

Loose Change

**A BritLit kit based on a short story by
Andrea Levy**

**Supplementary materials
to be used in conjunction with the 'Loose Change' kit on
<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/resources/britlit>**

Loose Change

Pre-Reading

2. Meeting the Characters

1. *You will meet three main characters in the story. The first is the narrator. The story begins like this:*

I'm not in the habit of making friends of strangers. I'm a Londoner.

How would you describe a person who is "not in the habit of making friends of strangers". Choose from the following list of adjectives:

- insensitive
- unfriendly
- unsympathetic
- reserved
- self-confident
- selfish

Can you think of more adjectives to describe this person?

Read the rest of the first paragraph.

I AM NOT IN THE HABIT of making friends of strangers. I'm a Londoner. Not even little grey-haired old ladies passing comment on the weather can shame a response from me. I'm a Londoner - aloof sweats from my pores. But I was in a bit of a predicament; my period was two days early and I was caught unprepared.

Glossary

shame a response	<i>not even a loss of face will make (me) respond</i>
aloof	<i>distant; unsympathetic</i>
sweats from my pores	<i>comes out of my skin</i>
predicament	<i>unpleasant situation</i>
period	<i>menstrual period</i>

How do you expect the story will continue?

- ✓ Now read the first paragraph again and find characteristics of a "Londoner" as described. Use your own words.
- ✓ Can you explain the meaning of a "predicament"?
- ✓ Have you ever been in a predicament? What happened?

Read the next paragraph and answer the questions which follow.

I'd just gone into the National Portrait Gallery to get out of the cold. It had begun to feel, as I'd walked through the bleak streets, like acid was being thrown at my exposed skin. My fingers were numb, searching in my purse for change for the tampon machine; I barely felt the pull of the zip.

Glossary

bleak	exposed; chilly; unpromising
numb	without feeling

- Why did the narrator go into the National Portrait Gallery?
- How did she feel when she was walking along the streets? Underline words in the text that give this information.

2. *The narrator finds that she does not have any coins – loose change – for the tampon machine in the ladies toilet and asks if anyone there can help her. Only one person responds, a young woman. How does the young woman appear to the narrator?*

As I mentioned before, I'm not in the habit of making friends of strangers, but there was something about this girl. Her eyes were encircled with dark shadows so that even when she smiled - introducing herself cheerfully as Laylor - they remained as mournful as a glum kid at a party. I took this fraternisation as defeat but I had to introduce her to a better portrait.

- ✓ Why does the narrator tell us again about her habit of not making friends?
- ✓ Does she want to help the girl?

3. *Later, the narrator takes the young woman to have a cup of tea.*

- ✓ Have a look at this paragraph. Who is the boy? What does he want?
- ✓ Do you think he wants to attack her?
- ✓ How would you have felt if you had been in her situation?

Just as I said that a young boy arrived at our table and stood, legs astride, before her. He pushed down the hood on his padded coat. His head was curious - flat as a cardboard cut-out - with hair stuck to his sweaty forehead in black curls. And his face was as doggedly determined as two fists raised. They began talking in whatever language it was they spoke. Laylor's tone pleading - the boy's aggrieved. Laylor took the money from her pocket and held it up to him. She slapped his hand away when he tried to wrest all the coins from her palm. Then, as abruptly as he had appeared, he left

4. Summarize what you know about the three characters you have met.

	Name (if known)	Relationship with other characters	Description (3 adjectives)
Narrator	-		-
Young woman			
Young boy			

3. Building a narrative

1. All the following words occur in the story you are about to read. Work in small groups to use as many of the words as you can't to make a narrative. Use the information you have already discovered in section 1. Use a dictionary if you need.

lonely holiday weather leave
tea stranger asylum filthy tampon
stink arrested twenty-pence
toilet cold cry passports

2. Tell your story to the rest of the class. When all the groups have told their stories vote for the most effective story (**note:** you can't vote for your own!)

Text

LOOSE CHANGE

Andrea Levy

I AM NOT IN THE HABIT of making friends of strangers. I'm a Londoner. Not even little grey-haired old ladies passing comment on the weather can shame a response from me. I'm a Londoner - aloof sweats from my pores. But I was in a bit of a predicament; my period was two days early and I was caught unprepared.

I'd just gone into the National Portrait Gallery to get out of the cold. It had begun to feel, as I'd walked through the bleak streets, like acid was being thrown at my exposed skin. My fingers were numb, searching in my purse for change for the tampon machine; I barely felt the pull of the zip. But I didn't have any coins. I was forced to ask in a loud voice in this small lavatory, 'Has anyone got three twenty-pence pieces?'

Everyone seemed to leave the place at once - all of them Londoners I was sure of it. Only she was left - fixing her hair in the mirror.

'Do you have change?'

20 She turned round slowly as I held out a ten-pound note. She had the most spectacular eyebrows. I could see the lines of black hair, like magnetised iron filings, tumbling across her eyes and almost joining above her nose. I must have been staring to recall them so clearly. She had wide black eyes and a round face with such a solid jaw line that she looked to have taken a gentle whack from Tom and Jerry's cartoon frying pan. She dug into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a bulging handful of money. It was coppers mostly. Some of it tinkled on to the floor. But she had change: too much - I didn't want a bag full of the stuff myself.

'Have you a five-pound note as well?' I asked.

She dropped the coins on to the basin area, spreading them out into the soapy puddles of water that were lying there. Then she said, 'You look?' She had an accent but I couldn't tell then where it was from; I thought maybe Spain.

'Is this all you've got?' I asked. She nodded. 'Well, look, let me just take this now . . . I picked three damp coins out of the pile. 'Then I'll get some change in the shop and pay them back to you.' Her gaze was as keen as a cat with string. 'Do you understand? Only I don't want all those coins.'

'Yes,' she said softly.

I was grateful. I took the money. But when I emerged from the cubicle the girl and her handful of change were gone.

I found her again staring at the portrait of Darcy Bussell. Her head was inclining from one side to the other as if the painting were a dress she might soon try on for

size. I approached her about the money but she just said, 'This is good picture.' Was it my explanation left dangling or the fact that she liked the dreadful painting that caused my mouth to gape?

40 'Really, you like it?' I said.

'She doesn't look real. It looks like ...' Her eyelids fluttered sleepily as she searched for the right word, 'a dream.'

That particular picture always reminded me of the doodles girls drew in their rough books at school.

'You don't like?' she asked. I shrugged. 'You show me one you like,' she said.

As I mentioned before, I'm not in the habit of making friends of strangers, but there was something about this girl. Her eyes were encircled with dark shadows so that even when she smiled - introducing herself cheerfully as Laylor - they remained as mournful as a glum kid at a party. I took this fraternisation as defeat but I had to introduce her to a better portrait.

Alan Bennett with his mysterious little brown bag didn't impress her at all. She preferred the photograph of Beckham. Germaine Greer made her top lip curl and as for A. S. Byatt, she laughed out loud, 'This is child make this?'

We were almost making a scene. Laylor couldn't keep her voice down and people were beginning to watch us. I wanted to be released from my obligation. 'Look, let me buy us both a cup of tea,' I said. 'Then I can give you back your money.'

She brought out her handful of change again as we sat down at a table - eagerly passing it across to me to take some for the tea.

'No, I'll get this,' I said.

60 Her money jangled like a win on a slot machine as she tipped it back into her pocket. When I got back with the tea, I pushed over the twenty-pences I owed her. She began playing with them on the tabletop - pushing one around the other two in a figure of eight. Suddenly she leant towards me as if there were a conspiracy between us and said, 'I like art.' With that announcement a light briefly came on in those dull eyes to reveal that she was no more than eighteen. A student perhaps.

'Where are you from?' I asked.

'Uzbekistan,' she said.

Was that the Balkans? I wasn't sure. 'Where is that?'

She licked her finger, then with great concentration drew an outline on to the tabletop. 'This is Uzbekistan,' she said. She licked her finger again to carefully plop a wet dot on to the map saying, 'And I come from here - Tashkent.'

'And where is all this?' I said, indicating the area around the little map with its slowly evaporating borders and town. She screwed up her face as if to say nowhere.

'Are you on holiday?' I asked.

She nodded.

'How long are you here for?'

Leaning her elbows on the table she took a sip of her tea. 'Ehh, it is bitter!' she shouted.

80 'Put some sugar in it,' I said, pushing the sugar sachets toward her.

She was reluctant, 'Is for free?' she asked.

'Yes, take one.'

The sugar spilled as she clumsily opened the packet. I laughed it off but she, with the focus of a prayer, put her cup up to the edge of the table and swept the sugar into it with the side of her hand. The rest of the detritus that was on the tabletop fell into the tea as well. Some crumbs, a tiny scrap of paper and a curly black hair floated on the surface of her drink. I felt sick as she put the cup back to her mouth.

'Pour that one away, I'll get you another one.'

Just as I said that a young boy arrived at our table and stood, legs astride, before her. He pushed down the hood on his padded coat. His head was curious - flat as a cardboard cut-out - with hair stuck to his sweaty forehead in black curlicues. And his face was as doggedly determined as two fists raised. They began talking in whatever language it was they spoke. Laylor's tone pleading - the boy's aggrieved. Laylor took the money from her pocket and held it up to him. She slapped his hand away when he tried to wrest all the coins from her palm. Then, as abruptly as he had appeared, he left.

100 Laylor called something after him. Everyone turned to stare at her, except the boy, who just carried on.

'Who was that?'

With the teacup resting on her lip, she said, 'My brother. He want to know where we sleep tonight.'

'Oh, yes, where's that?' I was rummaging through the contents of my bag for a tissue, so it was casually asked.

'It's square we have slept before.'

'Which hotel is it?' I thought of the Russell Hotel, that was on a square with uniformed attendants, bed turning-down facilities, old-world style.

She was picking the curly black hair off her tongue when she said, 'No hotel, just the square.'

It was then I began to notice things I had not seen before: dirt under each of her chipped fingernails, the collar of her blouse crumpled and unironed, a tiny cut on

her cheek, a fringe that looked to have been cut with blunt nail-clippers. I found a tissue and used it to wipe my sweating palms.

'How do you mean just in the square?'

'We sleep out in the square,' she said. It was so simple she spread her hands to suggest the lie of her bed.

She nodded. 'Tonight?'

120 The memory of the bitter cold still tingled at my fingertips as I said, 'Why?' It took her no more than two breaths to tell me the story. She and her brother had had to leave their country, Uzbekistan, when their parents, who were journalists, were arrested. It was arranged very quickly - friends of their parents acquired passports for them and put them on to a plane. They had been in England for three days but they knew no one here. This country was just a safe place. Now all the money they had could be lifted in the palm of a hand to a stranger in a toilet. So they were sleeping rough - in the shelter of a square, covered in blankets, on top of some cardboard.

At the next table a woman was complaining loudly that there was too much froth on her coffee. Her companion was relating the miserable tale of her daughter's attempt to get into publishing. What did they think about the strange girl sitting opposite me? Nothing. Only I knew what a menacing place Laylor's world had become. She'd lost a tooth. I noticed the ugly gap when she smiled at me saying, 'I love London.'

She had sought me out - sifted me from the crowd. This young woman was desperate for help. She'd even cunningly made me obliged to her.

'I have picture of Tower Bridge at home on wall although I have not seen yet.'

But why me? I had my son to think of. Why pick on a single mother with a young son? We haven't got the time. Those two women at the next table, with their matching hand bags and shoes, they did nothing but lunch. Why hadn't she approached them instead?

140 'From little girl, I always want to see it. . .' she went on.

I didn't know anything about people in her situation. Didn't they have to go somewhere? Croydon, was it? Couldn't she have gone to the police? Or some charity? My life was hard enough without this stranger tramping through it. She smelt of mildewed washing. Imagine her dragging that awful stink into my kitchen. Cupping her filthy hands round my bone china. Smearing my white linen. Her big face with its pantomime eyebrows leering over my son. Slumping on to my sofa and kicking off her muddy boots as she yanked me down into her particular hell. How would I ever get rid of her?

'You know where is Tower Bridge?'

Perhaps there was something tender-hearted in my face. When my grandma first

came to England from the Caribbean she lived through days as lonely and cold as an open grave. The story she told all her grandchildren was about the stranger who woke her while she was sleeping in a doorway and offered her a warm bed for the night. It was this act of benevolence that kept my grandmother alive. She was convinced of it. Her Good Samaritan.

'Is something wrong?' the girl asked.

Now my grandmother talks with passion about scrounging refugees; those asylum seekers who can't even speak the language, storming the country and making it difficult for her and everyone else.

160 'Last week . . .' she began, her voice quivering, 'I was in home.' This was embarrassing. I couldn't turn the other way, the girl was staring straight at me. 'This day, Friday,' she went on, 'I cooked fish for my mother and brother.' The whites of her eyes were becoming soft and pink; she was going to cry. 'This day Friday I am here in London,' she said. 'And I worry I will not see my mother again.'

Only a savage would turn away when it was merely kindness that was needed. I resolved to help her. I had three warm bedrooms, one of them empty. I would make her dinner. Fried chicken or maybe poached fish in wine. I would run her a bath filled with bubbles. Wrap her in thick towels heated on a rail. I would then hunt out some warm clothes and after I had put my son to bed I would make her cocoa. We would sit and talk. I would let her tell me all that she had been through. Wipe her tears and assure her that she was now safe. I would phone a colleague from school and ask him for advice. Then in the morning I would take Laylor to wherever she needed to go. And before we said goodbye I would press my phone number into her hand.

All Laylor's grandchildren would know my name.

Her nose was running with snot. She pulled down the sleeve of her jacket to drag it across her face and said, 'I must find my brother.'

I didn't have any more tissues. 'I'll get you something to wipe your nose,' I said.

I got up from the table. She watched me, frowning; the tiny hairs of her eyebrows locking together like Velcro. I walked to the counter where serviettes were lying in a neat pile. I
180 picked up four. Then standing straight I walked on. Not back to Laylor but up the stairs to the exit. I pushed through the revolving doors and threw myself into the cold.

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Loose Change

Context

Comparing texts

1. In 'Loose Change' the description of where and how Laylor is living is observed by the narrator, who can hardly imagine the position that Laylor is in. Here is what she says:

With the teacup resting on her lip, she said, 'My brother. He want to know where we sleep tonight.'

'Oh, yes, where's that?' I was rummaging through the contents of my bag for a tissue, so it was casually asked.

'It's square we have slept before.'

'Which hotel is it?' I thought of the Russell Hotel, that was on a square with uniformed attendants, bed turning-down facilities, old-world style.

She was picking the curly black hair off her tongue when she said, 'No hotel, just the square.'

It was then I began to notice things I had not seen before: dirt under each of her chipped fingernails, the collar of her blouse crumpled and unironed, a tiny cut on her cheek, a fringe that looked to have been cut with blunt nail-clippers. I found a tissue and used it to wipe my sweating palms.

'How do you mean just in the square?'

'We sleep out in the square,' she said. It was so simple she spread her hands to suggest the lie of her bed.

She nodded. 'Tonight?'

The memory of the bitter cold still tingled at my fingertips as I said, 'Why?' It took her no more than two breaths to tell me the story.

.....I didn't know anything about people in her situation. Didn't they have to go somewhere? Croydon, was it? Couldn't she have gone to the police? Or some charity? My life was hard enough without this stranger tramping through it. She smelt of mildewed washing. Imagine her dragging that awful stink into my kitchen. Cupping her filthy hands round my bone china. Smearing my white linen. Her big face with its pantomime eyebrows leering over my son. Slumping on to my sofa and kicking off her muddy boots as she yanked me down into her particular hell. How would I ever get rid of her?

- From the text we get a good idea what Laylor looks like. Why do you think the narrator didn't notice the condition of Laylor's clothes and generally cleanliness until this moment?
- How did Laylor and her brother keep warm at night, according to the text? In what other ways might they have tried to keep warm at night?
- The narrator imagines that there was somewhere 'people in her situation' have to go. What do you think is in Croydon (a town south of London)? What do you think the police would have done if Laylor went to them? What would or could a charity do?
- In the second part of this excerpt from the story, the narrator becomes quite hostile in her attitude to Laylor. Why is this? What does she think will happen if she invites Laylor to her home?

- Do we get any impression of how Laylor felt about her situation? Why does the author do this?

2. Now let's look at an excerpt from another text. This is from a piece of non-fiction by the author Michel Faber called 'Me and Dave and Mount Olympus'. There are a number of parallels, the most obvious being that the author finds himself homeless in London for a week. The biggest difference is that in this account, the experience of sleeping rough in London is told first hand.

Before you read the excerpt imagine what he might describe. He is a young man, with no money and no job and nowhere to live. How will he survive for a week? Where will he stay? What will he eat? Who will he meet? What will he do from day to the next?

Days are long when you have nowhere to go and nothing to do; homelessness is amazingly boring, especially after sunset. My diary gave me something to do while London passed me by. Some of the incidents described in those crumpled looseleaf pages come straight from the script of a Hollywood B-movie, like the time I slept in a park and a warden's sniffer dog sensed me hidden under a bush, only to be yanked away by his owner with a gruff "Come on, there's nothing there!" Other incidents have the sad flavour of life on the streets. Checking phone booths for forgotten coins, being fumblingly molested by a lonely man offering me a place to stay, walking miles to places where there's rumoured to be work only to find a sign saying 'No casuals required', being caught washing my hair in the McDonalds toilets, foraging food from bins and bus shelters. Some of the things that happened were quite sweet, like the time I showed up at the office of the feminist publishers Virago to blag a poster of gay icon Radclyffe Hall to give to my lesbian friends back home. (Virago gave me the poster, and a catalogue as well, despite the fact that I was a sour-smelling young male with mud on my parka.)

But what I want to talk about here is an encounter that actually changed me. The sleeping-in-the-park/foraging-for-food stuff didn't change me. I was young; I was having an adventure. I was a denizen of Mount Olympus, slumming it down on earth, experiencing cold and hunger the way Zeus experienced being a swan. My mind was immune to the filth that accumulated on my outward form.

As the week wore on, I discovered Counterpoint Night Shelter For Homeless Youth in Soho. It was in Shaftesbury Avenue then; it's since moved. In 1982, twenty years before Shaftesbury Avenue became a place where I go to autograph my books, it was a place where a policeman told me I might find shelter from the cold.

I spent two nights in Counterpoint, dossing down among the capital's other undesirables – glue-addicted lads, foul-mouthed elfin girls with scabby hands, cockney chancers, pimply schizophrenics, baby-lipped punks, doe-eyed teenagers whose memories of family life were already growing dim. Despite my homelessness being partly my own choice, the staff let me in, gave me a bunk-bed, fed me toast and tea. Front-line charity, I discovered, is provided not by governments but by volunteers, weary-looking ex-hippies and housewives who are used to being attacked by the people they're trying to help.

I first met Dave the Welsh skinhead in front of the high wrought-iron gates of the shelter. We were both waiting for 8pm, when the volunteers would emerge and decide who was in and who was out. We were the only ones waiting; most applicants showed up much later at night, when other ways of making time pass had been exhausted. Dave offered me a fag; I said I didn't smoke. He seemed unable to believe this extraordinary fact, and kept forgetting it. Despite some facial scars and wrinkled hands, he looked to me about fourteen years old, with a mild, puzzled expression in his blue eyes. He was dressed in bovver boots, army fatigues, a hideous woolly jumper that seemed to have been knitted from old road kill.

A van passed by on the street; he pointed it out to me. "Nice," he said. "Nice van." We stood next to each other in silence, and I felt what I always felt when enduring the company of people very unlike me – stoical disdain. In a week from now, I would be back inside my ivory tower and this lamebrained lout would have vanished from my world like a discarded bus ticket.

- What is the most 'amazing' thing about being homeless, according to the author?
- Why do you think the man with the dog in the park chose to ignore him?
- What were the sad things that filled his day? What was the significance of the 'sweet' event he recounts?
- What do you think the reference to Mount Olympus is all about?
http://www.sacredsites.com/europe/greece/mt_olympus.html How did this supposedly help him ignore the dirt and discomfort all around him?
- Where did the policeman tell him to go, and who ran the facility? Does this answer any of the questions that the narrator in 'Loose Change' asked about what Laylor should do?
- What was Michel's opinion of Dave the Welsh skinhead?
- What is the significance of the final sentence of the excerpt?

In a week from now, I would be back inside my ivory tower and this lamebrained lout would vanished from my world like a discarded bus ticket.

Compare the descriptions of characters in the two excerpts. What do they have in common? In which ways are they different?

Loose Change

Word Work

Vocabulary

In the following vocabulary activity, you have to match the word or phrases in the text given with the meanings asked for. Note that the words in the text occur in the same order as the meanings.

Money

Which words or phrases from the text below indicate:

- More than you can comfortably hold (2 possibilities)
- Coins of lowest value
- Sound of coins

.....and pulled out a bulging handful of money. It was coppers mostly. Some of it tinkled on to the floor. But she had change: too much - I didn't want a bag full of the stuff myself.

Her money jangled like a win on a slot machine as she tipped it back into her pocket.

Ways of looking

Which words or phrases from the text below indicate:

- A look which was full of concentration
- Looking hard at something
- Looks as if (she) will cry

Her gaze was as keen as a cat with string. 'Do you understand? Only I don't want all those coins.'

'Yes,' she said softly.

I was grateful. I took the money. But when I emerged from the cubicle the girl and her handful of change were gone.

I found her again staring at the portrait of Darcy Bussell.

The whites of her eyes were becoming soft and pink;

Disapproval

Which words or phrases from the text below indicate:

- Shock
- Dismissal
- Strong dislike
- Contempt
- Resignation

Was it my explanation left dangling or the fact that she liked the dreadful painting that caused my mouth to gape?

'Really, you like it?' I said.

'She doesn't look real. It looks like ...' Her eyelids fluttered sleepily as she searched for the right word, 'a dream.'

That particular picture always reminded me of the doodles girls drew in their rough books at school.

'You don't like?' she asked. I shrugged. 'You show me one you like,' she said.

As I mentioned before, I'm not in the habit of making friends of strangers, but there was something about this girl. Her eyes were encircled with dark shadows so that even when she smiled - introducing herself cheerfully as Laylor - they remained as mournful as a glum kid at a party. I took this fraternisation as defeat but I had to introduce her to a better portrait.

Alan Bennett with his mysterious little brown bag didn't impress her at all. She preferred the photograph of Beckham. Germaine Greer made her top lip curl and as for A. S. Byatt, she laughed out loud, 'This is child make this?'

She screwed up her face as if to say nowhere.

Cold

Which words or phrases from the text below indicate:

- Unforgiving landscape
- Without feeling
- Internal bodily effect of cold
- Akin to death

It had begun to feel, as I'd walked through the bleak streets, like acid was being thrown at my exposed skin. My fingers were numb, searching in my purse for change for the tampon machine; I barely felt the pull of the zip.

The memory of the bitter cold still tingled at my fingertips

.....she lived through days as lonely and cold as an open grave.

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