

# THE HOMES

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For Alice and her gran

# 1

‘*Les!*’ whispers Jonesy from her bed. ‘Lesley, you awake? I cannae sleep.’ This time louder.

‘*You* cannae sleep? I’m the one whit’s got to fight her.’

‘I know, I cannae sleep, you’re gonnae gub her.’

‘Nuh-uh, I’m deid, I’m so deid.’

I haven’t opened my eyes yet. I know if I open my eyes I will have to be awake and if I am awake it’s morning, and if it’s morning I’m going to have to fight her before school starts and she’s twice my size.

*She* is Glenda McAdam. I hate her. I didn’t start hating her. She’s always hated me. I did nothing to make her hate me; I wasn’t horrible to her, I didn’t say nothing about her, but she just always hated me. I think it’s because when I was in the same class as her, I was always top. She didn’t like that. I’m not in the same class as her now, I’ve not even been in the same school as her since last August. There’s one school at the Homes for most of the kids, but me and three others – one girl and two boys, all of them older than

me – have to get the bus and train every morning to the grammar school.

The fight is at 7.30 a.m. My bus comes at 8 a.m. The fight is outside the front gates, where the paths meet the road into the Homes. Glenda's cottage is only fifty yards from the gate. The cottage me and Jonesy live in is on the hill and looks down towards the gate. You can see Glenda's home from ours. When I finally make myself open my eyes, I see Jonesy has her head at the window. She's watching, staring at Glenda's cottage for signs of action.

Glenda McAdam is a bully. She's my bully, but she bullies everyone else too. She's got friends, but they are only her friends because they are scared of her. I am scared of her, but I'm not willing to be her friend to avoid it.

I shouldn't have agreed to the fight, but I was the one that suggested it. Glenda's always picking on me, has done for years. So I told Jonesy I was going to fight her, and that I thought if I fought her it would make her stop picking on me. Now I think I'd rather she just continued picking on me.

'She's gonnae bust my heid, Jonesy. She could kill me.'

'She's no gonnae bust your heid. She's gonnae hit you a bit and make you say you give up, but then it will be done. And if you're lucky she'll leave you alone. Mibbie let her hit you a bit and start greetin'.'

'I'm no greetin, I'm gonnae get a knife.'

'You're no gonnae get a knife.'

'I am, too.'

'If you stab her, her brothers will get you. If you just let her win then she'll leave you alone. Pretend to try at

the start, then let her win. She's gonnae win anyway, so just let her. You're making a sacrifice. It's a smart move, Lesley, and you're the smart one. Lose the fight and the big hippo will leave you alone for ever. If you're lucky, you could get in there and smash her one before she gets hold of you. Just don't let her sit on you. She's a beastie, that one; if she sits on you, you're definitely deid. I've seen her sit on her friend before and her friend went blue.'

'Can't I say sorry?'

'Nah, you can't back out now, everyone's coming. You back out now and everyone will hate you. You said fight, and if there was no fight they'll all want to fight you for denying them a fight. Those are the rules.'

'I feel sick.'

'Course you do, I would too. Still, it'll be over soon and then you'll be fine.' She looks at the clothes I laid out on my chair last night. 'Do you want to pack another school shirt?'

'Why?'

'Cos that one's gonnae get blood on it and they're no going to let you get away with that in your school.'

'Aw no, I like this shirt. I'll wear something else for the fight, a rubbish one.'

'Are you really going to do it?' comes the voice from the bunk at the end. It belongs to Shona. We share the room with her, Eldrey, Pam and Mary. Eldrey and Shona have the bunk beds at the end. Shona's bed is the one on top. She says as she's the oldest she should get it. She's the eldest by three days.

‘Aye,’ I say, trying to sound confident.  
‘She’s gonnae gub yuh,’ Shona says.  
‘Aye,’ I say, fully aware of what is going to happen.  
‘Good luck,’ she says. ‘And if you can, kick her in the fanny, if you can find it on the big monster.’  
Jonesy laughs.  
I would laugh too if I wasn’t so scared.

\*

We wash our faces in the sinks and I get dressed. I wear my normal skirt but I wear my shirt from yesterday as it’s going to need a wash anyway.

I wonder what Glenda McAdam is doing now. I bet she’s punching the walls in preparation, eating raw eggs and getting into a pure rage.

Jonesy goes down to get some breakfast, but I go back to my bed and lie on it. I can’t eat, there’s no point, plus everyone else in the house is going to be staring at me, they all know about the fight. I think our houseparents, Mr and Mrs Paterson, know about it too. They are not going to stop it, either. She’ll be helping Cook lay out the plates for breakfast; he’ll be sat reading the paper with everyone tiptoeing around trying not to annoy him.

Jonesy comes up after her breakfast. She’s brought me toast. She leaves it on the floor by my bed.

‘It’ll be all right, Lesley, you’ll see.’

It won’t. But it will be over, and all I care about is it being over. I’ve just got to get through it, and I don’t want to greet. Not in front of Glenda or in front of anybody.



‘Right,’ I say, ‘I’m ready.’

I don’t feel ready. I’m never going to be ready for this. I feel so sick. It’s time to leave the cottage. No amount of wishing is going to get me out of this. I’ve got to just do it.

I get up, leave our bedroom, and walk down the stairs, Jonesy following behind me. Everyone is watching. Everyone knows this fight is going to happen.

As I leave, no one says any words of encouragement. They know there’s no point. They know I’m finished.

Mr and Mrs Paterson don’t try to stop me. Fights are going to happen, they can’t do anything to stop them, so they don’t.

Is this what boys have to go through every time they have a fight? Then again, they just start fighting, they’re not stupid enough to pre-arrange it and make themselves sick with worry waiting for it to happen.

I walk down the path and I’m shaking. I’ve never felt so ill.

I see Mr Sharples, the caretaker. He sees me, he probably knows what’s going on, too. He’s not going to stop it either. I can tell by the way he is looking at me that he knows I am in for a beating and is just going to let it happen.

There’s twenty kids at the gate already, boys and girls together, all excited to see me get hurt, and I realise it’s not just Jonesy who’s followed me out of the house – all of them are here, joining the crowd. I’ve done nothing to them, but then sometimes anything here that’s a break from the normal is what gets them excited.

People like seeing other people get hurt. Humans are cruel.

I pace back and forth by the entrance gate; if I stand still they will see me shaking. I want to cry. I am not going to cry. I want to run away. I want to be anywhere on this planet apart from here and now.

I can see Glenda McAdam's house, Cottage 8; there's people waiting outside it. I keep looking to see if she's coming.

Her brothers are waiting; her brothers are even worse than her. Her whole family is Gorbals feral, her older brothers are some of the maddest people in here, they're pure crazy.

I could get out of it by begging. As long as I'm humiliated, this can be over. But I'm tired of her, I'm tired of the grief.

'There she is,' says someone behind me, and a surge of nausea sweeps over me. I thought I was feeling sick before, but this is worse.

Glenda is coming out of her cottage. I want to run away and never come back.

'Be calm, Les,' says Jonesy.

I could charge at her? Take the fight to her, go on the attack?

But I don't, I can't. I stand on the spot, frozen.

She's coming. She's big. She's so big. And ugly. Oh, Christ.

I feel the blood rush to my face. My muscles lock up. I clench my jaw.

I keep my spot, by the gate.

*The gate.*

I can see her face. I can see her nostrils flaring.

She's coming.

She's saying something. She's shouting at me.

I can't hear what she's saying.

*The gate!*

*Ready?*

*BANG!*

Just as Glenda gets to me I grab the gate and swing it, swing it with everything I've got, and it hits her.

She goes down.

She's down and she's groaning, and I don't know what to do.

I'm standing over her.

'HIT HER!' they're shouting.

'HIT HER! KICK HER!'

I grab Glenda's hair and pull her head back, but I don't hit her. She looks stunned.

I lean down, my hands still shaking, and I say, 'Please leave me alone.'

There's blood on her head. Some runs into her eye. She's confused. 'All right,' she says.

'Promise?'

'I promise,' she says.

I let go, and then walk off towards the bus stop. There's a groan of disappointment from the crowd. The kids wanted more fighting. They wanted more pain. Some of them are following me. Someone shouts, 'Wooooo!' It's Jonesy. Others are cheering too.

Jonesy jumps on my back. I glance back and Glenda's

still on the floor; her little cronies are trying to help her up.

I still feel sick. I'm still shaking. Oh God, I hope it's over now.

I start to cry. I didn't want to cry but I can't help it.

Jonesy holds me tight while I sob. Some of the others around me start patting my back. I want them to leave me alone, I just want to get on the bus. I pull away from Jonesy, then I'm sick on the grass. The kids around me are laughing. This is their entertainment for the day.

'Can you leave me alone now, please?' I ask.

'Yeah, leave her alone,' echoes Jonesy.

They do what she says.

She walks with me to the bus stop, holding my hand and squeezing it tight.

'You knew you were going to do that, didn't you? The gate. You knew all along. God, you're so clever. You lured her to that spot and then *bam!*'

I don't say anything. I don't because I don't want to lie.

I didn't have any plan for the gate. I didn't have any idea what I was going to do. It wasn't until she was stood in front of me that second that the idea came to me.

I get to the bus stop to see the bus coming down the hill.

'Hey,' Jonesy says, squeezing my hand again. 'Hey.'

I look up at her. She wipes some of the tears from my face.

'Lesley Beaton,' she says, 'you're my hero.'

## 2

I was put in the Homes when I was three weeks old.

The Homes is an orphans' village. It was built at the end of the last century as a place to put all the homeless children from Glasgow. There are about thirty cottages and nearly eight hundred children, and each cottage has a housemother and housefather, plus a cook. It's a self-contained place with its own school, church, shops and even a small hospital.

Us kids aren't necessarily here because our parents have died. Lots of children are like me, put here because we couldn't be raised by our families.

Some of us were taken from our parents for our own safety, as they weren't capable of looking after us. If the mother died sometimes the father couldn't raise the children on his own, and if there were no relatives to take the kids, then they would come here.

You don't get so many in here whose fathers have died, or aren't around. It seems mothers are mostly able to look after their kids, but dads aren't. But my mother couldn't

care for me and she thought it would be best for me to go here when I was a baby. I don't miss her as I've never had her to miss.

She does come to see me sometimes, but never more than two or three times a year. Her mother, my gran, comes to see me more; she seems to like me. She brings me sweets and clothes and sometimes takes me out for tea.

Maybe my mother genuinely doesn't like me or maybe she is embarrassed to see me living where I do and not with her. She's never said as much but it's something I think about.

I never knew kids lived with their parents until I was six. I just thought all kids lived like us. I'd never really met kids who weren't from the Homes until I was about eight or nine on a trip to the seaside. The kids on the beach teased us until one of our boys hit one of their boys and they all ran away.

After that, I asked why I was here – I asked my gran, not my mum. Gran told me it was for the best, that my mum wasn't ready to be a mum back then and that she herself was too old to take me.

Then I tried to ask more and she just changed the subject.

# 3

I come back on the bus from school that afternoon still sick with nerves. Will Glenda be waiting for me, after revenge? She knows – and I know – that I got lucky, and that if she fought me again she would teach me a lesson.

As I get off the bus there's a crowd of kids by the gate. Just girls this time, though. The boys are off playing football; last year everyone was football mad because it was the World Cup, even though Scotland weren't even in it, but this year it's back to being only the boys who are interested. I don't know much about football, but I hear what the boys on the bus talk about and some of it sticks. So if a boy wants to talk to me it means I know something to say back to them.

Jonesy is on the edge of the crowd; she sees me and comes running. I think I'm in trouble and she's going to tell me something bad, but the fight between me and Glenda is old news.

'You've no seen Jane Denton, have you?' says Jonesy.

‘Nuh, what’s happened?’

‘She’s done a runner, nobody’s seen her. Reckon she’s gone off with a fella. She’s a good-looking girl. Bet she’s shacked up and getting it off some young stud, huh?’

We walk back towards the group of girls. I can see Glenda is in the group and I feel sick again, but we keep walking towards them.

‘Who told you?’ I ask.

‘Rose in her house. Says they are proper jumpin’ today in Cottage 12. Says that they’ve called Jane’s family and they’ve no seen her, but they’re going to put polis outside their home in case she turns up.’

As we get to the group, Rose Millar is there answering questions from everyone. The police have been to Cottage 12 and the car is parked near the front steps. They’ve spoken to all the girls in the cottage about Jane and about where she might have gone and if any of us knew anything.

Glenda is looking at me. I stare straight back at her; she holds my gaze for a second, maybe two, then she nods. *We are not enemies any more*, I think.

After a while Jonesy pulls me away and we walk arm in arm back to Cottage 5.

‘She’s gettin’ a shaftin’, that’s all it is. She’ll be back tomorrow unable to walk, the dirty one. She’s going to be so embarrassed when she walks in. But who cares about her? Let’s talk about you, you crazy nutter. You’re the girl that done Glenda McAdam; ding dong the witch is deid, unreal.’

‘Get away.’



‘Get away? You’re the top dog now, Lesley, I’m gonnae have to be your skivvy. But that’s all right, I know I’m safe now. Don’t mess with me, or my pal Les is gonnae get you.’

She pats me on the back several times just as we are getting to Cottage 5. As we come in, Mrs Paterson, our housemother, is there. I like her. I don’t know if she likes me. Sometimes she’s nice to me, but other times she can be cruel. She has a pretty face. Her hair is always perfectly set every morning before we come down; I never know how she does it. It is jet black and shaped like a crash helmet that men with motorcycles wear. She has a fringe that’s level as a ruler and at the back it just touches her collar. She always makes sure us girls have brushed our hair before we leave the cottage each morning. She’s said before she doesn’t want other houseparents to see the kids from our cottage and think, *They don’t have standards in that house.*

She likes to dress smart, too; I suppose she thinks if she looks good it will make us want to look good. Jonesy doesn’t really care but I try to do my best.

‘Whit’s going on, you two?’

‘Jane Denton’s done a runner, miss,’ says Jonesy. ‘Gone off with a fella.’

‘How do you know this?’ says Mrs Paterson.

‘Everyone says so.’

‘Well, everyone might not be right, you know.’

‘Yes, miss.’

Mrs Paterson opens the door to see what’s going on outside, before shutting it again.

‘Right then, Jonesy, upstairs and git your hands washed, they’re a mess.’

I go to go up with her, but Mrs Paterson grabs my arm. ‘Not you.’

‘Miss?’

She moves me round to look straight into my eyes. ‘I will not have young ladies of this house fighting. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, miss.’

‘And, Lesley ...’

‘Yes, miss?’

‘Well done, you.’ She squeezes my arm. ‘You’re a brave wee girl, but don’t ever do that again, you hear? Now, have you had your tea? I think Cook has left it out for you.’

I smile at her and she smiles back. She does like me. I feel warm all over and safe for the first time today.

\*

In the evening all the talk is of Jane Denton. Jonesy is telling everyone just what she thinks she’s getting up to while we’re all stuck here. I don’t know where she’s learnt all this stuff, not from me. She can be quite crude when she puts her mind to it.

Everyone’s buzzing about it. My fight is forgotten. It was only this morning, but it’s old news. I am so tired after not sleeping last night, and not eating breakfast or hardly any dinner. I hope Jonesy doesn’t keep me up tonight with her tales.

I know Jane. She used to live in our cottage a few years ago, though she's fifteen or so – three years older than me – so I've not really spoken to her since she left. She's pretty; she's got this scarf and she knows all the boys like her.

I'm not surprised she's got a boyfriend. When she walks down the pathways all the boys watch her. I wonder if she even knows they're doing it – they pretend that they haven't seen her and then as soon as she's gone past they all turn round and nudge each other.

Maybe one day the boys will do that when I walk past. They don't at the moment. I'm not ugly, but I'm not one of the ones they go crazy for. It doesn't matter anyway as none of the boys our age are interested in girls; they're only interested in football and hitting each other, and I can't tell which one of these things they like more.

If people say anything about me when I go past it's something about being stuck up or a swot. I'm not stuck up. I might be a bit of a swot compared to them, but that's only because I like the schoolwork. They just hate me cos they hate all school, they can't understand how anyone can like it. Besides, I don't care what they think, I'm going to leave here one day, and if I can leave with qualifications, it means I have a better chance of never having to see them again.

I lie on my bed and do my homework while Jonesy, Pam, Mary and Shona look out the window. They're watching people going past, and squeaking whenever they see another police car.

Pam thinks Jane Denton will be fine, she's just 'done

a runner', which is a common occurrence in the Homes. Jonesy, of course, thinks she's off with a man. Mary and Shona think she's been kidnapped. I wish they would go downstairs while I'm trying to work. I don't say anything, though, I just let them get on with it.

At lights out they are still talking about it. Mr Pater-son comes in specifically to tell them to shut up. I think of saying, 'And so say all of us,' but I don't, I just lie there in the dark thinking how much I love that gate.