



NOELLE BALDARI

An estate of crisis

A glimpse of life on a council estate in a respectable town in the home counties.

7.30 pm Saturday evening

Behind the pub on the estate a little girl in a pink anorak is playing with her dog among the discarded glue bags. The dull, red-black walls enclose her like a prison. The two linked squares of flats, into which the sun never shines, are where the little girl lives. In through the concrete passage with its close-set black iron railings, past the battered grey lift which seldom works, up two flights of concrete stairs which smell of urine and drink, past graffiti saying, "Where can we go for a hit, honey?" and along a concrete walkway, partly blocked by the remains of a brown moquette armchair, you'll find number 86. The little girl lives there with her mother and brother.

Behind the identical peeling blue front door of number 117 lives Calvin with Jane and her children. The armchair belonged to him. He left it on the landing outside the door and used it as a safe place to hide his heroin. He's been dealing for about a year now and the police keep busting him. Also, the London heavies are after him because he owes them money. He thought that his smack would be safe in the armchair, for if he was

raided they'd search the flat but might overlook the chair. Someone didn't though, for one evening the chair was gone. Calvin found it later, but without the smack. He is 18 and was a heroin addict at 16. He stays indoors most of the day, but in the evening he goes to the pub. He has been sitting on one of three red plush stools for over an hour talking to Tony and Dean.

Tony and Dean both have large hold-alls with them. They've been "shopping" today. Regularly they go to the town together with empty bags and return with full ones, containing pairs of jeans, ornaments, perfume, video cassettes, bottles of alcohol—anything that can be sold for £10, the price of a hit, and that isn't too large to steal.

Tony has been a heroin addict for nearly four years. Every day he says it's the last time, but every morning he awakens sweating and shaking. Because of his habit he's unable to hold down a job and his unemployment benefit is not enough to cover his needs. So he has to obtain money illegally.

At first sight Tony looks an ordinary 23

The dull red-black walls of the estate enclose the inmates like a prison.

year old. He wears conventional clothes and has a conventional hair cut. He's aware that authority—especially the police—label an individual simply by appearance. Looking closer, however, you see that he looks far older than his 23 years; his eyes are bloodshot and when he is smacked up his pupils contract to the size of a pinhead, they are lifeless. Dead in his head. He has deep worry lines around them. His skin is pale and patchy and his hair is dry and brittle. He and Dean are edgy and impatient.

8.15 pm

David has just entered the pub; he deals in cannabis. He lives with his mother, brother and sister in the very top flat at one corner of one of the squares. Nobody goes up the steps unless they want to see the family; the steps lead to their flat alone—it's like an eyrie. His mother is the main heroin dealer on the estate; none of her children do smack though, they've seen what it's done to their mother.

The heroin addicts on the estate despise David's mother but they need her. She has to deal to keep up her own £100-a-day habit. The police keep raiding her flat but can never arrest her as she's careful not to keep too much gear on her at once. One day she was arrested on a charge of fraud; when let out of the police station she laughed as she had a couple of grammes of smack in a small plastic bag concealed inside her body. It's also rumoured that she sleeps with some members of the local drug squad. Often someone from the DS will stop a person who's just scored from her, take the deal from them and not press charges. The users believe that this her-

oin is taken back to her to re-sell. Many parents on the estate know her and her address but they, like the police, are powerless to do anything.

Across the pub sits Greg; he's 21, with blonde spiky hair, a tattoo on his cheek and a baby-face. Greg almost always seems happy. He's completely uncontrollable. If he wants to do something, be it illegal or not, be it hurting his family or friends, he will do it. He also is a heroin addict. He says it makes him feel special. Greg will take or inject anything as long as he gets a buzz; he says that feeling the spike in his arm is a buzz in itself.

On his lap is his two year old son Jimi. Jimi lives with Greg's parents; Greg's mother is a local school teacher. Greg has no fixed abode. When he's not in prison, he travels around the country, but never for longer than three weeks at a time, then he has to come back to the estate, the craving's too strong.

9.15 pm

Tony and Dean leave the pub. They're going to Al's house. He's due to have some gear around 9.30. They've been waiting since this morning. Al also lives on the estate, about ten minutes walk from the pub. He's about 45, he's been doing smack for a long time now, his body has become swollen and he's developed a limp. He's got nowhere left to bang up except his groin.

In the pub, joints are being passed around openly; the landlord usually turns a blind eye to dope. Lately there's been quite a lot of LSD around; amphetamines are also easy to get on the estate, cocaine not so easy. At the moment Wayne's trying to sell some PCP (angel-dust).

10.00 pm

Tony and Dean arrive back at the pub, they've had a hit. They're narked. Al knew that there wasn't much smack around so he gave really small deals cut with loads of glucose. He's clever though, he made sure they were outside before they opened the wraps, it's too late to do anything then. They did the gear anyway. It's better than nothing.

10.30 pm

Brian's drunk as usual, throwing abuse at anyone who passes and leering over girls. He's only 20 and already an alcoholic.

Near him at the bar is a group of six girls. They don't mix but keep themselves to themselves. They never touch drugs, but they're often drunk and need to be carried home. You'll see them in the pub every night of the week. Further down the bar are two men, they're suspected of being plain-clothed detectives, but who knows for sure? There is another group of young people, mostly couples. The majority of the boyfriends do mack but most of the girls keep well away from it. Amongst them is Helen, the mother of the girl in the pink anorak. She's about 25, tall and wears punk clothes. She has her head shaved and on it is a tattoo saying "Fuck society." She also has a son, Danny, who is six years old. You'll often see him selling cigarettes that he's stolen from his mother for the sniff of one of the older boys' glue bags. The other day he ate a quarter of cannabis that his mother had carelessly left lying around.

Tonight in one of the flats there's an eviction party. For those squatting there it's their



Cars may be vandalised for the hell of it, or in case they contain hidden smack.

last night. As soon as the pub closes, all those who want to make their way to number 247. At the bottom of the dark, uncarpeted stairs music and voices can be heard. On entering the smell of glue overwhelms. The living room window is uncurtained but a tattered union jack has been pinned across it. Notices have been stuck on the walls: "Please use the ashtrays—Respect the squat." It's good to have a sense of humour in a place like this.

In the kitchen, the walls—like in most of the flats—are mildewed and dank. There are many missing tiles on the floor and only a couple of cupboards have doors. A group of people stand heating spoons over the gas stove for vinegar and smack.

In one corner Greg is tying a piece of leather around the top of his left arm, just above the elbow. He's concentrating and being very careful; if he misses, it's painful and, more importantly, he misses a hit. He puts the needle into his vein and slowly pushes the syringe. It must be good gear because he slumps on to the floor before he can remove the syringe. Somebody else does it for him and passes it to the next person to use. Someone gives him a shake, he lifts his head very slowly, rubs his nose, scratches his arms, his legs, his stomach and he sings in a slow, scratched, broken voice "... when I put a spike into my vein, and I tell you things aren't quite the same. When I'm rushing on my run and I feel just like Jesus's son ..." his favourite Lou Reed track.

Now there's no one outside save for two aged prostitutes and Dippy Den. The prostitutes are listlessly wandering from corridor to corridor. Dippy Den squats in the gloom by the butcher's shop window. He always squats here and when no one is watching he turns on his ghetto blaster and dances. The two prostitutes trudge away and Dippy Den turns on his music and dances by himself in the rain. Someone has written "Dippy Den's Seat" on the wall where he sits. Suddenly he hears footsteps and stops. Nick and Sean are crossing the square. Both are from typically

middle class backgrounds and they do not live on the estate. Nick has been doing smack for about a year and he introduced Sean to it about three months ago. They met at sixth form college while studying for A levels. Sean's parents think he's staying the night at Nick's. They make their way to the flat where they score two £10 deals from Calvin.

For once, everyone seems pretty pleased with the gear. Calvin turned up at about 11.30, apparently he'd scored from someone in London but we'll never know for sure. Dealers rarely reveal their source.

2.30 am

The only people left are the smack-heads. Some are asleep. In the kitchen a girl is sitting on a stool giggling to herself, she's staring at the wall in fascination and eating a piece of bread she found in a cupboard. Black mascara'd tears have run down her cheeks and onto the piece of bread. Her name is Wendy. She is a heroin addict, but tonight she has dropped two acid tabs also. She is Greg's girlfriend and the mother of Jimi.

Jack, who's been doing smack for over ten years, wakes first. He's extremely thin, has long brown hair and is 30 but looks 45. He's had a rough life, he spent eight years in prison in South Africa for possession of two joints of hash. He begins to stumble around the flat in the vague hope that he might find a joint or a wrap. He lifts the corner of a soiled blanket and discovers Sean underneath it. He prods Sean to ask him for a cigarette. Sean does not respond. Jack notices that Sean's body is stiff and his lips are blue.

8 am Sunday morning

The local police receive an anonymous call to tell them that someone has OD'd at number 247. When they arrive they find Sean's body. A couple of other people are asleep in the bedrooms. They search the flat meticulously but find no drugs.

Two days later Sean is buried; most of his friends attend the funeral. Greg, by way of a tribute, throws a spike in with his handful of earth on top of the coffin.