

# Just a Small Town

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Hookline Books, Bookline & Thinker Ltd.



No work, no hope, forgotten by everyone. Happiness comes from getting high and the only industry is the supply of drugs.

A small town that could be anywhere: industry is in decline, streets are in decay, those that are able to have left, while those left behind take short-term joy in drugs.

Four young people are among the left behind.

Alex consumes heroine to escape his abusive father. Jim uses to hide from guilt after the death of the friend he didn't save. Chelsi's brother killed a local boy, and ostracism pushes her towards a rival gang, prostitution and loneliness. Danny is a hustler but needs protection from the drug gang that supplies him.

Can any of them survive the addiction, gang life, isolation and manipulation?

Can they conquer the adversity in their lives?

A small town that could be anywhere.

For Caron Freeborn,  
An amazing teacher and a special person.  
You are missed

## Jim

As he sat in the crowded bedroom Jim Jones looked at them and wondered if they were actually his friends. All three of them. Did he trust anyone there?

He didn't trust Nick. Shit, he didn't even like him anymore. It was Nick's house; this was the only reason Jim saw him – even associated with him – as selfish as that sounded. Nick's mum didn't give a toss and he was allowed to have people round smoking and the rest of it while his little sister was in the next bedroom. Jim felt sorry for Chelsi. The girl had no hope.

He used to be alright, did Nick. He was in a bit of trouble as a kid – stealing cars and stuff like that. Despite this he had a decent nature. It was his mum that changed him. Shagging every Tom, Dick and Harry in the town – she'd even had a couple of his mates. Having a mother like that was going to have some effect. There was also the fact that he and Joe had started banging coke up their nose most nights. Since that, Nick had become the most selfish prick you could ever meet. An arrogant sponge, absorbing and absorbing and giving nothing in return. As Nick saw it, anything brought into his house was

his, so he had the divine right to take as much as he pleased off anyone who entered.

‘Jim, are you passing that or what?’ said Nick, lying on his usual spot on the bed.

Jim leant across from the couch, passing the spliff in the ashtray. Nick took it without saying anything, just carried on looking at his phone.

Prick. It summed him up. Jim watched him lying there, taking heavy pulls – really dragging the shit out of it – his face screwed up as he sent texts. Kel again.

See that was the other thing about Nick. For about six months now he’d been going out with Kel. She was 14.

She was a nice girl, mad about him because he was her first. He walked all over her. Always paranoid about what she was doing when he wasn’t there, though he would often cheat on her. They’d all seen how Nick treated Kel, though no-one in the room had said or done anything. They just carried on as they were – getting wasted and using his house.

The only one who ever did say anything was Drew. Drew was a good mate to Jim. Would never hear anyone say a bad word about his pals, would always have your back. He hadn’t been coming round much lately. He was never as big on the sessions as the rest of them were – more of a clean-living guy. The main reason was because him and Nick

weren't exactly tight no more – weren't tight at all. Drew was family friends with Kel and had known her since she was a little girl. He didn't particularly like the way Nick treated her. None of them liked it, but Drew had the balls to say something.

Drew was someone Jim could trust. Drew wasn't even in the room.

This was the problem that was rolling around Jim's head. Yeah, maybe he was being a bit paranoid, but he couldn't work out why he was spending so much time with these people when he didn't even know if he could trust them. They all called each other 'mate', they'd hung around with each other for years – but were they really? I mean what were they to each other when it actually came down to it, apart from sharers in experience?

'You know, boys, I've been thinking,' said J, scratching his head, his eyes doing the usual things. 'We've all got dogs – but we've never walked them together.'

'Yeah man, we should all go on a dog walk together. That would be sick. They'd love it,' said Joe, lifting his head from the spliff he was making. It was a bit of an ordeal for him. He kept forgetting he was doing it and spilling it on his lap and starting again, rolling the roach over and over while sweat glistened on his forehead.

'My dog doesn't get along with other dogs,' Jim said.

'It'll be alright man, we'd have 'em all on leads,' Joe said.

'Yeah don't worry, Jim. She'll be ok. We'll all be on the ball.' As J spoke, he took his shirt off and dropped it on the floor. His leg shook. 'What's her name, Ruby?'

'She's a He. Called Stan,' Jim said.

'Oh yeah – Stan. He'll be all good, mate, our dogs are alright. Ain't they, J?'

'Yeah. They're sound.'

'Whatever, boys,' Jim replied.

He just wasn't in that zone tonight. Felt numb. Everything that came out of their mouths was complete rubbish. On another night everything would make sense and the idea of the dog walk would be a grand plan. But it was nonsense. None of their dogs had ever met. Jim's was a nervous wreck, a skit-tish Lurcher that would fight or flight at any confrontation. Joe's was a violent Staff – a stocky ball of muscle that would attack anything. And J's – J's was old. Jim was surprised that the old mongrel was still going. Even without all that, J and Joe weren't leaving their beds the next day. They'd be stuck in a hot room that smelt of breath and body odour, fixed to their sweat-stained sheets in a foetal position. Their mouths would be dry and their hearts would be pounding. They would feel

exhausted, but they would not be able to sleep for love or money. They certainly would not be out walking any fucking dogs.

'You ok, Jim? You seem stressed tonight mate,' said Joe.

'I'm cool man, stop asking.' Jim looked at Nick finishing off his spliff on the bed. 'Pass me some of that please, Joe.'

It wasn't as if Jim didn't know how they felt; he'd been like it many times himself. He just wasn't feeling it as much lately, like all the happiness had been drained from the inside out. He had to take too much to feel anything these days.

He looked at Joe. He was a true mate, Jim supposed. They'd known each other years and had had some laughs. Though he was selfish and couldn't ever be relied upon. He was the same with everyone – though Jim knew that he was as much of a mate to Joe as anyone. The guy was just out for himself. Although he was the only one of them with a job (labouring for a plumber for £200 a week), he was tighter than a duck's arse. The only person he really shared anything with was Nick and that was because he was using his house – just like everyone.

Nick was still sitting there, drinking his beer, screw-facing the phone. Jim looked at his face – Christ, he hated him. Actually,

hated him. Couldn't remember a single thing in recent times that could have made him like the bloke. How bad was it, that you could be constantly round someone's house, associating with them most days and you didn't even like them? Worse than that, you actually hated them. Jim had to look away. He was getting wound up just seeing his face.

J was just a messhead, pure and simple. Yeah, he was a funny lad – just watching him would be enough to have you in stitches. But there was nothing about him when he wasn't high. He had no ambition for anything else. He was selfish in his own way too, though not as coldly as Joe. He was just selfish in the sense that you only saw him when you were getting on it and you probably meant nothing more to him than company. He used everyone as much as everyone used Nick's house.

What was he even doing there? The way things had been going lately, he should have been loyal to Drew. Everyone knew how it was with Drew and Nick – it was only a matter of time before it reached boiling point and Nick would get a beating. He had been asking for it really. Some days Nick would be slagging Drew off – about how he interfered between him and Kel and how he needed a 'good slap', even though they all knew Drew would batter him. Though Jim would just sit there. He

wouldn't take Drew's side, as he really should. Maybe he'd say stuff defending him, but not really. Not enough. He just carried on being the shell of a person that he was. An empty sack of life.

He used to knock around with Drew all the time. He realised now he was the only friend he had left since Alex had gone.

How long was it since Alex left? It must have been a year. No-one knew where he was. There were rumours he was in the City, but they were just rumours, no-one really knew. His old man Tony wasn't the easiest bloke to talk to. One time Jim had gone round there and asked where Alex was, only for his dad to slam the door in his face and tell him to fuck off. Old soak. It was all down to him anyway – the amount of beatings he used to give. Alex just probably had enough of it and did the off – Jim didn't blame him. Maybe one day he would come back or at least get in touch. Al owed him that. He was his best friend and he missed him.

Maybe he'd go looking for Al. Get some money together and just fuck off to London. He probably wouldn't find him, but it was worth it – even just to get away for a while and clear his head. He was sure Al had an auntie in Kilburn. Maybe he would try there. Kilburn was a shithole but at least he didn't know

anyone there – could walk unseen without being pestered or scrounged off. Not used. He might get robbed, but at least the thief wouldn't be biased. He would just be like any other victim.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone a day straight.

When he thought about it, the only one he would really miss would be Drew. And he hardly saw him lately anyway – he was too busy hanging around with these mugs.

He was going to ring Drew tomorrow. Come out with it all and apologise. About how he should have had his back more, how he was sorry he'd been a shit friend. Maybe Drew would come with him, to try and find Alex? It was a long shot but that was the sort of thing Drew would do for his pals. It was about time someone tried to get Al back home.

He couldn't be bothered with all this pissing around with Nick and that – getting nowhere, just dragging him down. They could go fuck themselves. He'd had enough.

'I'm off, boys,' Jim said, rising to his feet and zipping up his jacket.

'What? Where you goin'?' said Joe.

'It's only 11, you pussy,' Nick said.

'I'm tired,' Jim shrugged.

'Tired? We've not even got started!'

'I'm not feeling it,' Jim replied.

'You've fucking changed man,' J laughed.

'Later,' said Jim, walking out. He didn't even look at Nick.

'Later,' said the others.

As he walked home he felt he'd gained some dignity in leaving. He hadn't lied to them – he was tired. Not that he needed sleep – he doubted that would happen for a good few hours. He was tired of them. The same old nights. The fake friends. He couldn't be bothered with it all anymore. He'd had his fill.

He stopped at the off-licence. He'd just made it in time before close and he bought some fags and some Rizla. As he left the shop, he saw someone he knew walking past. Smithy looked his usual self, pale and skinny.

'Jim, how's it going?'

'Sound, Smithy, you good?'

'Not bad.'

'What's up?'

'It's Drew.'

'Drew? What about Drew?'

'Nick been offering him out and that – must be pissed. Drew's going mad. You just come from round there?'

‘Yeah – I’m ’avin an early one. Can’t be arsed tonight. Nick didn’t say anything about it. Been on his phone all night though.’

‘He wouldn’t say anything about it, the little prick. Does it all through texts cos he knows you lot would pull him up on it.’

If only we would, but we’re actually a bunch of using cowards, Jim thought.

‘Where’s Drew now?’ Jim asked.

‘He’s gone round there to smash him. I tried stopping him...’

Yeah right.

‘When did he go there? I must of just missed him.’

‘He left just now. I’m telling you, Jim, I wouldn’t wanna be in Nick’s shoes when he gets round there. He’s gone too far this time.’

Jim gave Smithy a fag and he lit one for himself. They both stood in silence as they smoked.

Part of him wanted to go back round there. Talk Drew out of it and stop Nick getting battered. There was a small part of him that didn’t want him to get hurt – especially when he knew what Drew was capable of when you pushed his buttons.

Or was it? Might be the exact thing Nick needed. A good beating that he’d probably deserved for a long time. A hiding that would finally put him in his place. Might make him leave Kel so she could get a boyfriend her

own age who was actually nice to her. Or at least it might give him the nudge he needed into treating her better – though Jim doubted that would ever happen. Arseholes are arseholes at the end of the day.

Jim stood thinking. If he went back round there, what was he going to do? He remembered the feeling he'd had when he looked at Nick earlier. He'd boiled inside, he wanted to hit him himself. If he went back, nothing would change. He wouldn't be able to stop Drew or change his mind. He'd just see stuff he didn't have to see.

'Laters, Smithy,' Jim said, bumping his fist.

'You going back round there?' Smithy asked.

'Nah. Fuck Nick. He deserves what's coming to him.'

'But he's gonna kill him, Jim!'

'So what? Go and stop him if you care so much.'

Jim turned and walked, flicking his fag onto the empty road.

## Chelsi

What the hell was she going to do?

Her heels splashed through the puddles as she walked through the lane that led to school. Another few minutes and she'd be on the green – then past the church and she would be there.

Another day of torture.

Chelsi didn't know if she could take another day like the previous one. The teachers were hardly supportive – even if they were, how would it help? They couldn't stop the masses – like basically the whole school – from getting to her. Constantly. Every day the same, like a nightmare on repeat. One she rarely woke from.

She hated Nick. She'd hated him as long as she could remember. He'd never looked out for her, never done anything for her like a brother should. Never stepped up as a man when there was no dad around, only looked out for himself and took the piss out of Mum. Always the little shit growing up, always getting in trouble. Then when he 'calmed down' – having all his mates round at all hours stinking the house out with skunk and doing God knows what else. Selfish prick. He

never even acknowledged that Chelsi or her mum existed.

The amount of times she couldn't sleep with all the noise they made from his room. Near enough every night. She was grateful when they had time off – though it wasn't often. She heard it all. The walls weren't thick at that house and if they were it probably wouldn't have mattered, they were so loud. She remembered their shit music and their ridiculous conversations about life – like they knew everything about the world from sitting in a shitty bedroom taking drugs. They were idiots. The only one that was half decent was Jim Jones – Chelsi was best friends with his brother, Danny, at junior school. Pretty much boyfriend and girlfriend, she supposed – as much as two kids can be. Jim was a wrong 'un like the rest of them, but he was ok. He used to look guilty when he came round.

She could never have her own friends over. Could you imagine it? Their house was notorious. There was no way any of her friends would be allowed round. It was a simple no-no.

So instead, at 12 years old, she would sit in her room and put up with all the aggro coming from her brother's room. It was always pretty much the same – until the night it happened. After that, everything changed. She

was there – she heard it. All that stuff she saw after. That shit was enough to fuck anyone’s head up. Then, all the drama of the following months. The court case, the sentence, leaving the house – just her and Mum. Those walls were cursed, haunted – too many bad memories that could never be erased. They downsized into a shoddy flat a couple of roads down. Although it was small and crowded, it felt empty with just the two of them there. Not that she missed him. Her brother not being around anymore wasn’t the bad thing. It was just because she knew *why* he wasn’t around.

Mum was a mess. She’d always been a mess really – an embarrassment most of the time. But after all that she became worse, sliding further and further. She drank loads and lashed out at everyone, saying how it wasn’t her precious son’s fault. He’d always been the favourite. Chelsi had heard of mums and their sons before, but what the fuck? He’d always been a twat, but it was nothing to Mum. After everything he had put her through, the sun still shined out of his arse. He wasn’t the little monster that everyone said he was. He was the biggest prick in the world.

She thought of his letters. How they spoke to her like she was a much-loved sister. It was as if he had invented their entire history from his prison cell and convinced himself they’d actually been close. Perfect big bro and

little sis, doting mum. It was only the fact that there was never a daddy figure on the scene that kept them from being the perfect little cornflake family. All the bullshit on those pieces of paper – failing to address the nitty gritty of the situation, or even admitting what he'd done. Like it hadn't fazed him. She didn't reply to any of them.

It was obvious that people hated Chelsi because of what Nick did that night. Her switch to senior school was when she realised her brother's actions had really changed her life. Her first year had offered nothing but misery. Six months in and she was struggling to see it out.

She stopped at the old bench outside the church. It was still damp from the previous night's rain but she didn't care. She sat there most days. She would wait as long as she could, taking her time smoking a fag before she faced another day of shit.

A few kids trickled past, taking their daily route. She didn't know any of them by name but they knew her. About twenty went past, boys and girls. All older, all staring. Chelsi just looked at the floor. Looking back was asking for trouble. She heard them say the odd thing as they walked.

'That's her, ain't it?' one boy said to another.

‘Yeah. Look at her. Fucking sket.’

She stared at the gravestones that were scattered around the grounds of the church. Old, cold pieces of stone. Beds of eternal rest. She envied them. Free from pain and hate. Unless there really was a heaven and a hell – then some of them would be suffering. Though Chelsi struggled to believe in that. Life at the moment was all the hell she could muster.

‘Christ,’ she said to herself. Is this what it had come to? Being jealous of the dead?

What was in store today? It wasn’t hard to guess. The usual muted response – the stares. Come break time there was always someone having a pop. It had spread through the school like a disease – everyone was infected. Boys, girls – it didn’t matter. Wherever Chelsi went she was hounded. She skulked around like a wounded animal avoiding the predators.

It had started out ok. She had two friends from her junior school: Kara and Louise. They helped each other settle. It was scary in as much as starting senior school is scary for anyone, plus Heathway School had a grim reputation. They started quietly, got chatting to a couple of other girls. It felt promising. Like she was going to be able to put a terrible year behind her.

Then she got noticed. She hadn't realised that Drew's cousin went to the school. He was in the year above. She remembered when he first saw her in the corridor. She knew who he was, and he recognised her. She felt the guilty look on her face. Guilty of what? Being someone's sister? That was what made everything worse. She was guilty by blood association.

'Are you Nick's sister?'

She'd tried to walk past, pretended she didn't hear, but he stepped in front of her. A packed corridor was watching.

'You fucking are, aren't you?'

Within days none of the girls spoke to her and the boys abused her. Even Kara and Lou distanced themselves. They couldn't stand alone with Nick Butler's sister.

Murderer, murderer, murderer.

She hadn't done it. Why did people hate her so much? It was as if she had helped him in the act. She hated her brother just as much as everyone else. She said it so many times her tongue went slack.

She tried arguing her case for a long time. Nobody would listen. Everyone had loved Drew. She'd heard how many people had been at the funeral. The story was all over the papers. There wasn't anyone in town who hadn't heard. A young lad, full of life, who

defended his friend and was stabbed in the heart for it. A crime that devastated everyone. He was a popular guy and nice with it; not one of those popular boys who is only really popular for being an asshole.

At school the amount of people who didn't even know him and jumped on the bandwagon was ridiculous. These people helped make Chelsi's life hell and they didn't even know him! Chelsi had liked him, for fuck's sake – even kinda fancied him. All the girls did.

She made a fight of things at first – as good as she could. The abuse hadn't stopped at verbal lashings. She'd had kick-ins – the girls were the worst. Her hair was nearly pulled out one time. Her eyes had been gouged with long nails. Her head stamped on with stilettos. She tried for a while but there was no fight left.

She finished her fag and lit another with a shaking hand. She'd only started smoking recently. She had hated the taste at first but now she liked it. The hit on the throat and the smell on her fingers. She didn't do it to be cool – there was no chance of that happening. She liked it when sometimes on a clear day, when the sun filtered at a certain angle, she could see the smoke in all its glory as it passed through the light. Smoking was one thing she enjoyed. She stole them off her

mum – who didn't know where she was half the time let alone how many fags she had left.

She was late. Mr Grayson would give her shit. All the teachers did – they were as bad as the fucking kids. Weren't they supposed to protect her? Some anti-bullying scheme or something? Maybe they hated her because of her family too. It was clear she was being bullied and yet nothing had been done. To be fair, she had never reported anyone – what was the point? She'd have to report most of the school.

Some of the girls were worse than others. A couple of times when she had been beaten up bad after school she'd had a couple of weeks off. Even though she was in pain, those weeks were relief. Just lying in her room watching crap telly. These times she could sometimes forget. She milked it as long as she could till there was nothing wrong with her. Mum, in her usual state, would storm up to the school and mouth off at the teachers. But nothing changed. And Mum just forgot about it after a while. Went back to wallowing in her bottle about her poor little locked-up son.

Whenever she got caught skipping lessons – it was usually last lesson so she could avoid being attacked – the teachers came down hard. They never bothered to try and get to the source of the problem – they just dealt

with the surface. The amount of times Chelsi had heard words along the lines of: *'We had great expectations of you after your achievements at primary school. When will you realise your potential and stop throwing it all away?'*

'When everyone stops trying to drive me to an early fucking grave,' she said aloud to herself, sat on the bench.

The streets were quiet now. The only noise came from one of the houses over the road as a fat, bald man put his rubbish in the wheelie bin in his front garden. No more kids on their way to school – the day was underway and Chelsi was getting later all the time.

She started to walk, though not in the school's direction. She wasn't going in. Fuck it, what were they going to do, kick her out? She wouldn't complain if they did. The thought of going in turned her stomach daily. Today was Tuesday and she was craving the weekend already. Even though she didn't do anything but stay in, she was at peace. Then by Sunday, knowing she had to go in the next day, the sickness came back. It was the same old cycle and she wanted to break it.

She didn't know where she was going. Mum left for work at 12, so she couldn't go home till then. She would just walk as far as she could, away from Heathway. Maybe find somewhere quiet to just sit the time out. She didn't want to be seen too much in her

uniform and get reported to the Old Bill by some busybody.

She found herself biting her fingernails. She was always doing it lately. Looking down at them she noticed they were bitten back, the skin around them sore and frayed. Stopping next to a car, she stared at her reflection in the window. Her hair needed a good brush and her face was pale and gaunt. She'd stopped bothering with everything recently. Wasn't eating enough, wasn't sleeping enough – didn't take pride in anything. She hadn't even realised how she looked when she left the house. How did things get so bad? Chelsi began to cry. No wonder they all called her sket.

The houses she passed were new and mysterious. The further she walked, the more miserable the buildings seemed – grey, with the paint flaking and the gardens overgrown. The world seemed darker than ever before.

She walked for an hour in no particular direction, down streets she'd never seen. Then she came out onto a main road, Chedhall Way, and opposite her were Chedhall shops. She'd passed there before in the car with her mum. It was a place she'd heard a lot about, mainly bad. She didn't want to linger. Maybe if she took a slow walk back it wouldn't be far off 12? But curiosity got the better of her and

she decided to grab a coke for the return journey.

The shops were quite empty. Over on the far side by the dry cleaners were a group of old blokes sitting on benches. They had cans in their hands and sat in gruff silence. Luckily she didn't have to walk past them.

Some of the shops were closed down with graffiti all over the shutters. There was only a newsagent and an off-licence open. It wasn't like Dairwell – though she supposed only you know what you know. Everything was dirtier, the ground, the shop fronts – even the people. An old woman hobbled past, her hair matted and her clothes filthy. Chelsi was in hostile territory – though it was better than being in school. Despite being scared there was a nervous excitement, of something new and dangerous. She felt alive. She walked into the newsagents.

The shop was small and dated. There was nobody behind the counter, but Chelsi could hear the faint sound of a radio. She grabbed a can of coke from the fridge and walked to the counter. She heard the door open behind her as someone came in, but she didn't look round.

A short, middle-aged woman with a pinched face came from out the back. She eyed Chelsi and her uniform with a blank expression.

‘50p,’ the woman said.

Chelsi fumbled in her blazer pocket and brought out the change. She thought she had more – she was 15p short.

Chelsi cleared her throat. ‘Sorry – I’ve only got 35.’

‘50,’ the woman said, shaking her head.

‘I’m sorry,’ Chelsi said, picking up the can to put it back.

‘Here, Barb,’ said a voice from behind. An arm reached past Chelsi and placed a coin on the counter.

Chelsi turned and it was a boy dressed in a tracksuit.

‘Anything else you’d like?’ he asked Chelsi.

‘Um, no, thank you.’ She held the can awkwardly.

He smiled at her and she noticed he had teeth missing. She wasn’t sure how old he was. Was he young-looking or just young?

‘Thanks, again,’ she said, walking out.

When she got outside, she quickly pulled out a fag. The can was cold in her hand and she put it in her bag.

The boy came out the shop. ‘Here, have one of mine,’ he said, holding out a fag.

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ she said, with her arm in the bag looking for her lighter.

'Don't be daft,' he said. He lit one up and passed it to her.

'Thanks,' said Chelsi, confused.

'Aren't you a bit young to be smoking anyway?' His tone was comfortable, like he knew her.

'I'm 14,' she lied.

'Still not old enough.'

'How old are you?' Chelsi asked.

'Too old for school,' he smiled, showing the missing teeth again. He wasn't 15.

'Why aren't you at school now? Were you excluded?' Chelsi said.

He just smiled at her. 'You're a bit far from home, aren't you? What's a girl from Dairwell doing up these ends?'

'How do you know I'm from Dairwell?'

'That's a Heathway uniform, ain't it? Don't know anyone round here goes Heathway.'

What if this boy knew Nick? Was that why he had been nice to her? His way of pulling her in? She shouldn't have walked out all this way. Trying to get as far away from Heathway had landed her in more trouble. 'Out of the frying pan into the fire' as her Nan used to say.

He must have seen the worry on her face. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'm only messing with you. Just wondered what a skiving girl

from Heathway is doing round here. On her own.'

He looked at her in a strange way. Like, despite what he was asking, he knew all about her.

'I...just don't like school,' said Chelsi. She didn't know what to say.

'Getting picked on?'

'What? No, I just...'

'Kids can be fuckers.'

Chelsi didn't know what to say. She wanted to cry again. 'Anyway, thank you for my drink. And the smoke,' she said. 'I better be going.'

'Hey wait – what's your name?'

'Chelsi.'

'I'm Reece.'

'I'm sorry but I've got to go.' She turned and started walking.

'Later, Chelsi.'

The next morning Chelsi told her mum she was ill. Her mum didn't say anything – she probably didn't care if she went school anyway.

Once her mum went to work Chelsi got ready. She had a bath and spent ages brushing her hair. She put on her nicest jeans and

a little jacket. When she was ready, she set off.

When she got to Chedhall she sat on a bench. The shops were empty again – though there was drum and bass coming from one of the flats above the shops. It was cold and she felt stupid for wearing her nice little jacket when she would have been warmer in her coat.

After about half hour of waiting she got up to leave.

‘Chelsi!’

It was Reece.

She turned and faced him. She could feel herself blushing. She didn’t even know what to say. She stood there and smiled, like an idiot.

‘Not bothered with school at all today, eh?’ Reece said.

‘No,’ said Chelsi, shaking her head. ‘I was wondering – could you get me some fags please?’

‘You’ve come a long way to get some fags,’ he said.

She stopped herself from saying she didn’t know anyone to get them for her.

‘Don’t worry,’ Reece said. He took her money and went in the shop.

As Chelsi waited she saw two boys standing on the balcony of one of the flats above the shops, the one that drum and bass

was coming from. They looked older than Reece. They were both smoking and staring at her. One of them said something to the other, making him laugh. Chelsi looked away.

‘Everything alright?’ Reece asked as he came out the shop. He handed her the fags.

Chelsi nodded. She looked out the corner of her eye and could see the boys still on the balcony.

‘What you doing today then?’ Reece said.

‘Meant to be meeting my mates later,’ Chelsi said. She lit a fag and gave Reece one.

‘You smoke skunk?’ Reece asked.

‘Sometimes,’ she lied.

‘Got some banging stuff. Come smoke one with me if you ain’t doing nothing?’

Chelsi could see two other boys appear over Reece’s shoulder. They walked past and stopped at the stairs that led to the flats above the shops. Reece turned around and looked at them. He mouthed something to them but Chelsi couldn’t tell what. They nodded to him and disappeared up the stairs. She heard one of them laugh again. She looked around, the shops were deserted.

‘Come, come with me,’ Reece said smiling, his voice soft.

‘Where?’ Chelsi asked.

‘Up to mine,’ he gestured upstairs. ‘I need a spliff.’

Chelsi nodded and started walking. She didn’t know why but she just found herself going with him, floating along with this boy she hardly knew. She didn’t have anything else to do.

Anyway, he was nice to her – she trusted him.

It was better than being at school.

