

Coming Home

Melvin Burgess

1. (VIDEO CLIP 1 – LAWRENCE)

2. I thought, she knows I know, and I know she knows I know. I expected her to have a little talk with me, which is what usually happens in our house if there're any problems, but she never said a thing about it. She was scared . . . You see? Chicken.

My sister Gill came home later and we sat and watched TV and ate crisps together, but I never said anything to her about it. She's two years older than me and she's always giving me advice about girls.

Once I said to her, 'What do you know about girls?'

And she said, 'I *am* a girl.'

'Not a proper one,' I said.

She got up in a huff. 'Can't you take anything seriously?' she snapped.

'Only if it's worth it,' I said, and she rolled her eyes and stamped out. But I was being serious, she *doesn't* know anything about girls, not the kind of girls I want to go out with. The kind of girls I want to go out with would *like* me talking like that.

3. (VIDEO CLIP 2)

4. I once caught my mum and dad having sex, you know. I went into the room without knocking and she was sitting on top of him. I hadn't thought at the time, but looking back I could hear her making pleased-sounding noises before I went in. I didn't really know what it was at the time, but Gill told me. She said it must have been. It didn't look anything like what she was doing with this other bloke, though.

The day after I saw her and Nigel Turner, I remember standing by my bedroom window, which is above the kitchen, looking down into the garden where they'd been and saying to myself, 'She has a lover,' but I still couldn't make it as though it had really happened. I said, 'Sandra,' to myself. We always called her Mum. Even though that woman down there with her blouse open had been my mum, it wasn't the same person who cooked and worked and shopped and woke up every morning smelling of Dad.

When I was younger, a few years ago, I used to try to see my mum with nothing on. I used to peep through the keyhole of the bedroom . . . well, I'd never seen a real woman in the nude. I hadn't done it for years, but now I wanted to see her like that again. I was handing the dishes to her after dinner a few days later. I was fed up thinking about it

whenever I saw her. She still hadn't said anything to me. She was bending over, putting the plates in the Dishwasher and I was looking at her back. I was wondering what was it that made Nigel Turner so turned on? She had on this slightly transparent blouse - you could see her bra strap under it, and where the flesh squeezed out on either side. I reached down, I took the strap in my fingers and I snapped it.

She looked up at me as if I'd hit her. 'What did you do that for, Lawrence?' she exclaimed.

I shrugged. 'I dunno.' Well, I didn't know . . . I just did it

She scowled; she was really furious. She stood up and yelled in my face, 'You're not to do that to me again. Do you understand?'

'Yeah, sure, so what?'

Then she stamped off out of the room. I was really angry. It was just a joke. It didn't mean anything, it was a joke. Maybe I did it harder than I'd meant to. I thought she should be grateful to me really. I could have said something if I'd wanted. I thought, what would happen if I told my dad?

5. (AUDIO)

6. Of course, I got the little talk *then*. Then she was right up the stairs, my mum, telling me how it wasn't my fault, but it was all too late then, wasn't it? Anyway, she was only saying that, she never believed it. Gill thought it was my fault all right, she never stopped going on about it. Mum and Dad were always saying how it wasn't my fault at all, but even they say I should have spoken to Mum about it first. But I never let it out, did I? I didn't actually say anything about it.

They were down there for ages. We never did get our pudding. After a while, they started shouting. It went on for ages, and then the next night and the next . . . it just kept on.

The thing that gets me is the way it all just fell to pieces. I don't think they even tried. My dad had it coming, actually. He's always been the smart one, the good-looking one, the clever one. He's one of those people, everything they do is perfect . . . it makes you sick. And then when things do go wrong he can't take it! And he's had affairs . . . he admitted it. Can you believe that? Gill heard them talking about it. You know what he said to Gill when she accused him of being a hypocrite? He said, 'Yes, but that was just mucking about. Your mother is *in love*.'

The day she left he was working in the garden. All along the bottom of the garden there's a long row of poplar trees. He's been on about them for years. He says poplar trees have robbing roots, which is why nothing grows well in our garden - they steal all the goodness out of the soil. You can find the roots just under the surface almost anywhere in our garden.

So on this day, the day she left, he started to dig a trench right across the end of the garden to cut through all the roots growing our way.

Mum said she really wanted to stay, but they had to split up, so she gave him the choice and he chose to stay on at the family home. She said it made more sense because he was the one who was going to be spending more time at home, so he was better able to look after us. Gill said he should have stayed away while Mum was moving her stuff out, but instead of doing that he went into the back garden night after breakfast. He spent the whole day there, digging this trench. Mum was popping in and out with boxes.

You know what? She made me and Gill help. Well, she tried, anyway. Gill just said no and went into town. I did a couple of boxes, and then I went into my room and sat by the window watching Dad dig his trench. He just worked and worked. Gradually he went deeper into the ground.

About lunchtime I opened the window and shouted out at the top of my voice so everyone could hear, 'Why don't you do something? Why don't you *stop* her?' I saw him lift his head up and stare at me, but then he just went back on with his spade. By late afternoon you could just see his head poking out of the top, bobbing up and down as he dug.

Mum went about teatime. She said she'd see us tomorrow at her new place for tea.

'It's just up the road, we can see each other whenever we want,' she said. Then she drove off to Nigel. Later, Gill came home and we went out to the garden to see Dad. He stood at the bottom of this trench. It was amazing; it was so deep. I hung around by the shed while she put her hand out to him.

'Coming in, Dad?' she said.

'Has she gone?'

'She's gone.'

He ignored her hand and pulled himself up a ladder he had down at one end of the trench. He was all streaked with mud. He looked hopeless. Pathetic. I'd have liked to push him back in the bloody trench and fill the earth in on top of him, he was so useless. Me and Gill stood there looking at him.

'Right. Coped with that pretty well, then, didn't I?'

Gill snorted and suddenly all three of us started laughing. He coped! At the bottom of a trench, I mean. Then he put his arms around our backs and we sort of led him back into the house. He looked shattered. Me and Gill made him some tea and then we all watched telly for a while before we went to bed.