretty,' I say. But Mum's right. It's like voting. How would daffodils make things better?

'Sorry I never talk about your dad,' she says.

'Doesn't matter.'

'I've been thinking … I should tell you … It's difficult to find a time.'

'Yeah.' I get a sick feeling in my belly.

The girls chant louder ... *my boyfriend gave me a pear, my boyfriend gave me a kiss on the lips and threw me down the stairs.*

Mum laughs. 'Did you hear that?'

'What?'

' ... my boyfriend gave me a kiss on the lips and threw me down the stairs.' Don't you ever let anyone treat you like that.'

‘Course I won’t.’

‘That’s what *I* said.’

‘What you on about?’

Mum stares across the grubby city: at the blocks of flats that grow higher every day, the cranes that Alan thinks are dinosaurs, the gasworks and the roadworks, boys playing football in the floodlit cage, the fly-tipped furniture sticking out of the dark canal like a little house on the water.

‘You know those chips?’ says Mum.

‘What chips?’

‘The ones I slipped on.’

‘Yeah.’

‘There weren’t any chips.’

Across the way, the wrecking ball swings into a row of houses: once, two times, three times ...

Mum’s mouth does the twisted thing. ‘But I don’t want you to think that … ’

‘No.’ I say. ‘No, I don’t.’

The insides of the houses open up and the wallpapers look like giant patchwork quilts until everything magics into a cloud of dust that’s white against the grey sky. Through the dust I see the man with the bright blue eyes.

I send April and Alan to bed early and help Mum with the dresses till I start making mistakes. When I tiptoe into the bedroom I lie down next to April. I touch her cheek; it’s still hot and I hear the noise of the slap. Alan snores. Mum sews. *Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch* ... Gunfire explodes on a TV. A chair scrapes across the floor upstairs. *Cheep cheep cheep*. A woman laughs. A baby cries. The man next door pees like he’s never going to stop. A drunk shouts in the stairwell: *The devil’s fucking done me over!* and makes my heart beat fast. I put my fingers in my ears. The glowy-green hands of the clock creep round.

I open the door just a crack to let some light in. I get my special-things box from under the bed and take out the photograph. I tear it in half, very slow and careful so as not to make a noise. And half again. And half again.

‘I couldn’t believe my eyes yesterday. The lift doors opened and hundreds of bears tumbled out!’
‘Bears?’
‘Yes, teddy bears. This man had a huge cardboard box and the bottom had fell out. The floor was wet and muddy because it had been raining all day. He was effing and blinding like there was no tomorrow. I told him there was no need for that sort of language and he told me to eff off! Nasty piece of work. Left him and his bears to it.’

‘Mum, there’s a teddy bear on the floor.’
‘It’s dirty, don’t touch it.’
‘How do teddy bears go on holiday?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘By bear-o-plane!’
‘What a stupid joke.’
‘I wasn’t telling it to you I was telling it to Mum.’
‘I had to have it in my ears and it was stupid.’
‘Give it a break, boys.’
‘It wasn’t stupid.’
‘I’ve got a better joke.’
‘What?’
‘What’s a bear’s favourite drink?’
‘Dunno.’
‘Coca-Koala!’
‘That’s the most stupidest spasticest joke I’ve ever heard in my whole life that’s ever been told in the galaxy, solar system universe.’
‘That’s not even the right way round, div!’
‘Jesus Christ, can you two just give it a break?’

‘Alright, darling?’
‘Yes, thanks.’
‘No need to stand over there. I’m not going to bite.’
‘No.’
‘Schoolgirls didn’t get away with skirts like that when I was a lad. Not that I’m complaining. Nice legs ... I said, nice legs.’
‘Thanks.’
‘How old are you.’
‘Fourteen.’
‘Very nice. You could pass for twenty. Fancy a drink some time?’
‘No, thank you … you’re squashing me.’
‘Just warming you up a bit. You’re shivering. Must be cold in those skimpy clothes. Got any panties on under that skirt? Ow! Arrrrgh! Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck!’

‘You alright, Mr Hooker?’
‘Fine. Arrggh. Just a bit of cramp.’

Flat 47 – The Craven

Mum and I do our washing once a fortnight, on a Tuesday morning. Mum wakes me up at six thirty so we can bagsy two of the big machines – one for darks and one for lights; colours bleed, she says. She says if we could afford it she'd sort the washing into darks, lights and whites because even the lights make the whites go grey. We only use the tumble dryer on special occasions because Mum says it eats money but we must always use the spin dryer as it's a false economy not to.

I know Paulette from the launderette. Sounds like a song title: Paulette from the launderette. A love song. Her family moved here a couple of months ago and Paulette does the washing on a Tuesday too although her mum trusts her to do it on her own; she's a year older than me. We've not spoken a lot but we've spoken a bit. When I talk to her my cheeks burn, I say dumb things and I sound like a spastic. But I did make her laugh last week and I've played that laugh a hundred times over.

The kids hang out in the car park after school. It's been a warm, sticky day – there was a scuffle outside the science block at dinner time. The sky's a smoggy orange and the light's fading. It's cooler now it's clouded over but there's still no wind: usually it swirls between the towers but when I scrunch up my crisp packet and drop it on the ground it doesn't budge. Ian Taylor and his mates are choosing teams for Gang Stalking. Ian's got his sleeves rolled up and a scowl on his face. I wish I could get home without coming through the carpark. Ian sorts us into teams of darkies and whites – sometimes it's faggots or slags or gyppos. Passers-by, in pinstriped suits or blue overalls, taking a short cut on their way home from work, glance across and hurry along. It's pretty obvious what Ian's doing. Some of the kids are getting upset but no one messes with Ian Taylor; rumour has it it was him killed a black man on a bike when he threw a brick off the canal bridge a couple of years back. He never got done for it though.

Paulette appears from behind the parked cars on her way home from school. She seems to glide rather than walk, head held high, looking straight ahead, so skinny that if it was windy I swear she'd blow over.

'Hey, you!' Ian shouts.

She ignores him. Ian's brother, Mark, blocks her path.

'Do you get what we're doing here?' Ian asks. 'Which group you gonna be in?'

‘I’ve got to get home,’ says Paulette. She walks on but Ian pulls her back. ‘You don’t fit in either group. There ain’t one for half-castes so I can rub your face in the dirt or wash it in the canal. Up to you.’

A murmur goes around the groups. A little girl starts to cry and her older sister pulls her close. Paulette’s eyes flick round and catch mine. I look away. Everyone looks away. At their bitten nails. At their scuffed shoes. I stare at the crisp wrapper: Smokey Bacon Flavour. Smokey Bacon Flavour. Smokey Bacon Flavour.

‘Which one you gonna choose?’ says Ian.

‘Neither,’ says Paulette.

‘That’s not a choice.’

‘No, but this is!’ She gobs in Ian’s face, a big gob that just misses his eye. Everyone gasps. Ian wipes his cheek. ‘Fucking black bitch,’ he says. ‘White girls don’t act like that. It’s true what the papers say, you lot swamping us with your different cultures.’

‘Black now, am I?’ Paulette yells. ‘There’s your answer then!’ She bolts but Ian chases her, grabs her, shakes her. I fizz up inside. He could snap her in two. He shoves her and she flies backwards and lands with a thump on a scabby patch of grass. Ian lurches towards her.

‘For fuck’s sake, stop it! She’s a girl!’ Ben Bradley swings Ian round by the shoulders but Ian punches him and sends him reeling. Then Ian drops to his knees, yanks Paulette’s head by her braids and grinds her face into the ground – dirt, dog shit, daisies. ‘Like you could ever be white,’ he hisses. He stands and kicks her in the ribs. Paulette curls into a ball. Ian walks back to the front of the groups and shouts out instructions for the game.

Ben sits up. I try to catch his eye but he puts his head between his knees. I half want to check he’s alright and half want to punch him for having the balls to stand up to Ian. And if I’m going to help anyone it should be Paulette. But I do nothing. When Paulette finally gets up she wobbles like a newborn calf.

Ian looks across at her, ‘Come and join the darkies, if you dare.’

Paulette wipes the dirt off her face with her sleeve. She picks up her school bag, which has fallen open, a doodle-covered exercise book and her gym kit which is strewn across the ground. Blood from her nose drips down the front of her white shirt. She holds her head up as she limps towards the entrance of the tower block. Ian starts chanting: *Paulette ain’t white, she ain’t that light. Paulette ain’t black, she’s Caramac*. The darkies

and us whites join in, voices quiet and shaky at first but then louder and stronger. I mouth the words, too cowardly to keep my lips still in case Ian notices. Most of the kids will feel sorry for Paulette though not a soul, except Ben, sorry enough – or is it brave enough, or stupid enough – to do anything. As everyone watches her walk through the doors I sneak off and crouch behind a van. Ian and his mates lead the way out of the carpark and the kids follow them towards the canal.

I walk to the spot where Ian shoved Paulette onto the ground. I pick up a yellow wooden bead that came out of her hair. I roll it between my thumb and forefinger and put it in my pocket. I wish it had been me and not Ben who tried to stop Ian. *Long streak of piss* Ben gets called. I'm stockier; I might have had more chance of pulling Ian off. I remember Paulette's eyes catching mine. Smokey bacon puke fills my mouth.

Tea's ready when I get in. The smell makes me want to spew again. I push the fish fingers round my plate.

'You're quiet,' says Mum. 'What's up?'

'Nothing. I'm just tired.'

'Get some food inside you.'

'I'm not hungry ... Mum, if someone you liked needed help but you knew that if you helped them someone else would hurt you, what would you do?'

'You mean what should *you* do?' Mum looks down at her nails. Long, pink and glossy. A friend of hers did them at the weekend. 'I can't answer that because I wouldn't ever want you to do anything that meant you got hurt. But that doesn't mean that not helping's the right thing to do.'

My head pounds. 'I think I'll go to my room,' I say. 'Lie down for a bit.'

'You were going to help me prepare for tomorrow. But don't worry, if you're tired.'

Shit. I'd forgotten. Mum's got an interview for the receptionist job at Smith's Solutions, the pest control place. She's good on the phone and can sound quite posh when she needs to. Hopefully she's in with a chance this time. 'Come on then,' I say. 'What do you want to do?'

Mum smiles. 'Fab, thanks. I'll make us a cup of tea and then we'll get started.'

We practise customer complaints. Mum's the receptionist. I'm the telephone and a posh customer. 'Ring ring, ring ring.'

‘Good morning, Smith’s Solutions, Elaine speaking, how can I help you?’

‘Morning. I had Smith’s round last week – to do a cockroach treatment – but I woke up this morning and the house is crawling with them again.’

‘Oh, I do apologise,’ says Mum. ‘How awful for you. I …’ She gets the giggles. ‘Sorry, let me start again,’ she says, and clears her throat. But she can’t stop laughing so we use the sample interview questions that the dole office gave her instead.

‘So, Mrs Marshall,’ I say. ‘What’s your greatest weakness?’

‘Where do I start? Fags, Cherry B and lemonade, chicken tikka masala ... ’

‘Mum!’

‘Blue-eyed bastards, Kay’s Catalogue, *Crossroads* ... ’

‘Mum, do it properly! Half the block’s after this job.’

‘Sorry. Er, my greatest weakness. I’m a perfectionist.’

‘That’s one way of looking at it.’

‘Now who’s not doing it properly? Where was I? I’m a perfectionist. But I still get things done on time. No, not ‘done on time’. I always meet deadlines. That’s what they like to hear. Use the lingo. I *always* meet deadlines.’

I think Mum would really like a job. She was different before she lost her job. Different happier.

I lie awake most of the night worrying about Paulette. When I finally get to sleep I dream that Ian breaks into her flat and kills her. Sod’s law Mum wakes me for the launderette even earlier than usual as she needs her fancy skirt and blouse washed, dried and ironed in time for her interview. The council used to lock the launderette at night but now they can’t afford to pay someone to do it so we can get there as early as Mum likes, worse luck.

Before we leave, Mum looks all over the flat for dirty washing because she hates it if she finds a bit under the bed or behind the settee afterwards. Grown-ups are crazy. How could you get pissed off about an un-washed sock when your boyfriend’s legged it, you ain’t got a job and you run out of food the day before the dole’s due. Even our fifty pound sack of potatoes, bought from a barrow on Ridley Road and pushed home in a pram, ran out last week. I scrabbled in the bottom of the sack and pulled out a handful of potatoes and a load of mud. ‘I wish Kay’s Catalogue did food,’ said Mum. She said it would be a waste to peel the potatoes so we scrubbed them and boiled them in their skins. We ate them hot with marge and salt, quite tasty but we were still hungry after so I searched in the

cupboard: a pot of white pepper never opened, half a jar of mouldy mint sauce and six tins of pilchards left by the people who lived here before; me and Mum hate pilchards but Mum says to keep them on account of the Cold War. I stood on a chair to check I'd not missed anything and spotted a packet of strawberries-and-cream Angel Delight lying flat on the top shelf! Mum whisked the powder up with water; it didn't set very well but it tasted good.

There's a poster in the launderette: *Laundry today or naked tomorrow*. Laundry today and naked today more like; Mum wears her dressing gown with nothing underneath so she can get as many clothes in the wash as possible. The gown's a bit see-through, especially under the fluorescent lights, and there's a button come off where her tits are; she never misses a chance to get her boobs out. I wear boxers that can pass for shorts, and a vest. In winter I wear my scratchy coat on top. The launderette's only two floors down so it's not worth waiting for the lift but the stairwell's freezing. I take my coat off as soon as I get inside the laundry because it's always warm. The launderette's the nicest smelling bit of the tower. The bin shed smells of shitty nappies and the rubbish chute smells of dead things (rats and mice, I hope) and the stairwell smells of beer and the lifts smell of bleach if they've been cleaned or piss and sick if they haven't. But the launderette smells of soap powder. When we take our dirty clothes out of the sacks – even my cheesy socks and the fishy tabard Mum wears when she gets a cash-in-hand shift at the chippie – all you can smell is soap powder.

The launderette's empty but a couple of the small machines are already taken. Mum selects two large machines and looks inside, checks for *the red sock* that will dye our clothes pink, like the robes the Hare Krishnas wear as they chant down Oxford Street handing out rice. And then she checks again. She has never found *the red sock* – or any other colour sock for that matter – but that doesn't stop her checking. I help her pull the laundry from the bags into the machines as she inspects every pocket. She clicks the doors shut, chooses the cycles – hot for lights, warm for darks – pours powder into the compartments and slides in the coin trays. Then she goes home to bed. I have to stay to mind the clothes because if I don't they'll get nicked. Or Mum thinks they'll get nicked anyway.

The hum of the machines and the heat usually make me sleepy. I'll sometimes nod off, only waking up when a wash goes onto the spin cycle but this morning I keep glancing at the door as I wait for Paulette. I flick through last week's Gazette and a *Woman's Own*

with recipes torn out and puzzles half-filled in in small OAP writing. The washing churns: clockwise, anticlockwise, clockwise, anticlockwise. The second machine chases the first: click to wash, click to wash. The water level rises. The drum fills with suds.

I have jobs to do while I'm at the laundry. 'Might as well, while you're waiting,' Mum always says. Like I couldn't read the paper or do my homework. I glance at the clock; it's still ten minutes till Paulette usually comes in. I rummage through the bin – overflowing with soap powder boxes and sweet wrappers and cans – and pull out the boxes; I rip them open because there's often powder stuck to the bottom. I find a lump of Daz, a bit of Tide, a bit of Surf and a tiny bit of Persil. I scrape out the powder and put it in an empty Stork tub; there's enough for a wash so Mum will be pleased. The Buddy Holly ad pops into my head and I sing out loud, *Every day shines a little brighter, Persil aut-o-matic washes whiter* but then I remember Ian Taylor.

I check for coins under the machines. I take a ruler with me and slide it underneath. I find tumble dryer fluff and ring pulls and bus tickets and last week I found a porno mag, *Fat and Forty!* The old woman on the cover had humungous tits and rolls of belly flab which hung over her lady bits. I was about to take a peek when Mrs Benson, who's nearly as fat as the woman on the cover, came in. I rammed the magazine as far under a machine as it would go but I can still see the edge poking out. I find the odd copper and once I found fifty pence. Fifty pence! I wasn't about to give that to Mum but I went red as ketchup when she asked me if I'd found anything. She looked in my coat pockets and was threatening to pull my boxers down when I kicked off my shoe and the coin rolled out.

Paulette's late now. I'm scared that she won't come at all. I hope she didn't bang her head when Ian shoved her on the ground. The first wash has already clicked to rinse when she finally arrives. She doesn't even look at me. She drags two black sacks along the floor. She smells of Germolene – like hospitals and root beer. She puts on the washes and sits at the far end of the bench. She's wearing flared jeans and a long-sleeved top with *Feelin' Fine* printed on it.

'Alright,' she says.

'Hi.' I study her through narrowed eyes as though that will make it easier to look at her. Her cheek's bruised and grazed. Her nose is cut and swollen. Her lip's split. She's tried to cover up the bruises with makeup that's too light for her skin. I wipe my forehead; the red line on the thermometer on the wall has already hit seventy. The clock above the door ticks loud and slow over the thump and swish and whoosh of the machines.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t do anything to stop Ian,’ I say, in my head.

In my head, Paulette replies: ‘Nothing you could have done. Ian Taylor, his brother, his mates and twenty kids. Would have been suicide. You did the right thing to stay out of it.’

‘How was your evening?’ Paulette asks.

‘Er, it was okay. My mum’s got an interview this afternoon. I was helping her prepare. Er … ’ I wipe away the sweat that rolls down the side of my nose. ‘It’s hot in here.’

‘Yeah.’

The grey circle of sweat on my vest, where the cotton is clinging to my belly, is growing. I don’t even have a belly.

‘How bad does my face look?’ says Paulette.

Shit. How the hell do I answer that? Like the multiple choice in our CSE mocks? A) *Very bad*? B) *Bad*? C) *Neither bad nor good*? D) *Good*? E) *So good that you’d never even know you’d been beaten up by a racialist bastard while I stood and watched and now I feel so* A) *‘Very bad’ that I want to climb, heavily soiled, into one of the machines, shut the door and drown myself in a hot wash.*

‘What about my legs?’ She stands up, kicks off her flip flops and slowly unbuttons her jeans. They slip from her long skinny legs onto the floor and she steps out of them. I flinch. Her thighs and calves are covered in dark bruises and pink smears of Germolene. She puts her hands on her hips and one leg in front of the other and poses like a model. She looks mean and scary – and beautiful. My dick stirs in my boxers. I leap up, kneel in front of a washing machine and peer into the window.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ says Paulette.

‘Just checking everything’s okay.’

‘Why wouldn’t it be? What about my arms?’ I twist my head round. She winces as she wriggles her top up and yelps as she pulls it over her head.

I swallow. Panic over. I return to the bench.

‘The worst thing is that I thought you liked me,’ she says. She is standing in front of me in her bra and knickers. Paulette Williams is standing in front of me in her bra and knickers.

Not again. ‘I did. I do.’

‘Not as much as Ben Bradley does.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘He knocked on our door last night. To see if I was okay. Dad thanked him and said that he was *a charming young man*.’

‘Oh.’ My dick shrivels up completely.

‘He’s the first person to stand up for me, other than my family.’

‘Didn’t do no good though, did it?’

‘No, but he tried, which is more than you did. Some people on the estate are nice. Some are ignorant. Some are plain nasty. But the nasty ones make the most noise: the flags, the posters, the racist graffiti everywhere you look. We find *Go Home* leaflets on our *Welcome Home* doormat.’ Her voice breaks. ‘The problem is that the nice people don’t make any noise at all.’

I think she might cry.

‘A few months ago my sister asked me what *Keep Britain White* meant. It was after the cold spell. I told her that the snow makes the city look so beautiful that some people don’t want it to melt. You can believe that when you’re six years old. And it’s your big sister telling you.’

I can’t look at her any more. There are a lot of RULES in the launderette: DO NOT OVERLOAD DO NOT OVERSOAP NO DYEING NO BENT COINS DO NOT REMOVE BASKETS. I wish there were more. I stare at the fag ends in the ashtray. I stare at the vandalised soap dispenser. You used to be able to buy a cup of soap for two pence. I wish I could buy a cup now. I wish …

‘What was your first thought when you met me?’ Paulette asks.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Half-caste? Coffee-coloured?’

‘I thought you were cute. I didn’t think what colour you were.’

‘What did you think when you saw what Ian had done?’

‘Just now? Awful. Guilty. Cowardly. Like a complete and utter arse.’

The mean look on her face gets a bit less mean. I decide to chance my luck. ‘And then I wondered why you bother wearing a bra.’ I regret saying it the second it comes out of my mouth.

She narrows her eyes and wrinkles up her nose. ‘Ow, that hurt. Literally.’

‘Sorry, stupid joke. I thought that you look more like a girl from the TV than a tower block.’

‘What, Corrie?’

‘Charlie’s Angels.’

Paulette smiles. A sort of smile anyway. Sort of perhaps because it hurts to smile or perhaps because she hates me. The first machine clicks from rinse to spin. She picks at a bit of scab on her knee. ‘Ow,’ she says. A drop of blood trickles down her shin. ‘Got a tissue?’ she says. I shake my head. The second machine clicks from rinse to spin. Paulette uncrosses her legs and I catch a glimpse of her knickers. I drop my eyes and stare at her feet. Her toenails are painted red, or were, most of the varnish has flaked off. She uses her big toe to trace patterns in the soap powder and fag ash on the lino. It looks like the dusting of snow we had in November, before the hard stuff came; tiny blue and green flecks sparkle in the fluorescent light.

‘Have you been painting your nails?’ Paulette asks.

‘Course not, why?’

‘Looks like you’ve had a French manicure, white tips like that.’

I examine my fingers and laugh. My nails are full of soap powder.

‘You’re dripping with sweat,’ says Paulette. ‘Why don’t you take your clothes off?’

‘No way, Jose.’

Mrs Carter from our corridor comes in with a shopping trolley full of washing. She nods at me and does a double take when she sees Paulette. ‘Someone nicked your clothes?’ she asks. ‘You can’t leave nothing in here. I learnt that the hard way.’

‘I’m just hot.’

‘Normal where you come from, is it?’

‘Is what normal?’

‘To wander round starkers.’

‘No, it’s not normal. Where do you think I’m from?’

‘That’s a tricky one. Africa? Spain?’

‘Spain?’ Paulette laughs. ‘I wish. I’m from Leeds.’

Mrs Carter busies herself with her sheets and pillowcases. ‘How did you hurt yourself, love?’

‘I didn’t. Someone hurt me.’

‘Your dad?’

Paulette rolls her eyes. ‘No. Not my dad.’

‘I’ll let you have some arnica if you pop in later. Flat 27.’

‘Thanks, but Mum gave me some this morning.’ She pulls on her jeans and her top and slips her feet into her flip flops. She sits on the bench, folds her arms, crosses her legs.

Mrs Carter slides in her coins and the machine starts. I glare at her as she plonks her fat arse on the bench, in between me and Paulette. She pushes her glasses up her nose, lights a fag and opens a Mills and Boon called *Choose the One You’ll Marry*.

Click to rinse, click to rinse, click to spin, click to spin, click to end, click to end. I pull the clothes into plastic baskets the colour of puke and carry them to the spin dryer. I load it as evenly as possible but it goes off balance and vibrates like a pneumatic drill. When the clothes are spun I put them in the black sacks. Mum should be back by now; she’s got the timing down to a tee so she must have fallen asleep. She won’t want me to leave before she’s checked the machines: turned the drums round and round, in case a bra or stocking’s stuck to the top. Round again, a final check. One more time, you never know. Then the spin dryer. Head right inside, like she’s going to dive in. Like I’ve got all day.

I squeeze in between Paulette and Mrs Carter.

‘What you doing at the weekend?’ Paulette asks.

My hearts beats fast. ‘Me?’ I squeak. ‘Nothing. You?’

‘Ben Bradley’s taking me to the pictures.’

I stare at the machines. The washing goes round and round.

Don't choose

Tor(y)ment

Smash Tory Sc

'That graffiti's still wet.'

'They must of ran out of paint, or someone got in the lift. Look, there's the can. I wonder if there's any left.'

'Fuck, watch where you're sprayin it!'

'What shall we write? What d'you think *Tory Sc* was gonna be?'

'Dunno. Tory Scum?'

'Scams?'

'Scabs?'

'Scat?'

'Scots?'

'Scag?'

'Scanks?'

'Duh, skank's a k.'

'Scuzz then?'

'Scrotums?'

'Ha ha ha.'

Smash Tory

Scrotums

'That was such a good film.'
'You liked it?'
'Yeah, it was fab.'
'I was worried it was going to be a bit of a boy film.'
'What's 'boy' about a voyage to Mars? I'd go to space if I got the chance. Better than living here. The aliens might not be so racist!'
'True.'
'The only bit I didn't like was when Brubaker ate the snake. Gross!'
'It's girly to be scared of snakes!'
'I'm not scared of snakes! I just wouldn't want to eat one!'
'You've got popcorn in your hair. Come here.

…

Sorry, that just sort of happened.'
'Don't apologise. It was nice. Are you going to walk me to my front door?'
'Course.'
'Do you wanna go and see something next week?'
'Yeah. That'd be great.'
'The Muppet Movie's out soon.'
'No bloody way!'
'Not even with me?'
'Well … Maybe with you.'

ur2good2b4got10

Flat 4 – The Voter

I turn eighteen tomorrow, Election Day, and I get to vote for the first time. I've watched the party broadcasts on TV and read the leaflets pushed through the letterbox: *The Labour Way is the Better Way* and *Labour Isn't Working.* Mum's Labour through and through, 'What use is the bloody right to buy when you've got no money? And like we'd want to buy this flat anyway.' But she's as sick of the strikes as anyone and every time she comes back from the shops she moans about the prices, 'Milk will be fifteen pence before the end of the year. It would be cheaper to keep a bloody cow.'

We'll get up early tomorrow. I'll open my cards and my present from Mum. I'll wear the purple polo neck sweater I bought in a jumble sale last week and the amber bracelet my auntie gave me. Mum's shift – cleaning at my old school – starts at seven but we'll meet for breakfast in the greasy spoon when she's finished, treat ourselves to a full English, extra toast. Mum'll eat my baked beans. I'll eat her fried egg.

While Mum's at work I'm going to vote with our neighbour, Mrs Turner; the polling station's in the church hall on the edge of the estate but it will take us a while to get there if her knees are bad.

'Your first vote, my last,' she said to me.

'You don't know that,' I replied. Even though she's ninety-seven it's not impossible she'll last until the next election. 'I want an invite to your hundredth birthday party, don't forget.'

I could so easily not have been voting tomorrow. A week after I was born, a doctor told my parents that they could leave me in the hospital and I'd pass away. My father said that given what he'd just seen he thought that might be best for everyone. Mum said, 'Not a chance. Not a bloody chance.'

The day before my sixteenth birthday – not so sweet sixteen, it's tough out there, but never been kissed – Mum told me what happened when I was born. I'd been on at her for years about trying to find my father and she thought I was old enough to know the full story as she put it. She told me the day before my birthday because sixteen was an important one and she didn't want to spoil it, but we both woke up the next morning with hair matted to our faces and puffy eyelids and mascara smeared down our cheeks. I didn't know the full story but I have known since I was five that I have a large head, three fingers on one stump

of a hand, two on the other, and no legs because when I was a blob in her belly a doctor gave Mum Thalidomide for morning sickness. Mum blames herself because she *took* Thalidomide, 'It was me who swallowed the pills,' she says. My view's that she was *given* it by a doctor. *Trust me, I'm a doctor*. Isn't that what they say? A posh Harley Street doctor paid for by my father: name on a brass plate, white pillars and a black front door. They don't come much better than that, do they?

My father was a poet. Mum was a cleaner. My father came from Hampstead. Mum came from a village on the Norfolk coast. My father's family owned a cottage in Mum's village. She was paid to clean the cottage once a week even though it was empty a lot of the year. She wiped seagull shit and spray off the windows and dusted cobwebs from the ceilings. If the family was expected she made up the beds with candy striped cotton sheets and patchwork quilts. She opened the shutters and swept up the dead wasps and flies that fell onto the cold stone floors. When my father stayed in the cottage for a month one summer – to finish writing his first collection – Mum got pregnant. Her family were horrified. His family never knew. Her mother, who I've never called Nan, told Mum she'd have to get rid of it and that she knew someone in King's Lynn. Mum packed two battered red suitcases, one large and one small, and came to London. She rang the bell of my father's tiny flat in Hampstead. He opened the door and, after a few minutes on the doorstep, let her in.

This tower block was completed in 1961, the year I was born, the year that Thalidomide was banned in the UK; I guess we've both got our defects. Me and Mum are on the ground floor. We don't have the views across London – we can see the bin store, the car park and the playground – but if there was a fire we'd be the first to get out. There's bars on our windows to stop burglars and balls. There's a NO BALL GAMES sign screwed to our outside wall so if a ball's going to be kicked anywhere it's there and the thud, thud, thud gets on our nerves. Mum would like to live higher up but the lift's sometimes broken and they say that on a windy day water slops in the toilets and ornaments fall off shelves and you've got noise coming at you from flats in every direction. There's no one underneath us so we can stomp around, well Mum can, and does when she's cross or upset. And our neighbours on this floor are peaceful – even less mobile than me: two widows each living alone, biding time, waiting to join *my Fred, my Jack*. You can hear what they're watching on TV. They go to bed early and get up late. And there's Mrs Ward further down the

corridor. Her husband was a bastard, used to beat her and shout at the poor little twins. But he walked, or she threw him out; we haven't seen him for months. They all look so much happier.

Mrs Turner, Ada, is our oldest neighbour. Her crisscrossed skin clings to her cheekbones and she rubs circles round her arthritic knees. Her nephew takes her to the hairdresser for a wash and blow dry on a Tuesday. She comes home, clutching his arm, thin white hair puffed up like candyfloss; for a day or two her pink freckled scalp and hearing aids are hidden. Ada likes to talk; her family's lived in the borough for centuries and her memory's still sharp and filled with tales of relatives long gone. She loves these flats. She's been here from the start, when the concrete was so white that it dazzled in the sun and the floors in the corridors gleamed. I have a cup of tea with her every Wednesday. I remember to comment on her hairdo.

I've got an interview at one o'clock today, for the receptionist vacancy at Smith's Solutions, the pest control company. Mum makes us an early dinner and helps me get ready. She does up the buttons of my white shirt and I wear my old blazer; we unpicked the badge, *deus noster refugium*, when I left school so God is no longer my hope and strength, which is perhaps why I can't get a job. I've got a good CV, six CSEs, all grade 1; I should have done O Levels. I wanted to stay on for sixth form but Mum needed me to start earning. For the first year I was hopeful that I'd get a job. Now I write applications to keep her happy. She blames the lack of work. 'It's difficult for everyone these days. Especially teenagers. But something will turn up.' If I got a job and we could afford it I'd love to go to night school, do City and Guilds or A Levels.

I wheel myself into the Smith's Solutions office at exactly five to one. Yet another office: brown carpet tiles, grubby orange chairs, cup ring marks on a glass coffee table. The receptionist does a double take and forces a smile. 'The doctor's surgery's along the street, a couple of doors down,' she says.

'I'm here for an interview. Michelle Colman.'

She blushes and glances at a sheet of paper. 'One moment,' she mutters. She stands up and swishes through the door to the right of the desk, tugging at her skirt. I park my chair next to the row of seats. The fluorescent lights sizzle each time a bluebottle hits the tubes. I pick up a magazine, flicking past close-ups of rat droppings and cockroaches.

A tall man in shirt sleeves comes into the reception with a girl who must have just had an interview. I can't remember her name but she lives in our flats and was a couple of years below me at school. She's plastered in foundation but her cheeks glow bright red. 'Thank you for your time,' she says – as the careers teacher told us to do – and trips over a wastepaper bin on her way to the door. The man glances at me and goes back into the office with the receptionist. He comes out again alone.

'Michelle,' the man says. He starts to raise his hand then drops it. 'David Smith. I'm awfully sorry but there's been a mix-up and I won't be able to see you this afternoon. I do apologise.'

'Oh,' I say. 'Oh. But … '

'Let me help you with the door. We'll be in touch.'

I don't want to have tea with Ada but she'll get bothered if I don't turn up and I'd rather see her than face Mum. I stop in the corridor and take a tissue from my pocket. I dab at my eyes and wipe the glossy brown lipstick off my lips. I read in a stupid magazine that brown lipstick impresses at interviews. I knock at Ada's door, which is never locked, and open it and shout hello. The TV's blaring and the curtains are shut – a dull lamp lights the lounge. The heating's on full and it smells like Meals on Wheels was shepherd's pie.

Ada sees me before she hears me, 'Hello, love, you're looking very smart. Switch the telly off. Put the kettle on, be a dear.'

We sit in the gloom. Ada talks as I dunk a gypsy cream into my tea.

'It was Myrtle Bennett's funeral this morning,' she says. 'I would have gone and paid my respects but oh my knees, I could barely stand. I knew her mother and her grandmother. Lovely family, God bless them. Nobody should outlive their child. Her daughter jumped off a balcony on the nineteenth floor, about ten years ago now. It was in the papers and everything. The doctors said she was depressed. Myrtle never got over it. You wouldn't, would you?'

I shake my head.

'There's been a lot of death on this site,' Ada says. 'Some folk think there's a curse on this tower. But there's no risk I'll be jumping. Couldn't jump off the floor if I tried.'

'That makes two of us,' I say.

Ada chuckles. 'There was once a paupers' graveyard here, did I tell you?'

I shake my head. She has told me, many times before.

‘It was so crowded that they buried bodies on top of one another. And the graves were so shallow that storms washed the earth away and left skeletons staring at the sky. My mother got the fright of her life when she walked through the graveyard one morning, bones glowing in the light of the moon. She never forgot that. When they cleared the ground and moved the bodies out of town they left the deeper ones. Still there to this day I shouldn’t wonder. And then years later, all the terraces built on the site were blown to smithereens, all those people lost their lives in the Blitz. And no bad thing. Not the loss of life, God bless them all, but those houses were no good, those families were living in squalor, you know.’

‘I know,’ I said.

Ada grimaces and rubs at her knees. ‘How come you’re all dressed up, love?’

‘I had an interview. At Smith’s Solutions. Except I didn’t. They took one look and showed me the door.’

‘Shame on them. Aren’t there laws against that nowadays? You’re too good for that lot. I knew Smith’s father, and his father before him. Crooks they are the lot of them. His grandfather was a rat-catcher: a nasty piece of work, ended up on the gallows.’

I picture David Smith Junior with a rope around his neck and I feel a little better.

The lounge smells of lemon Pledge. Mum switches off the Hoover when she sees me. ‘How was it? You’ve been gone ages. I thought that was a good sign.’

‘I went to see Ada straight after.’

‘How long was your interview?’

‘Half an hour?’

Mum takes a doily out of the sideboard and places it in the centre of the coffee table. ‘What did they ask?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it. They had sixty applications. I haven’t got any experience.’

‘But the ad said they’d give training. How many did they interview? Can’t have been more than a handful. You stand as good a chance as anyone.’

‘They said if I don’t hear within a week to assume I haven’t been successful. *They’ll keep my CV on file*. I don’t even want the job. I don’t see a future in vermin. I’m going to my room. I need to think about more important things, like who to vote for to run this hellhole of a country.’

‘You don’t need to think about who to vote for,’ yells Mum. ‘And don’t forget the Pickersgills are coming at three. Make sure your room’s spotless. And don’t say anything stupid. I don’t want to mess this up!’

I hear the front door slam shut. Usually when Mum’s upset she takes the lift to the top floor and climbs the flight of stairs to the roof. She says that she gazes at the sky and stretches her eyes and thinks of Norfolk. The Pickersgills are coming to view our flat, a mutual exchange they call it. Mr Pickersgill’s been offered a job in London. Mum put her name on a list a year ago and didn’t hear a thing until last week when she got a letter from a tenant who lives on the ground floor of a 1950’s red-brick maisonette in a town on the Norfolk coast, not far from where Mum grew up. Mum borrowed fare money from my auntie and we set off on Saturday morning to catch a bus, a train and a bus to visit the house. It was on the outskirts of the town on a quiet, neat road of identical houses. It had small lawned gardens front and back, one for the top flat, one for the bottom. It was a ten-minute walk to the sea. We went into town afterwards and bought fish and chips. Mum was so excited about the house she was trembling. We sat on the green at the top of the cliffs to eat, wheelchair brakes on firmly; I’ve heard enough jokes about chairs and cliffs to be careful.

Mum went to put our chip wrappers in the bin. Two girls walked past, looked at me and sniggered. ‘The circus is in town,’ said one. ‘Normal for Norfolk,’ said the other. She spat at me but missed. I scowled at her. I didn’t say ‘fuck you’ like I usually would because I didn’t want to spoil the day with a fight. It’s easy to take someone out with a chair if you catch them unawares. ‘Don’t piss her off,’ said the first girl. ‘The flid’ll have an eppy.’

I glanced at Mum who had a flock of seagulls squawking above her. She walked back to the bench and sat down. ‘Nobody in their right minds would swap that flat for ours,’ she said.

‘Then we’ll just have to hope they’re in their wrong minds.’ I glared at the fat arses of the girls as they waddled away.

We’re still waiting for the Pickersgills at quarter past three; Mum’s in a tizz and has convinced herself they’re not coming.

‘Best not mention the body in the canal,’ I say. ‘They never did find the head, did they? Or who did it. Or whose body it was.’

‘Sh!’ Mum frowns at me. The doorbell rings and she jumps. She tucks her hair behind her ears and smooths her skirt. ‘Put the kettle on,’ she hisses. ‘And bring the biscuits in.’

I wheel myself into the kitchen. Mum has already filled the kettle.

‘I’m sorry we’re late,’ says Mrs Pickersgill, in the hallway. ‘We had a terrible time finding the place.’

I switch on the hob and listen to Mum showing them around while I wait for the kettle to boil.

‘This is the master bedroom.’

‘It’s a good size. I like the wallpaper.’

‘And the bathroom. A three-piece suite. Avocado.’

‘No window,’ says Mrs Pickersgill.

‘No. But the fan works well. And the council put down new linoleum after a leak last year. It’s warm underfoot. Even in winter.’

I take the plate of Garibaldis through to the lounge and put it on the coffee table. Mum comes in with the Pickersgills. ‘And finally the lounge. Wall-to-wall carpet. And a dimmer switch. Do take a seat.’

Mr Pickersgill nods at me. Mum disappears into the kitchen.

‘Bars on the windows,’ murmurs Mrs Pickersgill to nobody in particular. ‘And is there no outside space at all?’ She turns to me. ‘Where did you play when you were younger? Our little ones love to run around.’ She reddens. ‘Oh, I’m terribly sorry. I just meant … ’

‘It’s okay.’ I say.

‘How do you take your tea?’ says Mum, wheeling in the hostess trolley.

‘White, no sugar,’ says Mrs Pickersgill.

‘Same for me,’ says her husband.

‘Sweet enough already,’ says Mum. She offers them the biscuits. A Garibaldi slides off the plate and onto the floor; when she bends to pick it up another one slides off. ‘Have you got any questions? The block might look a bit rough around the edges but we’re very central here and it’s a lovely community. It’s mostly older people on this floor so it’s very quiet.’

It is quiet, horribly quiet, except for the chink of china, the crunch of Garibaldis and the slurping of tea. The stains on the ceiling look worse than usual and the magnolia walls look so … yellow.

'You said that Mr Pickersgill's new firm want him to start as soon as possible,' says Mum. 'Well, if you want this flat we could be packed up and ready to move tomorrow. I've got contacts. My sister's husband's in removals.' She has a raisin stuck between her two front teeth.

It's not so quiet now. It's home time. Outside, kids are laughing, shouting, swearing. And then the thud, thud, thud of a football starts against the outside wall.

'Would you like me to take you up to the roof terrace?' says Mum. 'The views are fabulous. You can see all over London.'

'No, thank you,' says Mrs Pickersgill. 'I don't want to trouble you any further.'

'The schools are good. Michelle got six grade 1s.'

'Mum!'

'And I'm happy to leave furniture. Saves us lugging it across the country.'

Mrs Pickersgill glances at her watch. 'We mustn't miss our train. Thank you for your time. We'll be in touch.'

'Snobs, they were,' says Mum, after she's stopped crying. ''specially her. Face sour as vinegar. Like we live in some sort of slum.'

Mum's always saying that we live in a slum.

'Bloody Tory voters, I bet. And how awful would it have been if you'd been offered the job and had to turn it down.' She lights a fag. 'There's good prospects at Smith's. They're expanding fast. People are crying out for pest control after the winter we've had, all those rats. I don't know what you'd have done in Norfolk.'

The day before my sixteenth birthday Mum showed me an old diary, a diary she started when she found out she was pregnant and kept till I was a week or so old. I read that when I was born I was whisked away and Mum was kept sedated for days. When she finally came round only my father was there and she was convinced that I was dead. When a midwife came in, carrying a tightly swaddled bundle, Mum was overjoyed. The midwife placed me on the bed without a word and scurried out. Mum picked me up, kissed my face, stroked my hair and cuddled me.

My father sat, very still, on a chair beside the bed. ‘They’ve told me that it hasn’t developed normally,’ he said.

‘What hasn’t developed normally?’

He nodded in my direction.

‘She’s a little girl,’ said Mum, ‘not an it, and she’s beautiful. She’s got a hare lip. It doesn’t matter. She’s our daughter.’

‘That’s not all that’s wrong. It’s a cripple.’

Mum unwrapped the blanket and saw only half the baby she was expecting: stumps where legs should have been, stunted arms, deformed hands.

My father gagged, walked over to the window and leant on the sill. The trees in the hospital garden were heavy with pink and white blossom. ‘It’s a spastic,’ my father said. ‘A cretin. What sort of life would it have? What sort of life would we have?’

A doctor came in. Mum wrapped me up again.

‘I understand how upsetting this is,’ said the doctor. ‘It’s an unusual situation and a shock to everyone. But there are options. You don’t have to keep her. If you leave her in the hospital she’ll be allowed to pass away peacefully. Or, if you’d prefer, we can find her a place in an institution, a home for incurables.’

‘Given what I’ve just seen,’ said my father, ‘I think that might be best for everyone.’

‘Which option?’ said the doctor.

‘Er, the peaceful one.’

‘Not a chance,’ said Mum. ‘Not a bloody chance.’

Mum left the hospital, with me, a few days later. The receptionist called her over as she was leaving. ‘One moment, madam. A gentleman dropped off a couple of suitcases for you this morning. I’ll just fetch them.’

We eat our tea in silence. Mum picks at her food. She twirls spaghetti round and round her fork but it keeps slipping back onto the plate. I’m making a better job of it than her and that’s saying something. I knew I should have changed out of my white shirt.

‘It would be a lovely birthday present if you heard tomorrow.’

‘Heard what?’ I say.

‘That you’d got the job. You and Callaghan on the same day!’

‘Mum, I’m not going to get the job at Smith’s Sodding Solutions any more than Callaghan’s going to keep his! They didn’t even interview me. They took one look and that was that. Just like my father did. Who puts a spastic on their reception desk? I’m not going to get a job. It’s been almost two years. I’d be better off studying, it’s not like I’m earning anything. I could do A Levels. I could get a grant and go to university. I could get a job where my brain matters, not my body. I might as well put spastic at the top of my CV and quit wasting everyone’s time.’

‘Stop it,’ says Mum. ‘I hate that word.’

‘I get called a lot worse.’

‘I know.’ She starts to cry. ‘I’m sorry, ’chelle. I was so excited about the flat in Norfolk. It’s so depressing here. I thought it would be a fresh start for both of us.’

A loud screech makes us jump.

‘What’s that?’ says Mum.

‘I don’t know. Kids mucking around. Let’s put the telly on. Watch the election stuff.’

Mum picks up my plate and scrapes my leftover spag bol on top of hers. The lights go out. ‘Shit,’ she says. ‘Another power cut. That won’t help the Labour vote.’ She feels her way into the kitchen and opens a drawer. She strikes a match and brings the box of Prices to the table and lights them one by one. She drips wax into the holders to make the candles stand up straight and places them around the room. We watch the shadows flickering on the walls.

‘’chelle. You know what you said about your dad not wanting to know when you were born?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’m sorry. I should have told you everything at once. I don’t know why I didn’t now. I think I’ve made things worse for you. I’m so sorry. I suppose I thought … ’

‘What you on about?’

‘It wasn’t just the Thalidomide.’

‘What wasn’t?’

‘Your father didn’t want you from the start. He didn’t want me either. I was the cleaner for Christ’s sake. He was engaged. He marched me off to Harley Street because he wanted to get rid of you. It was then I realised that money can buy you anything. He made me see a doctor and two psychiatrists. They said I was mentally unstable, unfit to have a

baby. He went on at me for weeks but I refused to have an abortion. It was a relief to him when you were born the way you were. His get-out clause. I saw the glint in his eyes when the doctor said there were options.'

I recently saw, for the first time, a photograph of my father. This man who tried to get rid of me not once, but twice. I found out a while back that he had had a poetry collection called *Strandline* published and, with my eighteenth birthday getting closer, I plucked up the courage to find it. I asked for it in a bookshop in Islington but the girl at the desk told me it was out of print so I went to our local library. The librarian looked in the catalogue, 'You're in luck. I can order it from another branch. I haven't heard of him. Is he any good?' I shrugged my shoulders and she looked at me curiously. 'It's for a friend,' I mumbled. She filled out a form and said the book should be ready to collect in a couple of weeks.

When I went back in, the librarian rummaged beneath the counter and handed me the book. 'Hope you enjoy it,' she said. I thanked her but she had already turned away. I wheeled my chair to the end of a quiet aisle. I held the book for a few minutes before I opened it. There was a black and white headshot on the inside cover of the slim, little-borrowed collection published five years after I was born. It didn't make sense, this man being my father. The short biography said that he lived in London and Norfolk with his wife and two sons. I imagined him having sex with his wife between the candy striped sheets or in front of the fire on the cold stone floors of the cottage. I flicked through the poems, scanned the lines for anything I could have inspired – a bloodstain, stunted trees, twisted driftwood – but the words blurred and I couldn't read anything. I slipped the book down the inside arm of my wheelchair and left.

Mum's gone to bed. The power's back on. I'm half-listening to the radio, volume low. The polls are still predicting a Tory victory, our first female prime minister. I take *Strandline*, renewed three times but not opened since I was in the library, from my bedside cabinet. Underneath the sketch of seaweed on the cover there's a testimonial: *Illuminating, you can smell the sea*. I open the book at the contents page and read the titles: 'Flotsam, Jetsam, Lagan, Derelict', 'Storm Surge', 'Kittiwake'. I choose a page at random, a poem called 'Driftwood': 'A battlefield brought by the sea and strewn upon the beach/disfigured limbs of warriors, their lives now out of reach.' I wonder if the disfigured limbs are mine but

suddenly I don't care. I stare at the photograph on the inside cover. I don't want to meet my father any more. I flick through a few more poems. I can tell that they're awful, nothing like as good as the poetry we read at school. I bet the testimonial was written by a friend. 'Smell the sea', my arse! All I can smell is fags and spag bol.

When Mum said good night this evening she gave me a big hug. She said that in the morning, after we've had our fry up, we'll pop into the education office and make an appointment for me to see about doing A Levels.

Inventory of things in the lifts and the stairwell on Thursday 3rd May 1979

A green plastic code peg from Mastermind

A yellow liquorice torpedo

Cherry blossom

Wrappers - 2 fruit salad & 1 blackjack

Sherbert

A polyester scrunchie in neon orange with two long blonde hairs caught up in it

1 money spider, 1 ladybird, 1 bluebottle

An unused blue sachet of salt from Smith's salt 'n'shake crisps

A used condom

A polling card

Empty tube of Yardley lipstick in coral crème

A dummy

A yellow wooden bead

5 bus tickets, 2 tube tickets

A Wimpy burger wrapping

A small teddy bear

16 cigarette butts, 9 dead matches

5 ring pulls

An empty tube of model glue

1 coke can, 1 7UP can, 1 Fanta can

A shopping list: *fags, cake, potatoes, beans*

3 apple seeds

The torso of a Tiny Tears doll

Empty aerosol can

A flake of pastry from a sausage roll

A milk tooth, decayed

Hubba Bubba

A red geranium petal

A small white piece of polystyrene with a tooth mark in it

A half-sucked Murray Mint

Betting slips

Birdseed

Dreft soap powder

2 ABC cinema tickets for *Capricorn One*

A classifieds column torn out of the Hackney Gazette. 2 ads circled in green pen:

***PART-TIME ASSISTANT UNDER 35, FOR CITY FLORISTS Tel: 01 283 4867* Miss Barker**

GIRL *Intelligent with nice personality. Accounts office, sales ledger, good conditions* Start £20

Apply Taylor & Company 249 8736

Flat 53 – The Bride

Marry in the month of May, and you'll surely rue the day. Huh, Tammy Tampax is getting married this morning, Friday, Saturday slots long gone. Usual story. Once upon a time … sixteen years old (by a whisker), starting to show. Didn't know you could get pregnant when you're on? Should of kept your Tampax in, shouldn't you, love? Tammy could pass for twenty-one so she won't get comments when she trogs the streets with the pram but Wayne's shorter than her and looks about twelve. And his job? He's a slabber. Just what every girl dreams of. *What does your husband do, Tammy?* Plonks slabs down. Pulls slabs up. Twenty-five years and he'll get a promotion: Wayne Bodle, Senior Slabber. Expert in all things Slab. Just be careful what you find underneath them.

Tammy's mum and dad scrub out one of the lifts and deck it out nice so the soon-to-be Mrs Bodle can leave for her wedding in style. They block the door open with a mangle and work quickly; most people are pretty nice about using the second lift. Instead of piss the lift now smells of Jeyes Fluid – and piss. Her dad found an offcut of red carpet in a skip outside the Smith's Solutions office and he cuts it to size and puts it on the lift floor. He gets a dining chair for Tammy to sit her fat arse on. He puts new batteries in the cassette player, turns the volume up loud and plays a piece of classical music I recognise from a mouthwash ad. Her mum ties pink carnations to the back of the chair and has made a banner saying WAYNE & TAMMY FOREV (should of worked out how much space she had before she started) which she tapes to the wall to hide the graffiti: TAMMY TAMPAX IS A SLAG. But the banner's fallen off by the time the lift gets downstairs so she needn't of wasted her time.

There's a small gathering in the lobby: the unemployed and mums with snotty toddlers and OAPs – neighbours from Tammy's floor, some in their dressing gowns, not a hat in sight. Tammy's uncle come down earlier and handed out confetti, shredded paper found in a box outside the Smith's Solutions office. When the lift door opens everyone says *Oooh* and *Ahhh* and *Don't she look lovely* and throws shredded paper over her. Derrick the Drunk raises and drops his can of Tennant's; froth bubbles out over the floor.

Dum dum de dum … Here comes the bride, forty inches wide … in something old – her late aunt's wedding dress, something new – the straining bump, something borrowed – her cousin's shoes, something blue – milk bottle legs. Her mum unties the carnations from the chair. Tammy takes them, bingo wings wobbling, and holds them as she poses for pictures in front of the lift: doors still open, her mum trying to hold up the WAYNE & TAMMY FOREV banner as a backdrop. Who needs a church porch? Her dad tells her she looks fabulous and blows his nose.

I remove a strand of shredded paper from my shoulder and work out what the cut-off words from the Smith's Solutions brochure inserts are: ugs and oaches and ats. I'm going to start work there the day after my last exam: Office Junior, £15.25 a week. Dad saw the job ad in the Gazette. He sat at the table and made me write a letter to go with my CV, screwed up the paper each time I smudged the ink. 'If you don't get this it's the pie and mash shop,' he said. He took the envelope round to the office that evening and put it through the letter box.

At the interview Mr Smith himself asked me why I wanted to work for his company. All I could think of was the pie and mash shop – the trays of slippery eels in jelly and the vinegary smell of the liquor – so I said that my grandad bled to death after a rat bit his throat in his sleep. I said that I had only been young when I found him drowned in his own blood, that since then my ambition had been to rid the world of rats. A letter, the envelope stamped with the Smith's Solutions cockroach logo, arrived a few days later. Dad opened it, even though it was addressed to me. 'I'll take fifteen a week for board and lodging,' he said. 'You can keep the change.' Stingy bastard.

Photos over, Tammy teeters across the lobby. She catches my eye and gives me an awkward smile. Mind you don't slip on the lager, love. I watch the wedding party straggle outside. Tammy's dad's minicab mate is parked next to the bin store ready to drive them to the registry office in his gold-coloured Fiat. He stubs out his fag and opens the back door and, as Tammy climbs in, one of her shoes comes off and falls under the car. She clutches at her mum and balances on one foot as her dad's mate reverses; he rolls over the shoe and when Tammy gets it back it has a tyre print on it and is missing the heel. An old lady asks her what size she is, like she'd want a pair of fluffy slippers for her wedding day. Her mum says it's okay she'll nip upstairs. Her dad's mini cab mate says bloody Nora, how long's it gonna take you to nip up fourteen flights? We're already late and I've got a bleeding job in Mile End to go to. There's a lot of flapping around and Tammy tries on the heelless stiletto

and decides that as long as she keeps one foot flat on the ground and tiptoes on the other it will do. A gust of wind blows her dress up as she climbs into the Fiat and her uncle takes a photo of her arse. The car screeches off and the wedding party cheers.

I go back to the lift and press the button. I pick a carnation off the floor. I sit on the chair – on the mustard-coloured leatherette seat with its arse-shaped bald patch – and fold up the WAYNE & TAMMY FOREV banner. The tape recorder is still playing. I mouth along to the music, trying to remember the words of the ad: *breath so great you'll kiss your date*? When the lift stops I stand up and put the cassette player on the seat and carry the chair out of the lift and up the top flight of stairs to the roof. As I walk across the terrace, careful not to trip on the bulges in the cracked asphalt, the building shifts in the wind; it's like staggering along the top deck of a bus when it's moving. It was so windy when I got up this morning the water was swaying in the toilet bowl.

I pull the carnation apart and the pink petals flutter into the sky. It's starting to spit with rain. I unfold the banner and hold it high above my head. The wind whips it away and it flies like a kite, swirling and somersaulting, higher and higher until WAYNE & TAMMY are gone FOREV. I think of Tammy's dad's face as Tammy posed for photos and I get this pain in my head and I grab the chair and hurl it over the railings. I watch it fall and the legs splinter when it lands. I chuck off the cassette player and the sound of the violins fades before it hits the ground. It's mental how much stuff I've chucked off that roof and never hit anyone. There's not much I haven't thrown off of it – other than me.

I walk down the flight of stairs and wait for the lift. I press the button and the doors close. I pull my skirt up. I pull my knickers down. I squat. I piss on the carpet. I piss on everything my dad's never done for me. I piss on everything my dad's ever done for me. When the doors open on the twentieth floor and Skullcrusher Steve gets in I'm still pissing and I'm not about to stop. I drunk three cups (from the big *It's a Dog's Life* Snoopy mug) of tea this morning and I wish I'd drunk some more because I'm especially pissing on when my dad did his nut and shoved me in the belly. Skullcrusher Steve goes red as the carpet and the scars on his face show up like bolts of lightning. Jesus Christ, Skullcrusher Steve's blushing! *Scuse us* he says and turns and coughs. When the lift stops at the next floor he tries to leg it so quick he gets stuck in the doors.

Outside the block I take big breaths but the piss and Jeyes stays up my nose. The music sticks in my head too, screeching between gusts of wind: *breath so great you'll kiss your date* … One of the broken chair legs has landed on the path and I kick it onto the

scabby grass. The violins get louder. And louder. The cassette player has fallen onto a mattress dumped next to the football cage and it's still working! It's too good an omen for Wayne and Tammy so I pick up a chair leg and use it to whack the machine until the plastic splinters and the music stops. I don't want anything to bode well for the Bodles: the wedding, the baby or anything else. *If anyone has any reason why this couple should not be joined in matrimony, let them speak now*. If I was in Poplar Registry Office I'd be speaking now, I can tell you. And later too. As for the baby, I hope it's born a sleeping angel, i.e. DEAD. Say it how it is. Spell it out. D E A D. *Dead as a dodo, Dead as my dad,* except tragically he's not. Passed away, pushing up daisies, pearly gates; euphemisms they're called. We did them in English. Here's some more for you, Tammy: *Aunt Flo, birds and the bees, a bun in the oven, pissing bones.* Okay, the last one's not a euphemism and I made it up but I hope that's what it feels like when it happens to you.

Mum's lost a few. Now I'm at it: lost – like an umbrella on a bus or a glove stuck on top of a railing. She went to hospital the first time but didn't bother after that. Thought the authorities would get suspicious. Noseying about how much she drinks and how many she smokes and how did you get that black eye and broken nose? Bla de bla de bla. Tiny the babies were. Could have dropped them down the outdoor toilet but she didn't. Swaddled them and buried them proper. Twice I helped her prise up slabs in our back yard. Twice we dug deep and dropped carnations and cornflowers on top: pink for a girl and blue for a boy, the sex of neither never known. I didn't know how brave Mum was – dig a hole, cover it up, carry on – till I lost (there I go again) one too.

Our old house – the whole terrace in fact – is boarded up, corrugated iron on the windows and doors. I still walk down there some evenings. When the sun glints off the metal sheets it's blinding and I've trod in dog shit a few times. The lead's been stripped off the roofs and the boot scrapers yanked from the walls. Weeds have sprouted from the cracks between the paving stones. The burnt-out car's got a load of furniture dumped next to it: flowery armchairs and stained mattresses with springs sticking out.

The letter from the council arrived one Saturday, in the same post as Mum's birthday cards. She'd done a Twink perm – Dad was taking her out that night – and her hair smelt chemically and sweet. It was a warm morning: windows open, back yards full of washing, kids playing football and hopscotch in the road. As the postman worked his way down the street people ran outside waving their letters: *Condemnation and Demolition of 2-108 Burke Street, E14* the heading said. Some of the neighbours went quiet, some

shouted, some cried. Dad and the other dockers shoved off to Smithfield where the pubs were already open. The mums sat on doorsteps and cricked their necks as they stared at the tower block in the sky; we knew that's where we'd all be put.

'I don't want to leave my babies,' Mum whispered to me that evening. Dad hadn't come home. Her birthday cards were still on the door mat. 'I'm scared they'll be found.' I put my arm round her shoulders. 'They won't ever be found,' I told her. Bones smaller than a bird's. Crushed by a steel-capped boot or the fat tyres of a JCB.

Mum's never spoke about my baby since. I think she tries to pretend the whole thing never happened because she can't bear to think about what dad did to me. She didn't see the almighty shove that sent me flying across the lounge; the balcony doors were open and I went flying through them and hit the railings. When I came round I looked up at a blue sky. A blow-up Father Christmas grinned at me from the balcony above; he'd been up there six months and gone saggy.

So there was no back yard to dig a grave but we had an indoor toilet that flushed. I don't remember much: a few days in bed; blood on greyed sheets; a bathtub of cold water; a scrubbing brush; a bar of carbolic soap; bedding hung on the balcony in the sunshine. You'd never know. Only Tammy did. She guessed when it was there and she guessed when it was gone. And she held me so tightly that her blouse got wet through and she had a noseful of my snot in her hair. And then six months later she got pregnant and I felt like I'd been shoved in the belly all over again.

I now declare you man and wife. You may kiss the bride. Do they even bother to say that in a registry office? Will Wayne be able to reach Tammy's lips in that one killer heel she's wearing? Assuming a fifteen-minute ceremony – I wasn't invited and wouldn't of gone – Miss Tammy Tamworth will now be Mrs Tammy Bodle, wife and soon-to-be mum of Wayne Bodle Junior (which will push her up the housing list no end). Assuming Tammy's dad's minicab mate has returned from his bleeding job in Mile End, the wedding party should be making their way back home to the reception in the community room on the tenth floor.

I get there first. The door's locked but I know the code. The snooker table's been moved into one corner and the trestle tables have been set with brown cloths patterned with orange and yellow daisies. The buffet's laid out on random crockery borrowed from neighbours or

bought in the church jumble sale last Saturday. Next to each plate there's a label written in pink felt tip: *volovon* (filled with grey mush), *chicken keyevs*, *ritz* (with a squeeze of Primula), *quiche lorraine*, *cheese & pineapple* (on cocktail sticks), *cocktail sausages* (the size and shrivel of Wayne's dick) and *scotch eggs*. And for dessert there's *profeeterolls*, *straw-berry angel delight*, *black forest gatto* and an enormous *trifle* in the Tamworth family heirloom, Great Aunt Edna's crystal bowl. I down the glass of squash I pour from a jug and eat a couple of profiteroles. On a round table in the corner there's a cake with *Wayne and Tammy forever* iced on top and two plastic figures which look nothing like Wayne and Tammy because the man is tall and dressed in top hat and tails and the woman is skinny and wearing a big dress.

I stuff another profiterole in my mouth and sit down on one of the chairs lined up in a row against the walls. It feels like a doctor's waiting room; it just needs a VD poster, some tatty magazines and a shit load of germs. Tammy's uncle's rigged up a sound system and there's a microphone on a stand and a disco ball hung from the ceiling. I stand up and try out the microphone. Testing, testing. I pick up two sheets of paper from the table. It's the Father of the Bride speech. It's been typed up and Tammy's dad's scribbled notes on it. I read aloud, in an Irish accent, my voice sneering across the room. *Ladies and gents, boys and girls, I would like to welcome you here today, to celebrate the marriage of our beautiful daughter Tammy to Wayne. As Henry VIII said to each of his wives in turn – I'll try not to keep you very long*. He's written *pause for laughter* at this point.

Time's running out and I have to act quick. I take the mother-of-pearl-handled knife that's been set aside to cut the cake and I try to chop off the plastic bride's head. I saw backwards and forwards as hard as I can but all I do is slit her throat. Some voodoo doll. I eat another profiterole. If I needed to piss I could piss on the desserts – *This trifle's so moist, Mrs Tamworth. Is it sherry*? – but I don't. I pour myself another glass of squash. I could hurl the food off the balcony. I could wreck the sound system: no first dance. I could rip up the speech so Tammy's dad spazzes into a stuttering mess. I could smash up the microphone so Tammy's uncle can't sing his signature number: *Are you lonesome tonight? Is your bra strap too tight? Are your knickers all falling apart?* Actually, that would be doing everyone a favour.

I hear a faint cheer and go to the balcony. The wedding party's pulling up outside the block, tin cans jiggling behind the newlyweds' car. Wayne steps out first and Tammy follows; she's abandoned her shoes but it doesn't look like her throat's been cut. She joins

her mum and mother-in-law and walks towards the entrance to the block. Wayne, short but stocky, handsome in his new jacket and flares, joins Tammy's dad who slaps him on the back. Tammy's uncle gets out of his Escort and opens the door for two of Tammy's friends who've forgot to get dressed. Wayne's dad's not there – Pentonville didn't let him out for the big day then. The reception-only guests start to arrive. Brightly-coloured dresses blow up in the wind. Tammy's uncle organises photos.

It's my last chance. I go back inside and cast round for a weapon. I pick up the trifle. I can drop it on Tammy's head. I once got three darts in the bullseye and I'm the best goal shoot in the netball team, under eighteens and all. The crystal bowl will kill her instantly. I imagine the strawberry jelly and lumpy custard curdling with the blood trickling through her hair and running down her face. The story will make the front page of the Gazette, maybe even go national: *Pregnant bride killed by falling trifle*.

I take the dessert onto the balcony and rest it on the window box. Directly beneath me Tammy and her parents pose for a photo. I pick up the bowl with both hands. As I shuffle slightly to the left, Tammy's dad says something to her, pats her bump and puts his arm around her shoulders. I picture the baby growing in her belly and a sharp pain throbs in my forehead and spreads behind my eyes and through my jaw. I suddenly feel very tired. I'm tired of hating Tammy, tired of hating Wayne, two people who I used to love. It's not their fault I lost my baby. And it was me who dumped Wayne after the baby died. He would've stood by me, baby or no baby, he was broken-hearted too. When I'd told him I was pregnant he'd said, 'I'm going to be a proper dad. Not like yours and not like mine.'

I put the trifle bowl back on the table. The wedding party won't notice the broken chair or the shattered cassette player on the grass. They won't notice that the red carpet in the lift is wet or that the lift smells a bit pissier than before. They won't notice the slit on the neck of the plastic figure on the wedding cake.

I can't face another profiterole so I help myself to a scotch egg and a chicken kiev and I leave the room.

‘I know who … is.’
‘You’ll have to speak up. I’m not having me ears syringed till next week.’
‘I don’t want no one to hear this.’
‘Well, I won’t hear it if you don’t speak up. You can’t get much more private than a lift.’
‘Even walls and all that … You can’t tell a soul what I’m gonna tell you. Swear on your life you won’t tell a soul.’
‘Tell a soul what?’
‘Swear?’
‘Swear.’
‘I know who the body is.’
‘Body?’
‘The body in the canal.’
‘You don’t.’
‘I do.’
‘Who?’
‘Joseph Ward. Lisa Ward’s old man.’
‘Bloody Nora! Who told you that?’
‘Straight from the horse’s mouth – Mrs Ward herself. The Old Bill went round. They’d found his head, identified the body. He’s been missing for months now. She thought he’d done a runner. Always had another woman on the go. In with a load of thugs. Got on the wrong side of someone no doubt. She said he had it coming.’
‘Bloody Nora! How’s she doing?’
‘I think she’s in shock. Well you would be, wouldn’t you? Imagine your old man at the bottom of the canal. Head chopped off.’
‘Quite a nice thought really. Give me some peace and quiet.’
‘Mrs Jones, you are a one!’
‘I feel sorry for the bloomin’ kids. Saying that, they’re better off without him. They all are. Nasty piece of work. I always said it. Those big flat ears. Said it all.’
‘Sh! Someone’s getting in.’

‘Call that a wedding. All that way and a day off work for ten bleeding minutes. I hope the reception’s better. I need a drink. Is this us? No. We’re gonna be stuck in this bleeding lift longer than we were at the bleeding wedding. Oh, hallo, love. We were just saying, what a wonderful wedding it was. It really was very special. And Tammy looks fabulous, just like her mum.’

‘Hello, Mrs King. Well, this is a sad day.’
‘I know, who would have thought it. There was an MP on Thames News this evening, said the big swing was made on the council estates. Said people are fed up with the strikes: the piles of rubbish and the blocked chutes, the leaking taps that never get sorted. He said all these industrial disputes, we’re the ones get hit the hardest. Well, someone voted for them, didn’t they? But I don’t know anyone round here would admit it.’
‘Shirley Williams said people voted more for themselves and their own position than for the good of the country. She said it was a tragedy.’
‘She’s just so bloody posh, isn’t she?’
‘Who, Shirley Williams?’
‘No, Thatcher. Did you hear her? *Where there is despair, may we bring hope.* Well, I bloody hope she brings some hope, that’s all I’ve got to say.’

Flat 1 – The Friend

As I take my rain hood from my coat pocket, my handkerchief falls onto the pavement and flutters along the street until the wind drops. I stop awhile to think how best to rescue it.

'Excuse me, madam,' I hear a gentleman behind me say.

I shuffle to the side and rest my walking stick against the chemist's window. *Worried by Indigestion?* I am as it happens, especially after a jammy doughnut. A few people hurry past: a businessman in a drab pinstripe suit, a girl in school uniform and a young man with *It's called anarchy, arsehole* written on the back of his leather jacket. Well, there's no need for that sort of language and I bet I could teach him a thing or two about anarchy. His pink hair's as spiky as a porcupine's quills and he's got a ring in his nose you could lead a bull by. The wind picks up my hanky again and it has the misfortune to land in a puddle just as the pink-haired man plonks his great big boot in that exact spot. I flinch; that hanky's my favourite because my dear friend Margaret, now long gone, embroidered my initials on it in scarlet thread. I try to catch the attention of passers-by. 'Excuse me,' I say but the exhaust fumes catch in my throat and nobody hears. I hate asking for help anyway; after my Jack died I vowed I'd never feel sorry for myself, never be a 'just' woman – 'Could you just do this? Could you just do that?' I miss him more each day but each day that passes I'm a day closer to joining him. I mustn't complain. I have been blessed all my life and I am still blessed.

Jack dropped dead twenty-seven years ago. I was washing the dishes when I heard the thud. I rubbed a hole in the steam on the window and there he was, sprawled across the slabs in our back yard, his head cushioned by the small pile of weeds he'd pulled up, his legs surrounded by the dandelions and yarrow that survived him. I took out his false teeth and closed his eyes. I brushed away the wisp of washing up foam caught in his stubble. I fetched a quilt and covered his body. The socks on the washing line, pegged so neatly, pair by pair, quivered in the breeze and I thought how he would never wear them again and how that wasn't very neat at all. I put on my coat and hat and went to the telephone box to call the doctor.

Now that the handkerchief's stopped in the puddle I might as well rest my knees awhile. It's only blown a few yards but I'm worried that if I bend down I might not get up again. I look at the chemist's display: a pyramid of blue glass bottles, milk of Magnesia. I remember how that shade of blue – cobalt I think they call it – looked before my cataracts,

before everything had a tinge as yellow as the pea-souper of ’52, the smog that finished off my Jack’s lungs. I tie the rain hood under my chin and try to inch back into the middle of the pavement but it’s hard to find a way through the throng. Like a child growing or flowers dying you don’t notice it happening: one moment everyone gets in your way as you dart through the gaps in the crowds and then all of a sudden it’s you, you’re the one being tutted at.

When I worked in the typing pool at Selfridges I could get off the bus at Tottenham Court Road and walk to Bond Street – a mile it was – in quarter of an hour. I was ever so nippy, even in the heels I used to wear to work. I’ve always walked quickly because when I was a youngster I had to chase my dad; he was a butcher, a strapping man with muscly arms, six foot one and forever in a hurry. He wouldn’t stop for anyone. As soon as a new babe arrived, the one before was whipped out of the pram and plonked onto their feet so we all walked early. Six of us in nine years my mother had though only four survived and then my dad died too so that was the end of any more Browns coming into the world. I was the oldest but my mother asked around for hand-me-downs; by the time they reached our Lottie the clothes were threadbare and she could feel the cold wet ground through shoes as slippery as skates. She had chilblains the size of threepenny bits and fell so often that her knees were forever stained with the iodine my mother dabbed on her scrapes.

Now my heels get kicked and people charge past, knocking me with umbrellas and briefcases and great bags of shopping. If my knees lock or buckle, and I can’t move at all, people walk round me as if I were a bollard or a lamppost. If I’m sitting on the bench next to the swings, they see an empty playground. They gawk at my cataracts and think I’m blind. They spot my hearing aids and think I’m deaf. The old bat, the old biddy, the old bag. When you’re old and make your way slowly through the world you become invisible. ‘Don’t forget that walls have ears!’ we were told in the war, but they have forgotten.

I notice things I might not have noticed before. Mrs Smith and Mrs Patel are lovers. Sharon Bishop steals fruit and veg from the greengrocer. Men come and go when Mrs Griffin’s husband’s on the road. And Mr Hooker sits on the bench next to the climbing frame, the *Sun* spread across his lap, as he looks up girls’ dresses. And as for Mrs Ward: she did get a beating from time to time but red bruises began to appear before the green and yellow ones had even faded. And then, one morning, one of her little boys had his arm held in a makeshift sling. I noticed the flush in her cheeks, how she walked a little quicker, held her head a little higher. And in the days that followed the children’s clothes were

clean and mended, their hair brushed. Mrs Ward's voice was louder, stronger. Even though my hearing's not what it used to be I could hear two raised voices through the walls that have ears. One afternoon we stopped in the corridor, to say hello, as we always did. She asked if she could fetch me anything from the shops. I took her hand and looked her in the eyes and said if I could ever help her, if I could ever help her in any way, she only needed to ask.

A bus pulls up with a screech of brakes and water sprays from the gutter. Schoolchildren in green uniform surge off the platform and scatter like scarab beetles. I cower till they pass. Crowds never used to bother me. Not even at Cable Street and I hadn't seen hordes like that since I marched on Women's Sunday in 1908 but there was a lot more space in Hyde Park than in the narrow streets of the East End. At Cable Street hundreds of thousands of us turned out to fight the fascists, to block the roads so that Mosley and his Blackshirts couldn't pass. We knew what the Nazis were doing in Germany and we weren't going to let it happen in London. All sorts joined in: children, dockers, tailors, cabinet makers. I did things I never knew I had in me, in my fifties if not a day, and I feel proud and ashamed but, I must admit, not in equal measure. When I emptied my bedpan out of the flat above Dora Kindley's father's grocer's shop onto a fascist's head … well, if there was ever a tale to tell the grandchildren … except that I never had any. I could be a great great great great grandmother by now, another great on top if I'd started as young as my mother. But I lost my childhood sweetheart to polio and another young man, whose name I forget, to influenza and my first husband was killed in the trenches, a few weeks before I lost our baby. By the time Jack came along I was barren as they say but I mustn't complain because he was the love of my life and I was and I am still blessed.

At Cable Street I dropped marbles onto a cobbled passage and a police horse collapsed in front of my eyes. We waved banners above our heads and chanted *No pasaran!*, 'They shall not pass', a phrase in the news from the Spanish Civil War. When word came that the fascists had turned back and that we'd fought off the police, everyone in Cable Street was dancing – singing and cheering and dancing, *No pasaran!* It was the only Spanish I knew until Margaret and I went to Benidorm in 1965. It was our first time on an aeroplane and we had hoped, foolishly, for cotton wool clouds. Benidorm was crowded too, bodies on the beach thick as bees in a hive. We were the oldest guests in the hotel but not too old to try out the language with help from a phrasebook, page corners turned at *In the Restaurant* and *At the Doctor* – Margaret would deny it but she had always

been a hypochondriac. I got the hang of the lingo but poor Margaret couldn't even say Costa Blanca – Casto Blonco she kept saying – so she got in an awful pickle when she asked for a glass of sherry. We took to the dance floor each night, slow halting waltzes, our old-fashioned dresses – loose on the bust, tight on the tum – sparkling under the chandeliers.

Our Lottie's feet were so cold in her shoes. So cold. And when it rained her chilblained toes would wrinkle like raisins inside her sodden stockings. But we were luckier than some, some of the children in our street wore no shoes at all.

'Is she okay?'

'She's in a world of her own.'

'I think she said her feet were cold.'

'She's standing in a puddle.'

She? She? The cat's mother? It's Mr … the chemist – I forget his name – and the young girl who works for him.

'Are you alright, Mrs Turner?' says the chemist. 'You'll catch a chill in the rain.'

'I'm fine, thank you. Just resting my knees.'

'There's a chair inside if you need it.'

'No, thank you,' I say, firmly.

Mr Parker, or is it Barker, nods and goes back into the shop. The girl throws me a pitying look. I set off a little more quickly and a little more upright than comfortable and pain shoots through my knees. Half way down the street I remember that I had been on my way to the bank. As I dither outside the newsagents I glance at the poster stand for the Gazette: SEVERED HEAD FOUND IN CANAL.

Short man he was. Evil. Often the way: Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler. All shorter than me, in my prime, with my heels on, head held high. Across the road – on a plot of wasteland behind the stretch of boarded-up shops – a wrecking ball swings like a pendulum.

When I get home, Michelle, the young girl from my corridor, is coming out of the main entrance. She parks her wheelchair against one of the heavy double doors to hold it open.

'Thank you, dear,' I say.

'Still up for a cuppa on Wednesday, Mrs Turner?'

She's a good girl, Michelle. Always comments on my hair or compliments a blouse or cardigan she hasn't seen before. Always greets me with a smile. She took me, or I took her – depending on how you look at it – to the polling station yesterday. Her first time, probably my last, although I've said that before. I can still remember my first time, in 1918 when women over thirty had finally been given the vote. I'd been a member of the WSPU for years by then. I'd got into a bit of trouble along the way but as Emeline Pankhurst said, 'We're not law-breakers, we want to be law-makers'. And now look, I never would have thought it, our first female prime minister.

Michelle came back for a cup of tea after we'd marked our ballot papers. I told her about Women's Sunday. She was amazed how much I could remember but you never forget something like that: five hundred thousand suffragettes in Hyde Park fighting for the right to vote, dressed in white and purple and green. I wore my best white dress and a wide-brimmed hat with purple flowers and as for the green, well the grass stains sorted that one out. The sky was blue, not a single cloud, and the brass bands glinted in the sun.

There's a small crowd in the lobby now. A wedding by the looks of it: a few family members dressed up and onlookers in various states of undress. If I can get myself respectable there's no excuse for young women in dressing gowns and curlers at this time of day. The lift doors open and the bride steps out with her father. Oh, she does look beautiful in her big white dress, pregnant but beautiful. I reach for my pocket and remember my hanky, floating in the puddle with the, what do they call them, punk, punk rocker's, great big footprint stamped on it.

By the time I get indoors and onto the sofa I feel very sorry for myself indeed and quite liverish. I loved that hanky. Margaret embroidered two for my eighty-fifth birthday – one in scarlet thread, one in lilac. *85 staying alive* we'd said, we did like a game of bingo. The lilac one hasn't been seen since I did a wash in the launderette five years ago. It must have been stolen as I was always so careful to check the drum. I can't manage the laundry now so Grace, who does two hours for me on a Thursday, takes a load and brings it back the following week. I no longer separate the whites and darks now that everything looks yellow.

I stare at the crystal decanter on the sideboard, next to my dad's box of butcher's knives. His livelihood they were and the family heirloom. He left them to my oldest brother but when my brother died childless they were passed to me. The decanter sparkles

in the light from the lamp. I would kill for a medicinal brandy but the last time I tried to pull out the stopper I sprained my wrist in vain.

A pain shoots through my knees. I undo the button on my waistband and shift and wriggle my bottom until my trousers drop round my ankles. As I rub cream into my skin I catch my reflection in the television screen – what a sight! When I pull my trousers back up it hurts so much that I wish I hadn't bothered with the cream as it makes no difference anyway. I shuffle to the fireplace and take my jar of lucky gallstones from the mantelpiece. Like the scars on my belly the stones are a celebration of all the operations I've survived. I couldn't keep my kidney or my womb but the little jar of stones gives me hope and strength. It sits on the mantelpiece with my wedding photograph and a Coronation cup and a Silver Jubilee plate which lists the kings and queens of England. I could recite them all when I was at the grammar school but there's been a few since Victoria. If I last another three years I'll get my own telegram from the Queen although, no offence to Her Majesty, I'd like to join my Jack as soon as possible.

I take a stone out of the jar; it's quite pretty, glinting in the light, black as coal. Margaret's gallstones were orangey-brown. She had hers removed first, dozens of them there were. She kept hers in a jar just like mine. As I roll a stone between my fingers I try to think of hopeful, happy things. Meals on Wheels is fish and chips today, my favourite. On Tuesday my nephew is taking me to the hairdresser. Michelle will pop in on Wednesday. Grace will come on Thursday and leave the flat spotless, smelling of lemon and pine. I feel blessed again. I also feel hungry but dinner won't be here till midday and it's only eleven. My tum rumbles. I pop the stone back in the jar and twist the lid as tightly as I can. I'll make myself a cup of tea and treat myself to a custard cream, maybe two.

I fill the kettle and put it on the stove. I take a cup and saucer from the cupboard but the cup slips from my hand and smashes into pieces which skid across the kitchen floor. I move my walking frame out of the way so that I can bend to pick up the piece of china next to my foot. Oh my knees. I stand up and hit my head on the metal edge of the cupboard door. I grasp the frame to steady myself. I wish that my Jack was here to help and I howl. The kettle starts whistling and together we sound like a pack of wolves. I switch off the stove. I will tackle the mess and make tea later. I reach for my pocket and remember my hanky, floating in the puddle with the punk's great big footprint stamped on it.

I open the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet in the bathroom so that I can see the back of my head in the mirror above the sink. My head looks like a smooth brown speckled egg smeared with blood, the wisps of hair a nest of straw. You don't see blood on egg shells much these days, not so often as when I was a girl. The longer I stare at my head the more egg-like and grotesque it becomes. I examine my red-rimmed milky-blue eyes and the pouches beneath them, my deep criss-crossed lines, my downturned mouth and my scraggy neck and then I feel even more sorry for myself. I take off my hearing aids and I take out my false teeth. I pull ugly gummy faces in the mirror, howling like a mad woman.

I sleep fitfully. When you're as old as I am you know that you won't have to keep a secret for long but the discovery of the head in the canal has made me uneasy.

My nephew, bless his heart, comes every Tuesday. I'll be glad to have my hair done this afternoon as it's all mussed up from where I cut my scalp. He's a few minutes late so I'm a bit bothered by the time he arrives. I have my shoes and coat on and my handbag and keys ready on the coffee table.

'Have you heard the news?' he says as he helps me up off the sofa and pecks me on the cheek. 'I don't want to scare you but they've found the head in the canal, just across the way. I don't know how they missed it last time. They should be able to identify the body now. I do wish you'd keep your door locked.' He hands me a slim parcel wrapped in brown paper, my initials written in scrawly letters: ACT.

'What's this?' I ask. 'It's not my birthday.'

'It was in your postbox. But leave it for now, Auntie, we need to get a move on.'

We shuffle out of the flat, bent double over our walking sticks. Mrs Ward is coming in the opposite direction, clutching a child's hand in each of hers, heavily pregnant with her third. We nod at one another but neither of us speaks nor smiles.

When I get back home and sit down I hear a crackling noise and I pull the parcel from underneath me. It's stuck down with Sellotape and I struggle to open it; in the end I use scissors and hope that I don't damage whatever's inside. Whatever it is, it smells very fragrant. My hanky! Thank the Lord! White as bone. Not a footprint in sight. I peer inside the parcel and find a note.

Dear Madam (ACT)

I saw you drop your handkerchief yesterday. I'm very sorry I didn't stop but I was rushing for a train. I recognised you from the tower. I live here too. The hanky was still there on my way home so I picked it up. I did a bit of detective work using the initials on your hanky and the letter boxes in the lobby and I am hoping that I am returning the hanky to its rightful owner! My girlfriend has washed and ironed it for you.

Yours faithfully,

Adam, Flat 48

I hold the hanky to my nose and smile. It smells of fabric softener, April showers or summer meadows. I take a sheet of my best writing paper, Basildon Bond in blue, and slip the page of guidelines underneath. I write to Adam of Flat 48 to thank him and say how very grateful I am. I invite him and his girlfriend in for a cup of tea and a biscuit.

It takes my mind off the pain when there's people around but Michelle's mum dropped by to say that Michelle's got a sore throat so won't be popping in today. It's too wet and windy to take a walk or sit on a bench in the playground. I switch on the television. I like the schools' programmes, there's always something interesting to learn, but my knees are so sore it's hard to concentrate. I rub at them furiously, round and round. The man on the television babbles on. I switch the TV off at the socket to save me getting up.

Mrs Ward came to me in the night. Nightie drenched in blood. She was shaking so hard that I thought she was fitting. I thought he'd hit her again, that she'd lost the baby, but when she'd calmed down the terror in her eyes was tempered with relief.

'No, don't use your pram,' I said. 'Take my shopping trolley. No, not the rubbish chute. The canal.'

The body wouldn't quite fit in the trolley. Even though he was a small man and Mrs Ward tried every which way she could, sweat rolling down her temples. And then I

remembered my dad's box of knives – his boning knife, his cleaver – keen enough to sever anything.

I talked to keep her calm as I watched. 'I'll stay with the children while you go to the canal. Nothing to worry about, you won't see a soul.' Her knuckles glowed white as she clenched the handle. I thought of the rows of carcasses hanging outside my father's shop. Of his bloodied aprons. 'And when you clean up,' I said, 'don't boil wash the blood, you'll cook it in. Use cold water and coal tar soap. Report him missing after a while. Say it's not out of character but he's been gone longer this time.'

I remembered the next day that I'd forgotten to unpack the veg at the bottom of the trolley: potatoes and onions. I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on. Mrs Ward bought me a lovely new trolley, in a nice red check, from Woolies. I think she could ill-afford it but she said it was the very least she could do.

The doorbell wakes me. I must have dozed off. It's probably a door-to-door chap selling Encyclopaedia Britannica or vacuum cleaners. I felt sorry for the salesman who came last week so I bought a toilet brush set, in avocado to match the bathroom suite. It would have been cheaper on the market but it saved me carrying it home. I usually offer them a cup of tea if they seem nice. The bell rings again. 'Come in whoever you are,' I call. I leave the door on the latch during the day as I can't be doing with the toing and froing. I hear the door open and voices in the corridor.

'Hello, Mrs Turner,' calls a soft-voiced, young-sounding man. 'It's Adam from upstairs. I found your hanky.'

'Come on in.'

'We'll just take our boots off.'

Well I never! It's the punk with the porcupine quills! And a tall girl with matching pink hair, black lipstick and a leather dog collar round her neck.

Adam comes over to the sofa and shakes my hand. 'How do you do, Mrs Turner. This is my girlfriend, Amanda.' He sounds awfully la-di-da for a punk. I wonder what he did before.

Amanda smiles. The black lipstick makes her teeth look very white, as white as anything looks these days. She shakes my hand too. The studs on her dog collar are a little unnerving. She's carrying a bundle under one arm. 'I hope you don't mind,' she says, 'but we thought you might like to meet Saffron.'

It's a babe! A beautiful babe with blue eyes and golden curls and flushed cheeks. Amanda holds her out to me. 'Can I really?' I say. I haven't held a babe in years. I shuffle my bottom backwards and sit myself upright and gather her into my arms. 'What a poppet. Aren't you just perfect,' I say. I do hope that they don't make her into a punk rocker too soon. She has a ROCK AGAINST RACISM badge pinned to her handknitted yellow cardie. I suppose it's good to educate them young. I hear some wicked things said in the playground. Saffron smiles and gurgles.

'She likes you,' says Amanda, 'you're a natural.'

I remember the baby I lost, what seems like centuries ago now. I feel quite overwhelmed and reach for my hanky. I remember it floating in the puddle with the punk's great big footprint stamped on it. And then I remember that my hanky is in my pocket and that the punk is standing in front of me and then I don't need the hanky any more.

'Have you lived here long?' I say.

'A few months,' says Amanda. 'We got re-housed before Saffy was born. We'd hoped for a maisonette. It'll do for a while though, it's not like she's running around. The flat's nice enough but we're not sure about bringing up a child in a place where headless bodies are found. Did you see the paper?'

'Don't worry yourselves about that,' I say. 'I lived through Jack the Ripper and I'm still here. The Krays are locked up. And we're a long way from Yorkshire.'

Amanda looks unconvinced. Adam puts his arm around her shoulders and gives her a squeeze.

'Will you stay for a cup of tea?' I say. 'I've got some custard creams in.'

'We'd love to,' says Adam. 'I can put the kettle on.'

'Please, let me.' I stand up. The pain in my knees has quite gone.

A-Z of body fluids found in the lift

Amniotic fluid

Bile

Blood

Breastmilk

Cerumen

Exudate

Faeces

Mucus

Rheum

Saliva

Sebum

Semen

Sputum

Sweat

Tears

Urine

Vaginal secretion

Vomit

Body fluid graffiti in the lift

Faeces? What faeces?
The ones up your arse

shit happens

silent but deadly

Tears in my ears

Beverley Owen's got BO

no spitting no pissing
is shitting ok?

Bogey man

Didn't get caught IT+JS
Coz noone would of noticed you doin it ians dicks so small

Hands up who voted tory? See the blood?

EXIT

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