

Supermarket Supermodel

Jim Cartwright

Published by Black Swan

Black Swan edition published 2009,
a division of Transworld Publishers

Extract

All text is copyright © Jim Cartwright 2008

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

Chapter One

COLD, SO COLD. I WAS BUTTONING UP MY OVERALL, AND me fingers were so cold I could hardly do it, I'd come down to get dressed by the fire 'cause it was warmer. The heating was on the blink again. On the way down the stairs in my underwear I felt like I turned blue. I should have put my dressing gown on, but I couldn't see it when I got up and there just wasn't time, no time at all, I was late. Oh it was cold, and it was harder buttoning up too, 'cause I was late and really rushing. I don't like being late, I'm never late for work, I've been close a couple of times but never out and out late.

No breakfast, I'd only just had time to do me hair, I try never to miss that, it was a promise I made to me gran, a hundred times in the morning and night, with me head down to me knees, and then splash my face with cold water, icy water this morning, no creams or lotion, that's what she taught me, and her grandma taught her, and her hair was silk and her skin soft and clear right when she was old.

I got my coat on and left. I should have put a jumper on too, but I'd forgot to bring one down and I just didn't have the time. Oh it's not like me to be late, I don't like it.

I closed the back door. I meant to close it quietly, so as not to wake me mum, she's sleeping so light these days, but with rushing and the cold and the dark I sort of didn't have control and the door slammed shut. I know it seems to sound out louder in the early mornings but it went with a hell of a bang. She's not been well lately has my mum and the last thing I wanted to do was wake her. Then I saw a square of light in the dark of the backyard and I knew I'd gone and left the bathroom light on! Oh I couldn't go back now though, I'd never make the bus, but it would upset her when she got up, should I go back in? Too late – even while I was thinking about it my feet on the ice had made the decision for me and set me off slithering and sliding down our path and on to the road.

Everywhere was frozen solid. I usually walk pretty fast but I had to totter this morning and watch where I walked because when I looked up I felt unsteady. Straight away the cold went for my ears. I should have put a hat on, too late now. The dark road was lit by street lamps, circles of light on the white frost except up the top end where one or two had been smashed out by kids. I could find my way with me eyes closed though, I've lived on this council estate all of my life.

Our end's still all right but the top end's going a bit rough now.

I'll probably bump into Bet, she works at our place, she lives higher up, always on the last minute. She came sliding out of her gate as I passed. 'Link me, Linda. Link me before I fall.'

We carried on up the road, slipping and sliding. She's about forty, Bet, hefty and mad and just doesn't care, she's always in a short dress whatever the weather, whatever time of day or night, tights in the winter and bare legs pink or brown or white all summer, depending on the weather, and she has these shorty coats and macs for every occasion and a little fur one for best. I don't know if she chops them down herself or she buys them that way.

'My pegs is my best feature,' she says. 'They staying on show as a distraction from the rest,' and to be honest she's probably right. She's this fine red hair always pinned and piled and shooting all over the shop, a big face and mouth, no neck to speak of and then the rest of her's – how can I say? – round, round's all I can say, and then these very short but sturdy legs with calves like two tennis balls. I was worried about making time for the bus, but every time we speeded up a bit Bet nearly went and she let out this raucous laugh and shriek to wake the street. As we slowly took the corner where a lot of the rougher families lived, we saw an old washing machine in one front garden

covered in frost. Bet said, 'Where do they get those from, eh? I've always wondered that.'

'What?' I said.

'Them broken-down washing machines. There's washing machines like that in the front gardens of every rough estate I've ever seen. How come? It's another one of life's mysterious mysteries. Do you think there's a secret showrooms somewhere they all go to where you can get them?' She was off on one now.

'Very exclusive, to be admitted, you've got to have at least two Rottweilers, one that barks all day and one that barks all night, have never paid your rent, have sledgehammered a through wall down without council permission in the middle of the night when your next-door neighbour gets up for work at six o'clock in the morning, have dismantled a motorbike or at least a moped in your back kitchen and never put it back together, have been inside five times and have at least twenty tattoos – and that's just the women.

'Honest, can't you see 'em looking around, picking out their ornamental washing machine? "Oh Alf, imagine that in our front garden, be lovely that as a centrepiece with those car bits you've got and that rusty bike wheel." And the salesman there, "Excuse me, madam, sir, but could I suggest this busted-out television box to go with it, or these, the very latest

in garden chic, burnt-out armchair frames?" "Oh Alf, we'd be the envy of the street." "Go on then, we'll take 'em, I can't fault her taste." "Very wise, sir, and to enhance the effect further, I'll throw in some empty milk bottles and cat-food tins and a hundred used tea bags."

Bet's a real case. Don't know what *she's* on about though, she's had a kitchen cupboard and a broken fish tank at the side of her house for three years now. She's always like that though. Does all the voices and everything. She's really a very clever woman, reads all the time, she's always swapping paperbacks with my mum, but me mum can't keep up with her, Bet can get through two in a day. Her husband's as mad as her, he hasn't worked for years, he puts his head out the window and shouts after her most mornings, 'Bring home the bacon, Bessie.'

As we shuffled along, I said, 'He not shouting this morning?'

'Nah, bad guts.'

She called him rotten but there must have been something there. She'd sometimes come in with a big grin on her face, someone would say, 'What you smiling at?' and she'd say, 'Beano arrived this morning,' and wink, meaning her and him had well . . . had a bit of a 'session', so to speak.

We skidded and toddled up and on to the main road, laughing all the way. The ice was harder and

greyer here and frozen into rigid footprints, and the bigger street lights threw bigger pools of buttery buzzing yellow light on to its surface. We reached the steep brew. We stopped there a while looking down to where the bus stop was, getting the measure of the hill before we navigated it. There was a long queue at the bus stop, curling out of the shelter, and we could see people's frozen breath in front of them and rising all around them. We made our way gingerly down; the ice here was like a hard and smooth sheet and Bet nearly went again, with a big guffaw, and all the queue looked up towards us.

'Don't worry if me legs go up, I've got clean on,' she assured me with a grin, then nearly went again taking me with her. 'I hope you have,' she said.

We carried on down, clutching each other. Suddenly she looked at me. 'You're not normal, you?'

'Pardon?'

'Well, you always look bloody fresh and lovely in a morning. No tutee, nowt. It's not normal in a woman.' I blushed but it was too cold and the blood froze at the cheek. 'Get rough, will you, like the rest of us. Freak.'

We finally made it and tagged on to the end of the queue. Everyone was silent. Everyone seemed almost frozen solid. The first bus must have not even arrived yet, there were two buses' worth of queue here. Everything must be delayed because of the ice;

it looked like I was going to be really late now. Suddenly a woman popped her head out from further down the line and said to me, 'How's your mum, love?'

'Oh she's all right. Waiting to go in.'

'Is it *the* op?'

'Yes.'

'Who's she under?'

'Dr Mendleson, I think.'

'Oh, he did me and me sister.'

Someone else in queue piped up. 'He's good, him.'

'Yes.'

'They take everything out. For about three months you feel like a buffalo that's been gutted by Navaho Indians. Then you're all right.'

Others joined in. 'Me friend's just had that done.'

'I've had it.'

'Me too.'

Bet said, 'Is there no one in this queue with a womb? Bloody hell.'

It went quiet again. I was worried about me mum. She'd been ill for a while now, was trying to keep cheerful but it was hard for her and getting her down. There was only me mum and me at home now. Me sister left a few years ago to get married, and me dad's not been with us for a long long long time. She's had to pack in work, so it's not easy moneywise, she's depending on me a lot. That's this recent thing

with the lights, sometimes you've hardly got time to get up and downstairs or out the bathroom before she's switching the lights off. 'Save ont' lecky,' she says.

She's not young my mum, should be retired really, she didn't have us until she was in her late forties. She'd given up, wasn't expecting kids, neither was me dad, maybe that's why he took off. So she's always had to work, and she always seemed to get heavy work, packing and humping in a catalogue firm, laundry work, cleaning, and she always seemed to end up where there was the most lifting and shoving things around involved. Why? I don't know – she's only small really, with very fine features and tiny hands. My sister and me have always been tall and have towered over her since we were fourteen but boy can she sling boxes. I wonder if it's all that what's brought on her problem, but the doctor says not, they just put it down to 'women's trouble' and 'time of life' and all that, but I wonder.

Bet kept patting her hands together and blowing out and chattering her teeth and making all sorts of strange and wonderful noises, eeks and short shrieks and sighs, and then blowing and brumming through her lips and stamping her feet. Suddenly she said, 'Sod this for a box of soldiers. I've had it.' Then very loud, 'I'm off. I'm going back home, snuggle back in with the old lad.'

The queue all laughed.

She said to me, 'Any road, Beano might come this morning.' She set off up the road. 'See you, suckers.'

She struggled up the steep icy brew. It took her three attempts to get going at first, holding on to garden privets along the way and pulling herself up. She nearly fell over twice, you could just hear her swearing in the distance. Every time she did it a couple of the old ladies went, 'Ooo,' like they'd been shot, and some of the young kids sniggered. I had visions of her going down flat on her face then sliding all the way back to the bus stop. Then a young postman came and helped her. She had to wait at each gate while he delivered a letter, then he'd help her on. She turned to wink at me and mimed grabbing his backside, slipped round the corner and was gone. Home for another day, Bessie not bringing home the bacon. She's only been at our place about three months, but I couldn't see it lasting, she was always late and taking time off and being rude to the supervisors. I felt sure they'd sack her this time.

I looked back along the queue. Early-morning workers mainly, old dears and a few kids. Grammar-school kids with a long way to go. Three bus journeys. I looked at them and wondered what their lives would be like. I went to the local comp; most of the kids round here did. What a place, wasn't so much about

learning as surviving. My sister always says we all should have got a GCSE in survival for just making it; we could have shown the SAS the way out of anywhere, I'm telling you.

Didn't even think about staying on, there was a job there for me so I just took it. We needed the money anyhow. The grammar-school girls were the ones who went on to careers or university and all that sort of thing, we just got jobs, if we were lucky, or crappy college courses, wasted a bit of time, but it got most of us in the end, we were work fodder and felt like it. All I was good at was swimming – I was in the team for swimming – and, for some reason, science, I think mainly for the school microscope, I was fascinated by it. I've always got on with equipment, instruments type of thing; I'm like that at work with the tills. No problem for me, never have been. Though some of the women are scared of them and never quite get the way of them and call for me. Think I might have got it from me gran, she was one of those if you could get the back off something for her she'd sort of fix it in a flash, just saw how it worked and where things went. She was only a mill girl – she couldn't read, my gran – but the engineers at the factory would sometimes send for her to fix the machines. Her fast little fingers would be in and out the machine's innards instinctively handling its parts. Neighbours

brought her hairdryers and radios and she'd twiddle them better. No idea how she did it, it was like she was mates with machinery.

It wasn't just the microscope, though, in science, most in science I liked the words, liked science words: 'Ice is crystalline.' Those words 'crystalline substance', 'Celsius'. I like the words better than the words in other classes, even English. 'Molecular'. 'Conductivity'. I can even remember now when we studied ice, lifted it from outside on the windowsill then put it under the microscope. Once I'd had the shock and surprise of seeing the beauty of those perfect patterns, I was sneaking my friends in at break times and focusing the microscope for them till they got the shock, too, of such perfection from a bit of cold sludge. 'Molecules arrange themselves into a crystalline lattice.'

When my sister got a new doll, I got a chemistry set. I was fascinated with it till I stained the carpet, nearly sent the curtains up and dyed the cat. I used to drive my sister mad with it in our beds at night.

'Do you know what happens when you heat magnesium sulphate?'

'No.'

'Do you want to know?'

'Piss off.'

She was good at English though, she had a poem in the paper once:

A Council House Fable

A council house fable,
Two little girls at the kitchen table,
Pigtails and little legs and shiny shoes,
Listening to their mummy's news.
'Daddy's not coming home no more.'
My sister cried, I didn't, I looked at the floor,
I kicked the table, I kicked the table,
I kicked the table till my toes went sore.

I think it was about us. I don't think it was as good though as 'Molecules arrange themselves into a crystalline lattice.' A teacher came to see me mum and Dawn, to try and talk our Dawn into staying on at school, but she had met Ronnie then and just wanted to get a job and get married.

A gasp went up, and the queue suddenly became animated and started moving. The bus was coming round the corner. It looked somehow like a cartoon, all lit up in the dark and cold air, like it was cut out. The ice was still melting on the windows. We trudged on.