

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Scream if You Want to Go Faster

Russ Litten

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About the Book

Hull Fair, October 2007. A city still drowning in the aftermath of summer floodwater prepares to wave farewell to Europe's biggest travelling carnival. For six year-old Billie, Walton Street is a magical playground of wide-eyed adventure. For David and Denise, the fading lights of the Fair signal the birth of a brand new kind of freedom. Rose, a 60-year-old widow seeking a kindred spirit online, is dealt a hand she hadn't bargained for, while for Michelle and Darren it's the beginning of a haunted love affair that's struggling to escape its own past.

As the big wheel turns above them, and the sky comes alive with noise and colour, ten ordinary lives are brought together over a single weekend in the rain-soaked city below. Perfectly capturing the frenetic pace, heartbreaking poignancy and simmering aggression of modern urban life, *Scream if You Want to Go Faster* is a dark, funny, and abrasive novel from a stunning new voice in British fiction.

About the Author

Russ Litten was born at the end of the 60s, grew up in the 70s and left school in the 80s. He spent the subsequent decade in a bewildering variety of jobs before becoming a freelance writer at the turn of the century. He has written drama for television, radio and film. *Scream If You Want to Go Faster* is his first novel. He lives with his family in Kingston-upon-Hull.

**SCREAM IF
YOU WANT
TO GO FASTER**

Russ Litten



WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

KINGSTON-UPON-HULL

Friday 19 October 2007

Hedon Road: 10.04am

Marshall said the drop was due in at ten o'clock, but there's no sign of any lorry out here. All Dave can see is a load of empty pallets and a big empty yard. He's got two jackets on, but that wind is whipping off the docks and it goes right through the pair of them. No point being out here when the only warm part is his arse on this seat. He starts the forklift back up, spins it round and zips back into the warehouse.

Butch is leaning on his brush, yapping to that young Kosovan lad. What an introduction to English culture - an audience with Butch. The lad is smiling politely and nodding away, but it's obvious he hasn't got a clue what Butch is on about. He's not alone in that respect though. Dave doesn't think Butch even knows what he's on about half the time. Butch is not the sharpest tool in the box. The more ungenerous of his colleagues have even been known to use the term thick as pig shit.

- Teatime, ladies, shouts Dave as he whips past. Butch's brush clatters to the floor and the pair of them follow Dave into the Bun House. Kenny Rose and Little Stu have already got the kettle on and the cards out. Dave lines another three mugs up and drops a tea bag into each one. The sugar situation is looking a bit desperate; they're down to the last scrapings in the bag. Kenny has two sugars, Little Stu has none and Butch, the big fat bastard, he has three. Four if it's a big mug.

Dave holds the bag up to the Kosovan lad.

- How many mate?

The lad just smiles and gives Dave the thumbs up.

- No, how many? Dave holds up one finger, two fingers and both of his eyebrows. The lad smiles and nods.

- I'll take that as two, then.

Dave gets the brews on and Kenny deals him in, but no sooner have they got sat down and settled than Marshall's in the doorway, tapping on his watch.

- Dave, what about this lorry?

- What lorry?

- Them panels from Shrewsbury. Ten o'clock drop.

- Not here.

- Well it will be in a minute, so go and get that bay cleared.

Dave tells him he's just got sat down. Marshall moves to the worktop and touches the kettle with the back of his hand. He tries to do it dead casual so the lads don't see what he's doing, but he's about as subtle as a clown at a cremation.

- We need to get that Wilkins order boxed off today, ASAP, he says.

He picks up one of the papers off the side, the one with all the tits. He flicks the pages over, pauses and gives a low whistle through his teeth.

- Would not say no to that.

- What is it, says Kenny, - a picture of a cream cake?

Marshall folds the paper up and slings it back on the side.

- Don't be sat here all fuckin' morning!

A stern nod, a swift about-turn and he's out the door.

- Cream cake. Cream fuckin' puff more like, says Little Stu, and Kenny laughs.

Butch looks up from his cards, puzzled.

- Cream puff?

- Arse bandit int he, says Little Stu.

- Who, Marshall? Joking aren't yer?

- Nope, bent as a nine-bob note. Complete fuckin' deviant.

Little Stu looks up at Dave and winks. - No offence, like, Dave.

- None taken.

Dave studies his cards. Two queens. Not bad.

They play a few hands and Kenny tells them about the rugby club do he's going to tonight. Some charity thing for a bain with leukaemia. They want to raise enough money to send her to Disneyland. He's getting a Rovers shirt signed by all the players for a raffle. Kenny has that peculiarly sentimental streak commonly found in headcases. Butch tells them about some new fish he's got for his tank. Some little blue 'uns, apparently. Little Stu rolls a tab, sticks it behind his ear, rolls another one and tells them a joke about a nigger who goes for a job as a gynaecologist. Butch asks him what one of them is. What, a nigger? says Stu. A nigger is one of them blokes your mam shags, he says. No, says Butch, that other word you said. The Kosovan lad sits by the sink and reads the papers. Well, he looks at the pictures, anyroad. The radio plays the golden hits of the eighties and the wind rattles the plastic sheeting in the Bun House window.

Dave plays his cards and says nowt. He's thinking about the weekend and Denise and he's counting down the minutes till he can get out of this filthy place.

There's the rumble of an engine from the yard and then the hiss of brakes. Dave slings his hand in, stands up and gulps down his brew.

- Right, he says, and he puts his two jackets back on.

- Careful you don't break a fingernail, says Little Stu.

There's a hand shovel leant against the wall next to the sink. Dave picks it up. Stu's eyes go all wide and he takes the tab out of his gob.

Dave lays the shovel down on the table in front of his colleague.

- There you go Stu.

- What's that for?

- That's for them long dark days down the diamond mine.

Then Dave flings his shoulders back and sings out at the top of his lungs:

- HEIGH *HO!*

The Kosovan lad looks up startled from the football and tits. Dave gives him a big grin and a double thumbs up.

Then he goes out and gets that fuckin' lorry unloaded.

Boothferry Estate: 12.23pm

No skeletons, that's what she tells them. They both have to agree on that point. Rose doesn't like people playing silly buggers and she's too old for surprises. It's not like she's asking for much anyway; all she wants is a bit of civil company, someone to pass the time of day with. Enjoy a nice afternoon out maybe, a bit of a meal of an evening, summat like that. Nothing complicated. Companionship, that's what she's talking about. Donna said it would be good for her to meet new people, and she said that this would be an easy and safe way to get started. It's the modern way, Mam, she'd said. Everyone's doing it. There's no shame.

Course, Rose is not daft. She knows what men are like. Pack of hounds at the best of times; dirty bloody dogs they are, sniffing around with only one thing on their mind. But she makes it quite clear to each and every one of them from the off - no funny malarkey. That usually sorts the wheat from the chaff. Don't get her wrong; she's no prude in that department. Rose and her Malcolm enjoyed a normal healthy marriage in that respect, thank you very much. One beautiful daughter and one fine son, both of them doing very well for themselves. Course, they don't call as often as they should, but that's another story. They're both healthy and that's the main. But Malcolm was the only man Rose ever took into her bed, and she intends to respect his memory.

And that's the end of that.

This latest one, though, he seems like a decent enough chap. Rose turns the laptop on in the back bedroom and gets on the internet. It's running a lot smoother since she took it into the shop. They did a very good job, it has to be said. Damn thing had been giving her all sorts of bother, running slowly, taking for ever to get onto sites - sometimes even freezing up altogether. Crashing, they called it in the shop. Rose was a bit chewed up about it, cos she had everything on there, her addresses, her emails, her diary, everything. Anyway, the chap sent it to their repairs department and they sorted it all out. Said she had Trojan Horses, whatever they are. Rose doesn't pretend to understand computers. Anyroad, she left it with them and they got it all going again. They even organised all her photos, put them into separate little files for her. There's one that comes up on the screen now when she's not using the computer, a photo of her and Malcolm, took on the cruise ship off the coast of Majorca. Rose loves that photo. Happier times.

She logs onto the Local Link Up site and goes into 'Flirty Fifties'. Yes, there he is: LEO123. She invites him to a private chat and he accepts straight away.

Yorkshire_Rose: Hello again.

LEO123: hello rose, how r u?

Yorkshire_Rose: Good thank you, what have you been up to?

LEO123: usual really . . . work, etc . . . been painting the back room . . . how about u?

Yorkshire_Rose: Just pottering round the house. Nothing too exciting!

LEO123: doing anything over the weekend?

Yorkshire_Rose: Seeing my Grand daughter this afternoon. Taking her round Fair with her Mam.

LEO123: i've not bothered this year . . . seems to get dearer every year!

Yorkshire_Rose: I agree, it's all commercialised now isn't it.

LEO123: well if u r not doing anything this weekend maybe we could meet up?

Yorkshire_Rose: I don't know what I'm doing yet. I might be seeing my friend on Sunday, I haven't seen them for ages, we are due a catch up.

LEO123: which friend is that rose?

Yorkshire_Rose: Just an old friend, anyway don't be nosey!

LEO123: LOL, sorry rose, just don't want to be getting my hopes up if u r already spoken for!

Yorkshire_Rose: Well if you must know it's a lady friend. Not that it's any business of yours!

LEO123: LOL I know I am sorry, but just checking! Forgive me?

Yorkshire_Rose: You daft haporth!

LEO123: not cross with Leo?

Yorkshire_Rose: Don't be daft! Course I'm not!

LEO123: gd gd . . . hey rose I had a look at that site you mentioned, that hessle road one . . . by, there's some memories on there eh?

Yorkshire_Rose: Oh yes, some wonderful old photos.

LEO123: u must know half the people on there eh?

Yorkshire_Rose: Oh yes, a lot of them have passed on now of course, but some of them I still see from time to time

LEO123: hard to imagine st andrews dock like that now eh?

Yorkshire_Rose: Aye, it's a shame, but there you go. Like I always used to say to my husband, the only thing that stays the same is change!

LEO123: ooh very profound rose! you should get a job writing christmas cards!

Yorkshire_Rose: Cheeky monkey!

LEO123: LOL jst jkn . . . so, are you going to be going on any rides at Fair then?

Yorkshire_Rose: I might do! Think I'm past it do you?

LEO123: LOL, no I don't think that at all love . . . just u b careful though!

Yorkshire_Rose: I always am Leo! So . . . what are you up to tonight?

LEO123: nothing 2nite, staying in reading I'm going 2 church with my mother 2morrow nite

Yorkshire_Rose: It's Saturday tomorrow isn't it?

LEO123: yes, mother hasn't been for a bit and I said I'd take her . . .

Yorkshire_Rose: Well have a nice time, I'm going to get off now and get meself ready for this afternoon.

LEO123: ok . . . r u taking bella for a walk

Yorkshire_Rose: Yes, I will do at some point. She wears me out she does!

LEO123: well, good to stay active especially at our age!

Yorkshire_Rose: You'll get a clip in a minute! Our age! Speak for yourself!

LEO123: LOL promises promises!

Yorkshire_Rose: What's that supposed to mean?

LEO123: nothing . . . see u on here later?

Yorkshire_Rose: Maybe. If you're lucky. And you stop being cheeky.

LEO123: I was born lucky rose

Yorkshire_Rose: Well it's alright for some isn't it!

LEO123: LOL . . . ok, speak later?

Yorkshire_Rose: We'll see. Maybe tomorrow night.

LEO123: at church, remember?

Yorkshire_Rose: Oh, OK. Well whenever then.

LEO123: we finish at 9. I'll b on here after that

Yorkshire_Rose: OK

LEO123: see u then?

Yorkshire_Rose: OK

LEO123: it's a date?

Yorkshire_Rose: I told you, I don't do dates.

LEO123: LOL, you're a tough nut to crack rose!

Yorkshire_Rose: It's you who's the nut!

LEO123: LOL, ok have a lovely time at fair, take care

Yorkshire_Rose: And you Leo.

LEO123: speak soon xxx

Yorkshire_Rose: OK

She logs off the site, shuts the computer off, goes down to the kitchen and makes something to eat. Tomato soup and a ham sandwich with a spot of mustard. Bella gets up and starts trotting round after her.

- You've had your dinner, Rose tells her. She's after a treat, but she's got no chance. She gets spoilt enough as it is, that one.

- Down, she tells her, - down Bella!

Bella stands there gazing up at Rose with them big brown eyes. Thinks Rose is a bloody soft touch she does. Thinks Rose's here just to fill her belly.

- Lie down Bella, there's a good girl.

Bella realises there's nothing doing and she curls back up in her basket.

Rose puts the radio on while she potters about. She likes listening to them phone-ins on Humberside; Soapbox, with that Blair Jacobs. You get some good debates going on there. Some proper ding-dongs sometimes. Some of them get right on their high horse. There's some chap going on about Hull Fair today, how it takes all the money out the city and should be banned. Miserable old bugger! Why's he getting so worked up about it? It's not even aimed at people his age, it's for bains! Rose is off round Fair this afternoon with Donna and their little Jessica. She's been twice already, has Jessica. She absolutely loves it to bits she does. She gets that excited and her little face lights up like a

Christmas tree. Why deny a bairn a nice time? It's not like it's every week of the year is it? Grumpy old so and so!

Mind you, at least they've stopped going on about the floods and the council. That's all they had for weeks on end, council this and council that. Rose knows it was a terrible thing for all those people who had to move out of their homes, but there's no point trying to blame the council is there? What could the council have done? They can't control the weather can they? Malcolm knew that better than anyone, all them years he went to sea. You can't account for acts of God, he used to say.

This chap on the radio, he won't let Blair get a word in edgeways. He sounds a bit like that Alex fellow off the site, the last one she met up with. Not his voice as such, more his manner. Oh, totally in love with himself that one was. If he was a bar of chocolate he'd have ate himself, as Malcolm used to say. Rose should have known as soon as she clamped eyes on him, with his tinted glasses and his daft yellow cravat. What sort of man wears a yellow cravat? Sat with him nearly two hours in Norland one Sunday dinner time before she gave it up as a bad job. Two hours of him and his wonderful career as a travelling sales rep for Smith & Nephew. Oh, all over the shop he'd been. Not a town or city in the country that he hadn't visited. Abroad as well; Germany, Denmark, all over Europe. India even. The people he'd met and the places he'd seen. All me, me, me, he was. Not in the slightest bit interested in anything Rose had to say.

Mind you, he wasn't as bad as the second one. He proper put the heebie-jeebies up her did that bugger. Dickie he was called. Dickie Dirt she ended up calling him. He seemed alright at first. They had a couple of nice afternoons out, went up to Beverley, did some shopping, had a nice walk on the Westwood. Then he started on about all the other women he'd met up with. Some of the tricks they used to get up to. Rose told him, she said she wasn't interested in

that type of relationship and she'd thank him to keep them kind of details to himself, thank you very much. But he didn't seem to take any notice. Only seemed to encourage him, in fact. They met up a few more times, but Rose was always a bit wary. Somehow he'd always manage to turn the conversation a bit . . . well, smutty. That's the only word for it. The final straw was when he pulled a bundle of photographs out of his jacket one teatime in Medici's. Rose had never seen anything like them in all her life and she never wants to again. Disgusting they were. And not just women her age, some of them were young lasses as well. But he seemed to think it was the most natural thing in the world. Said he'd met them all on the internet and it was all between consenting adults. Well, that sealed the deal; Rose told him exactly what she thought of him and she walked straight out, just left him in there she did, with his half-eaten dessert and the bill still to come. Rose said if her husband had have been there he'd have took his bloody jacket off to him. He rang her up a few more times but Rose threatened him with the police and then she never heard from him again.

It was a while before she got the nerve up to even go back on the site, let alone meet up with anyone else. But you can't let these type of people win can you, these Percy Filth types with their one-track minds and their grubby little habits. Why should she miss out on meeting new people just because of one bad apple?

So Rose is hoping it's third time lucky with this Leo chap. He seems normal enough. She's been chatting to him for a couple of weeks, off and on. He seems keen on a meet up, keen as mustard. But she'll see. No rush, is there?

This chap on the wireless is still banging on. Poor old Blair still can't get a word in:

- *NOW HOLD ON A MINUTE PETER, IF I CAN JUST STOP YOU THERE FOR ONE SECOND . . . HULL FAIR HAS BEEN AN*

INSTITUTION IN THIS CITY FOR OVER SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS AND . . .

- YES, BLAIR, I APPRECIATE THAT, AND I AM A RESPECTER OF TRADITION, OH HELL AYE, YES, PLEASE DON'T MISUNDERSTAND ME ON THAT SCORE, BUT WHAT I AM SAYING TO YOU IS THIS - IT HAS GOT OUT OF HAND. ARE YOU WITH ME? IT'S BECOME AN ABSOLUTE MONSTER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING BLAIR?

- WELL WHAT YOU SEEM TO BE SAYING IS . . .

- NO NO NO NO NO, WHAT I'M SAYING IS THIS

Rose switches off the voices and takes her soup to the table. That's enough of that. She'll read a magazine instead. Can't stand to listen to any more of him, mouth all bloody mighty. Become a monster indeed! Some people, she thinks. They haven't got the sense they were bloody born with!

Lime Tree Lodge, Cottingham Road: 12.34pm

First thing Kerry noticed about this place was the smoke. Out of the twenty or so residents about ninety per cent of them smoke like chimneys; chaining them an'all, some of them, lighting one straight off the other. Kerry spends half her time wandering round emptying ashtrays. That telly room is the worst, the designated smoking room; you go in there sometimes and it's like someone's lit a bonfire. Can hardly see the screen some nights for all the smoke. Stinks an'all, clings to everything; the furniture, the wallpaper, even the carpet, no matter how many times you spray the room or sling the Shake n' Vac about. They've got these automatic air fresheners on the walls that give out the occasional blast, but they're no match for the twenty-four-hour smoke-a-thon that goes on in here. And anyway, half of them don't work now, since Pete Craven marched down the hallway the other night, smashing them all to bits with a sweeping brush. He said they'd been put there by the government to poison him in his sleep. Maggie's son Gary

who works here, and him who does the drawings, that Barry, they both had to get him down on the deck and sit on him while the doctor came with the injection.

They're certainly not supposed to smoke in here when they're having their dinner, but you're fighting a losing battle with most of them. Like Frank, for instance. Frank's the eldest one in here, well into his seventies Kerry reckons. Skinny little feller, a crumpled-up bag of bones in shirt-sleeves an' braces. Always got a rollie dangling off his bottom lip. She clocks his bacca pouch; he's rolling one up now under the table with trembling brown-tipped fingers. He's not even touched his sausages and mashed tatie, and that's his favourite an'all.

- Come on Frank, Kerry tells him - you know you can't smoke in here. Have a tab after you've had yer dinner.

- Oh aye, he says, - I know, just doing it for after. He slips the roll-up into his shirt breast pocket and picks up his knife and fork, starts smearing the grub round his plate.

Frank's not really mental, he's just an arsonist. Been in prison half his life for setting fire to things, including himself on a few occasions. He ended up in here after he set the curtains alight in his last old people's home. But he's not really properly crackers, not like Christopher or Alec Nelson or Marjorie upstairs, who never comes out of her room, not even for mealtimes. Frank's just one of them who has had a bit of a hard life, like most of the others in here. Alkies, druggies, victims of abuse, nervous wrecks, self-harmers. Manic depressives, or bi-polar or whatever they call it nowadays. Some of them are just people who have lost their way for whatever reason. They never had anyone to look after them and they just ended up slipping through the net. Most of them have had summat horrible done to them. Or they've done it to themselves. Like Maurice, muttering away in the corner there, dinner untouched. He was a skipper on trawlers; wife, four kids, two new cars, big house up in Swanland, the full lot. Drove home pissed up one teatime

and mounted the kerb near a school crossing, killed two mams an' a bain in a pushchair. Tried to do himself in about four times while he was in prison and now he can't live on his own. Needs constant supervision. Shame, really. He's quite a nice bloke once you start talking to him.

Half of them aren't even looking at their food and the other half are just plastering it all over the table or dropping it on the floor. Kerry can see she's going to have to get the Hoover out again, for the fourth time today. Keeping this place clean is like shovelling snow in a blizzard. Kerry must go through about ten gallons of Flash a week. When everyone's finished and left the dining room Sandra helps her clear all the plates up and stack them in the washer. Then Kerry gives all the tables a good going over while Sandra gets the brews on. When she goes back through to the kitchen Christopher's hanging around in the doorway.

- What do you want Chris love?

- Can I help yer?

- No, you're alright petal, we've nearly finished.

- I'll do the drying up for yer.

He goes to go inside the kitchen, but Kerry puts her arm across the doorway. He's just trying it on. He knows he's not allowed in there because of the knives and that.

- There's no drying up to be done love, we've got a machine. Now go in the telly room and I'll bring you a cup of tea. A biscuit an'all if you're lucky. Go on, skedaddle.

He peers over her arm into the kitchen.

- Who's in there?

- Sandra. Come on, Christopher, be a good lad.

- Have you got a cig, please?

- I'll bring you one wi' yer brew. Now off you pop.

He turns and strides off down the hallway, disappears into the telly room. Kerry was a bit wary of Christopher at first, but if you let him know who's boss he soon falls into line. The main thing with him, with all the schizophrenics really, is to keep it all on a certain level. Stick to basic instructions.

Don't get too deep. They can sometimes take things the wrong way, and the slightest remark can set them off. When Kerry first started here she made the mistake of getting into this big debate with Alec Nelson about summat on the news, and he went totally off on one, put his fist through the glass in the front door and had to go to Infirmary. Fourteen stitches up his arm and a visit from the social. Maggie went absolutely ballistic at her. Kerry thought she was going to give her the bullet, but she stood her ground, told Maggie she was new to all this mental illness lark and didn't know the proper way to carry on with people like Alec. After a bit Maggie calmed down and said Kerry could stay, but she was still on trial. Ever since then Kerry keeps it short and sweet, especially with them like Alec and Christopher and that other lass, that Joanne. Usually if you give them a cig it keeps them off your back for a bit. But you have to watch it with the cigs an'all. Make a rod for your own back if you're not careful. Kerry was going through about thirty a day at one point, and only smoking half of them herself. It's a balancing act, when to dish them out and when to say no. But you soon learn. Sandra, she won't give any of them a cig. Says she doesn't earn enough to hand her wages back to the residents every week. Sandra's firm but fair, and none of them ever play her up. Kerry's glad she's on with her tonight. The nights are long in here.

Kerry doesn't particularly like doing nights, but it's a case of needs must. She's been out of work too long and she doesn't want to mess this job up. Doesn't want to start shouting the odds about what hours she can and can't do. Maggie can soon find herself another care assistant, no problem. And anyway, not sleeping doesn't bother Kerry, she can always read a magazine or talk to one of them in here. There's usually at least three or four of them traipsing about well into the small hours. Kerry thinks the medication stops them sleeping. Either that or the voices. Good job she's got her helpful head on today. The hours soon

disappear if you keep yourself busy. And there's always plenty to have a go at round here, night and day.

When they've finished clearing up Kerry and Sandra bring two trays of tea and the biscuit barrel into the telly room.

Twenty minutes later Kerry's getting the Hoover out again.

Itlings Lane: 1.17pm

Michelle's popped round to her mam's, but she's starting to wish she hadn't have bothered. She's been buzzing her tits off all day - all week in fact - but ten minutes with her mam is enough to piss on the brightest of bonfires. Plan was to show her face, stop for a quick cuppa, get back to their Chrissie's, get changed, then meet Darren at the top of Walton Street for three. All Michelle wanted was a quick in and out with no head stress. Instead, she walks slap-bang into the middle of yet another domestic drama, number four hundred and twenty-six in an ongoing series.

One of the builders has sawn through some pipe under the sink and now there's water pissing all over the kitchen floor. Marvellous. Michelle's dad's going berserk. She's sat in the caravan with her mam and she can hear him shouting and bawling from inside the house.

It's dead cramped in this bloody thing. There's the portable telly from the kitchen jammed up on the side and a few of her mam's ornaments dotted about, but it's not exactly home from home. Michelle doesn't know how her mam and dad haven't murdered each other, the pair of them in here. It's only a matter of time though, surely. She'll come round one afternoon and one of them'll be dumped in that skip, along with all the old kitchen units and bits of sodden lino.

The little electric kettle clicks off and her mam pours the brews.

- It's just one thing after a bastard 'nother, she says.

She's always been a gloomy get has Michelle's mam, but since the floods she's been unbearable. Michelle knows it can't be much fun stopping in a caravan on the front drive, but it's not like her mam's the only one who's been inconvenienced. Both Michelle and Nathan have moved out, him to his mates in Anlaby and Michelle to her Auntie Chrissie's, just off the square. Chrissie's place isn't exactly a five-star luxury hotel, but you don't hear Michelle moaning and groaning. They just have to get on with it, all of them. Michelle's mam though, she's never happy unless she's totally miserable.

She treats Michelle to the full run-down on all the things that have gone wrong this week and all the bastards who are to blame - the council ('them bastards'), the loss adjusters ('them clueless bastards'), the insurance company ('them thieving bastards'), the builders ('them lazy bastards') and last but not least Michelle's dad ('that useless bastard'). Michelle will say one thing for her mam, she's very fair minded. She doesn't leave anybody out.

Michelle sits and listens to her go on and on. It's vaguely amusing at first, but after about ten minutes of useless bastard this and clueless fuckin' twats that, Michelle's good vibe is in very real danger of being totally wrecked.

She sups her tea and tells her mam she has to get off.

- What, already? You've only just got here.
- I know but I've gotta go and get changed.
- Why, where yer going?
- Round Fair, then off on Prinny Ave.
- Oh aye, is this with your new bloke then?

Wonderful. How does she know about that? Best thing to have happened to Michelle all year and now her mam's going to rag him to bits before she's even met him.

- What new bloke?

- Don't give me that, says her mam. - Angie said you were seeing some new lad. Danny innit? Danny off North Bransholme?

Their Angie. Michelle might have known. Can't hold her own piss, that one. It's a wonder that bain's stayed in her belly these last nine months.

- I've only been seeing him two weeks, Michelle tells her. - I wouldn't go buying a new hat just yet mother.

- Who is he anyway, this Danny? What does he do?

Michelle's mam lights a tab up and opens the caravan door.

- His name's Darren, says Michelle. And he's a builder.

Her mam takes a long hard drag on her cig and exhales a plume of blue smoke. She's always moaning about being skint but she must get through about forty tabs a day, at least.

- Oh well, she says, - at least he won't be short of work.

She leans out of the caravan and flicks ash.

- Can't he come and sort that bastard lot out, she says.

- I don't think he does houses, I think he just does shopfitting and that.

- Shoplifting more like, if your track record with blokes is owt to go by.

Before Michelle can answer her back, this builder comes stomping out the front door of the house, closely followed by Michelle's dad. Neither of them look best pleased. The builder goes off down the driveway, jabbing a number into his phone. Her dad kicks his boots off and stands them outside the caravan. The entire thing shudders with his weight as he steps inside. He has to constantly stoop down to move about.

- You have to stand over these bastards twenty-four-fuckin-seven, he says.

He clocks Michelle sat up at the other end.

- Alright Shell? No college today?

- Hiya Dad. No, no classes on a Friday.

Her dad picks a mug out of the sink and swills it under the tap. He looks completely knackered, like he hasn't slept for about a week.

- What's happening Joe? asks Michelle's mam. - Have they sorted that mess out?

Michelle's dad shakes his head.

- He's turned the water off and patched the pipe up, but they're gonna have to rive it all out again an' have a proper look. I'm not happy with him leaving it like that.

Michelle twists herself round and pulls back the net curtain. This builder is stood out in the street next to the skip, his mobile clamped to his ear. He looks seriously pissed off. Her dad's head bobs down next to hers.

- I know what it is, he says, - they're cracking up to get back to Middlesbrough so they can go out on the piss. If he puts them tools anywhere near that van I'll wrap them round his bastard neck.

- Middlesbrough, says Michelle, - why are they going to Middlesbrough?

- That's where they're from.

- Why do we have to have people from Middlesbrough to put a kitchen back in? Why can't a Hull firm do it?

- Cos these are the insurance company's preferred builders.

- Why?

- I don't know, do I? Probably give them the cheapest quote. There int a fuckin' plumber among them though, I know that.

- Me mate Sarah, her uncle's doing their house up. She reckons they'll be back in for Christmas.

Her dad ignores this comment. Probably not what he wanted to hear. Instead, he asks Michelle if she's been round to see her grandad.

- I went round last week with Chrissie, she tells him.

- You do know he's going into hospital on Monday don't yer?

Shit, Michelle had forgot all about that. She knew he was going back in at some point, she didn't realise it was so soon. He's only been out a month or so. The cancer's all in

his liver now. Michelle had heard Chrissie on the phone to her dad the other night. It's not looking good, she'd said.

- I'll go and see him, she says.

- Yeah, you do that.

These three other builders come traipsing out the house laden down with spades and pickaxes and heavy bags of tools. Two young lads and an older feller. One of the lads is a bit of alright, thinks Michelle, quite fit in fact. Not as fit as Darren though. They go up the driveway and start chucking all their gear into the back of a van that's parked up at the side of the road.

- BASTARDS!

Her dad goes flying out the caravan, nearly tipping the frigging thing over, ornaments bouncing about on the shelves. Her mam pelts her cig and she's right behind him. Michelle hopes for the builders' sake that her dad gets to them before her mam does.

Michelle rinses her mug out in the little sink while they all argue the toss in the street. She glances outside. The first builder's still got his phone to his ear, one hand held up to Michelle's mam, like he's trying to ward off a vampire with a crucifix. The other three are stood leaning against the van, rolling tabs and grinning at each other behind their gaffer's back.

Oh dear, thinks Michelle, not a good move.

- WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU LAUGHING AT, EH?

Michelle's mam's livid. The older bloke looks like he's trying to calm her down. Michelle can't hear what he's saying, but whatever it is, it's pointless. Like trying to put a blazing fire out with a can of petrol.

- YEAH, IT'S ALRIGHT FOR YOU INNIT! YOU'VE TURNED THE FUCKIN' WATER OFF! I CAN'T EVEN GO FOR A BASTARD SHIT!

All that money on that Swiss finishing school, thinks Michelle. Wasted on me mother. And her mam wonders why Michelle doesn't bring any of her blokes back to meet her.

She taxes two Mayfair out of her mam's packet, gets her coat and bag and gets out of Dodge City, smartish. Michelle hasn't got time to hang about and watch the show. Places to go, people to meet.

Well, person.

She says her ta-ras as she hurries past them. One of the lads grins and nods, gives her the once-over. Michelle can feel his eyes boring into her as she goes down the street, so she puts a bit of a wiggle on, just for his benefit. Put that in your wank bank and take it back to Middlesbrough mate!

She texts Darren:

RUNNIN L8. W8 4 ME!

Thirty seconds later her phone beeps:

NO PRBLM BABE.

And there isn't.

Not as far as she's concerned, anyhow.

Not one.

Lime Tree Lodge, Cottingham Road: 2.14pm

There's nowt on the telly. Kerry goes through to the other front room and Barry's got his sketch pad and pencils out. He's quite a good artist is Barry. Went to art school in London, or so he reckons. Says he used to be a roadie an'all, working for loads of big rock bands in the eighties and nineties. He looks the part, like one of them old biker types, the long hair and the denim jacket and that. He comes out with some right tales does Barry, although he's actually one of the more normal ones in here. Kerry doesn't think he's a schizo or a manic depressive or owt like that. She think he's just had a bit of a bad time with the old Class As. His arms

have got all faded trackmarks and scars and cig burns dotted up them, so Kerry thinks he used to do a bit of the old dirty digging. Best not to ask, though, really. Take people as you find them and all that.

She looks over his shoulder at what he's drawing.

- That's good Barry. What is it?

He holds it up. It looks like a load of horses stampeding through a whirlwind.

- What d'yer think it is?

- Dunno.

- Can't yer tell?

- Looks like a load of horses stampeding through a whirlwind.

- It's a merry-go-round.

- Ah right, yeah, I can see it now.

And she can, now that he's said. It looks ace an'all, the horses with their flared nostrils and raised hooves, charging after each other across the page in a mad circle. The way he's done the lines and that, you can almost see it spinning round.

- That's brilliant that Barry. You gunna colour it in?

- Dunno. I was gunna keep it like this. Why, do yer reckon it needs colour?

He holds it out at arm's length and tilts his head this way and that, like he's checking out one of them big old paintings in Ferens Art Gallery. Kerry can't draw to save her life so she doesn't feel qualified to give out advice. But Barry obviously wants her opinion, and besides, it's good to encourage 'em when they do summat constructive.

- I'd mebbe put a bit of yellow in it. Shining down. For the lights and that.

- Yeah, I think you're right.

He picks a dark yellow pencil out of his box and starts adding long swooping lines alongside the black. It really brings it to life, even more than before. He's definitely a talented bloke. Zoe was artistic an'all. She once did this