Lovereading.co.uk

Junk

Melvin Burgess

Puffin

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One



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

'I'm hungry,' complained the girl.

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

'Nah. Any crisps left?'

'Nope.'

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

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

Gemma looked over and smiled. 'Nah.'

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

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

Tar said, 'Come with me.'

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

'You must be crazy,' said Gemma.

'Why?'

'What have I got to run away from?'

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

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

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

Still . . .

'What about school and that?'

'You can go to school any time.'

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

Gemma would have liked to. She wanted to. But . . . What for? She didn't love Tar, she only liked him. Her

parents, and her father in particular, were totally ghastly but he didn't knock her around. Not yet anyhow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'It's only me . . .'

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

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

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

'I suppose we ought to have a secret knock or

something,' he said. 'Here . . .' He handed over the bag. Gemma poked inside.

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

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

'No. But I got some pickle . . .' Barry handed over a pot from his coat pocket.

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

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

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

They laughed.

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

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

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

'I told you . . .'

'All right.'

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

'Yeah, please . . .' he beamed.

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

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

'Tomorrow,' said Tar.

'Got everything?'

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

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

Tar looked stricken.

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

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

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

'That's what I'm hoping,' said Tar.

It got very cold in the garage later on. Gemma and Tar snuggled up together and wrapped the blankets around them. They kissed. Gemma didn't stop him

when his hand glided under her top, but when she felt his hand sliding down her tummy she slapped his fingers lightly.

'Naughty,' she said.

'Why not?' asked Tar in surprise.

'Not here . . .'

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

'I just don't want it to go any further.'

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

Gemma shook her head.

'It won't go any further, then.'

'All right.'

Chapter Two
Gemma



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

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

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

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

And I think he might be in love with me.

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

Is that human or what?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stone Age!

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

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

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

'She'll have to learn!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he said, 'Liar.'

The whole room went cold. My mother was furious, I reckon. She glared at him. I mean, I don't know if she

believed me, but she wanted to. I don't know what he believed. He just wanted to hurt me, I reckon.

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

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

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

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

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

The difference between Tar's dad and my dad is that

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

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

Well, I wasn't wrong. I'd have been a real cold bitch not to keep Tar company on his last day in Minely. I was beginning to think the only thing I'd done wrong was refusing to sleep with him. But I know when to open my mouth as well as when to keep it shut. Dad's easy enough to handle. The trouble is he enrages me so much I forget to do it sometimes.

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

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

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

'Have you two made friends now?' she asked as if

she didn't know. She must have been hiding behind the door waiting for her cue the whole time. I hate being manipulated.

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

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

Out it all came.

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

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

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

I was trying to be sarcastic.

Job, packed in.

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

I was trying to be cool. I was dripping sarcasm, dripping. I wasn't even going to bother arguing. But I was

livid. So was Mum. I could see Dad looking a bit injured, as if this was all going too far. But Mum had really made her mind up.

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

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

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

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

Mum said, 'Leave her . . .'

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

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

'Bastards, BASTARDS, **B A S T A R D S!**' I screamed.

There was an understanding silence.

After a bit I calmed down and I decided to play it cool and hope that the whole thing would blow over. I didn't go out in the week . . . well, there was no Tar, was there? The rest of the gang were still hanging out

on the beach on the seafront, but I could do without that for a few days. But at the weekend I went to work. I wasn't going to miss that.

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

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

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

'I work here,' I reminded her.

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

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

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

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