

# The hunger within

4 January 2006, The Guardian

by Stewart Dakers

It is the end of the school day and the local Lo Cost is bursting as infant hands grasp lollies and Ribena cartons, children's fingers reach for chocolate and Pepsi, adult hands gather convenience meals and cigarettes. From the bronchial cacophony, everyone appears to have the bug that "is going around". Except it is not a bug, just ill health. Bradley's a good example. In the queue, clutching crisps and cola, his system offers four-star bed and breakfast to every virus in town.

Basically, Bradley is hungry - but there's something deeper than hunger. He is angry. He knows his life is going wrong, but he has no idea how to deal with it. Who knows when he first became aware of this. Maybe he never did - after all, if it's commonplace, how do you spot it? Chronic constipation, for instance, or dehydration, how could a kid of 10 know? All you know is that you feel like shit. In any case, it started long before he was conscious.

The product of a liaison between one of the estate's beauties and one of its beasts, Bradley was born poorly. His mother, Chardonnay, at 15, had all the attributes of a supermodel before she was boned by Kevin, a substance supplier of Isthmian League status but with Premiership aspirations. Neither were natural-born providers.

Bradley's womb life was subsistence living, with narcotic interludes. It derived from a maternal lifestyle that verged on the chaotic as Chardonnay struggled to retain the attentions of a partner who became rapidly disenchanted by her loss of shape.

There was a difficult birth, but it didn't quite qualify for special care unit. Once at home, all Bradley's appetites were neglected. The health visitor noticed, but her schedules confined her to weights and measures. The parents failed to notice, preoccupied by the state of their volatile union, not by their child's needs. Nutrient famine led to psychological malnutrition.

In his earliest discomforts, Bradley had cried, but if the Calpol didn't work, all he got was indifference, working up through exasperation to hostility. So he gave up complaining directly and developed other strategies, such as disruption, inveigling, manipulation. So no one knew he was ill. When he fell behind at school, it was assumed he was stupid. The law of the jungle translated into the protocols of the "hood". Ill health is the price the not-so-fit pay for survival.

## Pot luck

"Least they eat it all. I'm not having to throw half of it away." That's Kerry's justification after she notices me noticing the Pot Noodle and curry diet that Bentley and Tracy are getting for their tea.

And it's valid. On benefit, you simply can't afford waste, so taste is all. White bread, jam, salt 'n' sugar-rich pies, pizzas, burgers - all these may properly incur dietary contempt, but for the uninformed, under-resourced and ill-equipped, this is subsistence living. It's all very well banging on about

vegetables, fruit, wholemeal bread, but they are affordable only in supermarkets, and you need a car for that, or a taxi. And because it takes time, you have to take the kids. Then there's the budgeting, because supermarkets make you spend what you haven't got, which is fine for those of us with credit cards, but not when your only source of tick is the local Provi ..."

"Can't be bothered with all that boiling and poaching stuff," is Chardonnay's explanation. What she means is that she can't cook. Incompetence aside, what she says is equally valid; the energy input involved in preparing a meal has to be proportionate to other demands. Ainsley Harriott and his chef cronies do not have chores and children to attend to, and in any case always have "one I prepared earlier". They don't show the peeling, washing, slicing, boiling, roasting, stirring - all of which requires time, heat, equipment, while the fish fingers and chips are done in a split second in the microwave. ". . . and it's fish, ain't it?"

"And all those proteins and calories, I can't make head or tail of it." Frankie's perplexity is real enough, although it conceals the fact that what really prevents her from using a recipe is that she can't read - not a factor generally appreciated in Whitehall.

"By Monday, we're skint," says Saffron. Her benefit is paid on Thursday, just before the weekend, with its feast of footie, fags and fries, so by the beginning of the week it's gone; budgeting is hard for all of us, but the less you've got the harder it is to eke it out.

The trouble with policies made in Whitehall is that they're made by a class and gender that assumes women have a natural reflex for cooking, like suckling or shagging.

### **Loved to bits**

The other night, Split remarked how he had turned a cleaning job down. "I'm not gonna work for no effing woman; all they bloody do is nag. Might as well stay home." "Cleaning's effing women's work anyhow," Pole encourages him.

Such tabloid devaluation of women is familiar enough, but it possesses some authentic origins. Boy nurture is monopolised by women. The absence of men from boy-child life is a deep social infection; it is not simply the outcome of feckless, nomadic fatherhood or single motherhood; the rarity of men goes beyond the home. Beavers, Anchor Boys, nurseries, cadets, therapists, youth clubs, primary schools, - wherever they attend they are supervised by women. That's why men always complain about nagging; it's because it was women who set the boundaries, enforced the rules, stopped the fun, and they have to go on doing it because men go on throwing their toys out of their prams.

It's done by unspoken contract. Mothers undertake a service-level agreement by which, in exchange for a degree of order and adherence to the rules, the boys will receive total care package. But is it really care that makes these stressed out, exhausted and disappointed women trail behind their male offspring, cleaning up as they go? If so, it is seriously misjudged because it does not produce respect, simply dysfunction - and payback. As they progress from boys to lads to men, these coddled, useless males accumulate

a baggage of unfinished business and they will dump it on every woman they encounter. Male bonding needs opposition, and womankind is the enemy. This is apparent as Split and Pole keep the subject moving.

"So she's got no tits, but she don't half rattle." "Not like Sheeley - all she's good for is a blow."

And the objects of these remarks smile wanly, offering brief curses before submitting again because they have their self-esteem problems too and sooner rather than later they will marry or mate, and the whole toxic cycle starts again. History will repeat itself as the girl brides turn to their boy infants for the respect and affection they cannot get from their man-partners, using the same bargain of domestic immunity and impunity that made them that way in the first place. "I love him to bits," is how they describe their feelings - and bits are all that's left as another male infant is programmed into feckless manhood.

### **Shit happens**

"When's it going to stop? You tell me." Lisa is at the end of her tether. She's just lost her dad to a heart attack, but that is the least, if last, of her problems. She is a serial disaster area, with a plotline that would not be out of place in the Book of Job. "All I need now is for Glenn to take a fall or his sister to get pregnant."

As the sister is only eight, the former seems more likely. Glenn was born with a serious heart defect, which has resulted in reduced growth and restricted activity. He also has the concentration levels of a butterfly. Together, these have produced behaviour problems. Challenged by his restrictions, frustrated by his ineptitudes, devalued by his size, and barred by his impatience from any structured activity, his only path to self-esteem or an identity is to seek assertive nonconformity. His peers become increasingly pissed off with his disruption, and some of the boys decide they've had enough and push him off a wall. Perhaps in this pass-the-parcel culture, it helped to dump their own pain from a family row. Who knows? Whatever, Lisa has another hospital trip for Glenn's arm to be put in plaster.

Lisa is entitled to play Cassandra. There does appear to be something magnetic about suffering. Her youngest son biologically damaged and now one-armed, her father dead - and that's just for starters. The non-impregnated daughter, Abba, was born with a malfunctioning urethra; this was corrected by operations, but her excretory system was so relieved by the provision of an outlet that, seven years later, it still employs it with the same exuberant lack of control that characterises the rest of her behaviour - she's also hyperactive. Older brother Wembley has appalling eyesight, but no one noticed; so when he should have been acquiring the rudiments of literacy through devices such as books and blackboards, he couldn't see what was on them. He became known as stupid. He needed self-esteem, and the local gang provided it. A month ago, after a bottle or two of alcopops, he was stopped driving a stolen car.

Lisa herself is not immune. Her life is dominated by travel: to the clinics for Abba, to the hospital for Glenn and, latterly, to the courts for Wembley; and, of course, to the shops for food. The nearest bus stop is 400 yards away,

the nearest shop at the other end of the estate. With all that exercise, you'd expect a role model of slenderness, but Lisa has a glandular problem. She is a woman mountain and requires the energy of a gladiator in the "hang tough" event to get herself out of an armchair.

Finally, Stan, the father. Out of work, naturally, underequipped except at pool - which is down to practice rather than talent. The last time he went for a job, the bus didn't come; it was pouring with rain and the figure that arrived for interview hardly cut the mustard for a front-desk image. The one before, as a shelf stacker, was sabotaged by falling the previous day and breaking his wrist, a skills profile similar to a unipedal Tarzan.

In threes? You must be joking; this comes in dozens. And magnetic? Well, there doesn't seem much in common between incomplete passages, parblindness, dicky hearts, glandular disorders - only Stan is master of his own shipwreck, but it helps if society blames the whole thing on pilot error.

And then Stan passed his driving test and bought an old Chevette. This was serious forward mobility; all those collection and delivery problems solved. So how does it happen that, two nights ago, Kevin - a graduate, where Wembley is a freshman - should lose control of his nicked Astra on the straight stretch where Stan had parked the Chevette and leave both as write-offs? The easy answer is that Stan shouldn't have parked it there, which he wouldn't have had he not run out of fuel, which he wouldn't have done had he been more attentive, which he would have been had Abba not had a particularly runny night, which she wouldn't have . . . yes, pilot error again.

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