

T E N T



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S T O R E Y

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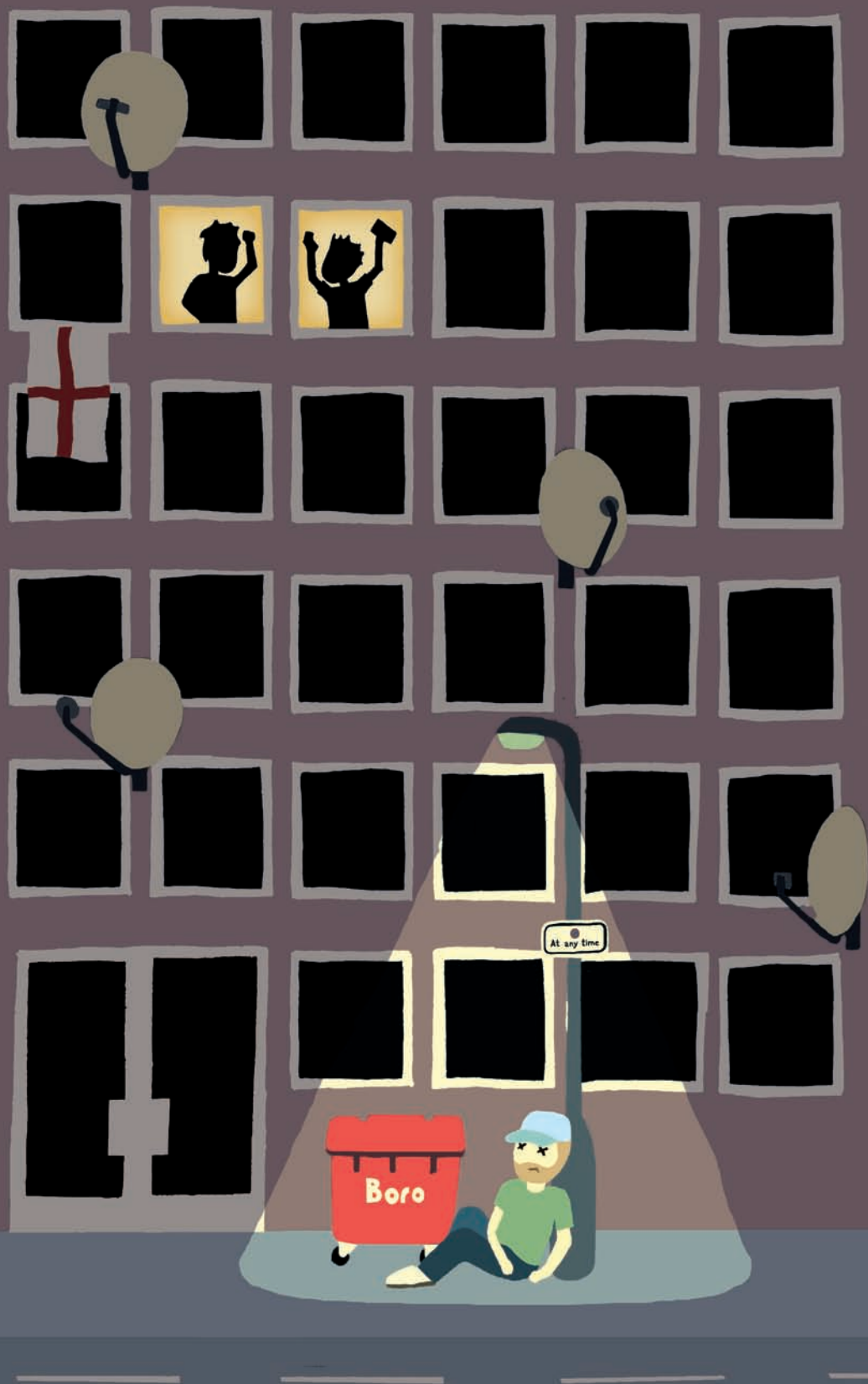
R I C H A R D



M I L W A R D



At any time



'Milward has that rare gift of being able to capture and distil an entire generation in a single, simple sentence. Brilliant. Very very funny and utterly original.' Helen Walsh

Spanning one dynamite paragraph, **TEN STOREY LOVE SONG** follows Bobby the Artist's rise to stardom and horrific drug psychosis, Johnnie's attempts to stop thieving and start pleasing Ellen in bed, and Alan Blunt, a forty-year-old truck driver who spends a worrying amount of time patrolling the grounds of the local primary school.

Bobby – the so-called 'love-child of Keith Haring and Basquiat', holed up in a Middlesbrough tower block – works on his canvases under the influence of pills-on-toast, acid-on-crackers and Francis Bacon. When Bent Lewis, a famous art dealer from that London appears, Bobby and friends are sent on a sweaty adventure of self-discovery, hedonism and violence involving a 2.5cm-head claw hammer.

A love song to a loveless Teesside and a portrait of a deeply dysfunctional, creative and drug-sodden world, **TEN STOREY LOVE SONG** is a ferocious slab of concrete prose peppered with beauty and delivered with glorious abandon.

'It's one of the best books I've ever read about being young, working class and British.' Irvine Welsh on **APPLES**

Ten Storey Love Song

Richard Milward

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You must always be intoxicated. On wine, poetry or
virtue, as you wish. But you must get drunk.

Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), poet and randy dandy

‘Hello,’ says the wallpaper. Bobby the Artist scratches his eyeballs. He can’t sleep. He sits on the sofa arm, argyle sweater pulled hunchback over the top of his head, having a conversation with his living room. ‘Go to fucking sleep,’ he replies to the wallpaper. He sighs. It’s that tail-end of the acid – he’s no longer seeing the cat from Dr Seuss in place of the lamp-stand, but there’s still loads of annoying thinking to be done. Being an artist, Bobby the Artist’s only really in it for the visuals – earlier on him and Georgie danced round the flat to Bardo Pond (‘Tantric Porno’ and ‘The High Frequency’ are two groovy numbers off an album full of noise), Bobby watching the knobbly skirting-board gradually form a zoetrope involving all these obscure froggy and bunny characters, and it even had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Usually Bobby the Artist would jump up and paint all this madness, but tonight he couldn’t be bothered. There’s nothing better than Georgie in a dancy happy mood, the only downside being she never joins in any of the drug-taking. Back on the sofa arm, Bobby breathes into his jumper sleeve, glancing at his girlfriend sleeping peacefully on the fuchsia cushions. He rests his head against the wall – two hours earlier it was soft as marshmallows, now it’s

a pain in the neck – and there’s no chance him joining Georgie in the land of Nod. You just cannot seem to switch off. He stares wide-eyed at dawn sneaking in through the window, wondering deeply deeply where him and Georgie are going, whether he’ll ever get famous, whether he’ll ever get to sleep, where the Cat in the Hat went. He yanks the green sweater down from his forehead, then strides about the room feeling irritated, kicking the empty sweet wrappers round and round the carpet. The flat’s a mess, and being on LSD it’s quite hard to remember how it happened to get like that. All Bobby clearly remembers is twirling round with Georgie, her drunk on cheapo vodka, him tripping his numbskull off. Twirling twirling twirling. Whirling curtains. At one point they’d been dancing so much Bobby’s hunger came back unexpectedly and he had to make pills-on-toast for himself in the kitchen. Here’s the recipe for pills-on-toast: *2 crushed ecstasy pills, 1 slice of toast (butter optional)*. Yawn! Smoke-rings loop-the-loop past like dreamy spectacles. Where did that whole twenty-deck disappear to? Bobby considers going across the road for more fags, but the prospect of being taunted by scallywags while still slightly tripping feels daunting, and in any case he hasn’t got any money. His last pound coin went on a paintbrush yesterday from Jarreds, and Johnnie from upstairs sorted him two blotters and two ecstasies on tick, and the idea was this: get wrecked and paint one two three four (or more) masterpieces. Hallucinogens are perfect for that nutty, colourful art no one can explain, but now Bobby feels a bit distraught for not doing anything, and now the acid’s starting to wear off. He looks at Georgie breath-

ing louder and louder on the settee, her eyelashes pressed shut like wee Venus flytraps, and with maximum effort he starts gathering his acrylics together. Georgie's his Muse, and there's tons of Georgie canvases strewn around the flat in various poses and multi-colours – the best ones, like 'Stripy Socks' (45x35cm) and 'Georgie Girl' (50x50cm), are hung above the telly in lime green and pastelly blue. Bobby the Artist crawls about the floor for a scrap of A1, then wallops bright pink across it with a six-inch DIY brush, slopping it everywhere. He ruins the carpet. Then he goes through to the bedroom to huff some Lynx Africa, spraying it into one of the dirtier argyle sweaters: the red one hasn't been washed for a bit. Smothering his face in the deodorant and sucking it all cold into his lungs, after three seconds Bobby feels a bit spacey again and floats back through to the living space, the colours in his head nice and bright again for a short while. He cross-legs himself in front of Georgie, suddenly spewing up eyelashes and blue hair-bands and fuchsia blocks all across the paper. Georgie's dressed in a blue and white sailor's outfit – often she plays up to her Muse status, her and Bobby the Artist flouncing around town in stupid attire and usually only to buy a new oil pastel or a jam-jar from Lidl. Now and then they get abusive comments from nobodies with buzzcuts, but they're well loved in Peach House and on the estate – Bobby's a bit like a doggy, quite dozy and partial to falling in love with everybody; Georgie's more like an apprehensive kitten: she loves to have fun, but it's got to be with the right person. She's often seen gawping at the sweetie counter in the newsagent across Longlands

Road, with her disco-ball eyes. Bobby the Artist chucks a jelly-babies bag out from under his bum, adding a bit of wacky detail to Georgie's face – spiky mascara, chewy lips, and a thought-bubble coming out of her head with a mermaid in it. There was quite an oceanic feel to the trip tonight – swimming in the carpet, imagining the doorbells were seagulls, etc. etc. – and he blames it on Georgie's sailor gear. He continues doing the Lynx while he paints, but after a while you get immune to it and Bobby finally feels the tiredness slip over him. He's so shattered. It seems like such an effort just to mix a decent phthalo turquoise, and his hand doesn't have that usual fluidity or purposefulness – in fact Georgie looks more like a blob with eyes. Bobby the Artist screams inside – coming down off acid is such a disappointing feeling. How awful it is to float back to a grey, drab world when you've just seen happy rainbow Munchkin land. It's frustrating, and Bobby tosses 'Blob with Eyes' (58x81cm) to one side, his head hurting from all the annoyance and wretched thinking. Georgie pipes up now and then with the odd snore, and Bobby wonders what they get out of each other anyway – all Georgie does is go to work, come home moody, nibble a few sweets and fall to sleep, though she does look good in a ballerina costume. All Bobby does is splash a bit of paint around in an argyle sweater getting mortalled. But all that negative thinking is a killer – Bobby doesn't believe in being sad, he wants everyone to get on with each other (and off their heads), and the temptation's miles too strong to phone up Johnnie and score more white doves. Some of Bobby's best work comes from an MDMA-fuelled

binge, all colourful and smiley and demented, although he does sometimes end up making love to the canvases. Bobby the Artist stands by the window, gazing at occasional shiny toy cars whizzing past way down there, dialling up Johnnie's mobile, but he stands there for a whole two minutes and Johnnie doesn't answer. Johnnie feels it go off in his Admiral bottoms, but he reckons it's probably his girlfriend Ellen and in any case he's got his eye on some youths over there with quite a flashy mobile and all. It's freezing out in the morning light, and Johnnie whacks up his collar as he darts across Kedward Avenue and squares up to the lads. 'Give us that, you daft cunts,' he woofs, nodding at the fancy Siemens. After Johnnie got kicked off the dole five months back, he got self-employed as a full-time thief and professional let-down. In his younger years Johnnie used to march around the estate slapping anyone who looked at him and, like a lot of the lads in his year, he was the Hardest Lad in His Year. But he's not especially macho or psychotic or unstable – in fact since he met Ellen he's calmed down slightly, and for example he loves painting pap paintings with Bobby or fixing Alan Blunt the Cunt's creaky door or helping his Nanna do the shop every Thursday. It's just a shitty state of affairs that everyone needs money. The lads look at him with their best don't-fuck-with-me (please) faces, but they can both tell they might be in for a pasting. 'Do youse wanna get battered or what?' he enquires. The lads don't, really. Johnnie roughs them up anyhow, pushing the two kids round the block, giving them little kiddy-slaps now and then for his own entertainment. Strangely, Johnnie hopes they turn on

him – giving him an excuse to pull out all his best moves – but the boys are sort of fannies and they just stand around looking a bit gutted. After a while Johnnie takes the flashy phone and £7.18 off the lads, then sprints off back down Kedward. At four in the morning there's hardly going to be a copper about, but now and then they do patrol Cargo Fleet Lane so Johnnie makes a beeline straight for Peach House. He's buzzing – thievery still gives him that burst of satisfaction, plus the sevenish quid should keep Ellen happy for sevenish minutes, say if they get a pizza or something later on. Johnnie grins, glancing up at the tower – it used to be dog muck and Sugar Puff colour but in the 2000s the council tarted up all five of the blocks, and in this particular instant Peach House looks very gorgeous, like pink and yellow ice cream on top of a raspberry ripple sunrise. Instead of stalling for the lift, Johnnie darts up the stairway past 2C's knackered fridge waiting to go to the fridge graveyard, and he dodges a binbag here, there and everywhere. There's an odd sock on floor three. There's half-eaten chips on floor three and a half. When Johnnie gets to floor four he's greeted by a crazy person hurling a crazy painting down the stairwell in total disgust. 'Now then, Bobby,' he smiles, 'what you up to?' Bobby the Artist blinks quite wildish at Johnnie, all dishevelled in his green/red-trim jumper and gurning. 'Ha ha, oh how's it going? I'm pissed off like, can't fucking paint again, can I . . .' Scratching his veiny neck, Johnnie slants his head at the crumpled 'Blob with Eyes' (58x81cm) landing halfway down the staircase. Still wet, Georgie lies there on the sofa on the ocean on the paper on the

step. 'As if!' Johnnie says with his eyebrows, 'it's fucking mint. God, is that Georgie? She looks dead relaxed. I like it, me.' One thing Johnnie misses in his life is relaxation. Having a hundred pills tucked in the vitamin tin and various other Class As playing hide-and-seek about the flat makes for an unsettled young man. Plus having no income means he's constantly thinking about the next steal and the next one and the next one – Johnnie gave up robbing his parents three weeks back after he nabbed £30 for the teddy-bear acid, and all the profits had to go on rent and even then it didn't stop the bailiffs coming round but Johnnie didn't open the door to them and eventually paid them off a week later after kneecapping a youngster who owed £70 ticky. On top of that, he's stressed about Ellen – they've been together about seven months, and he loves her to death, but he's completely plagued with jealousy. If she hasn't phoned for a day or two he instantly conjures up an image of her fucking one of the scummy rats she hangs around with. If they're at a party, Ellen can't talk to another boy without Johnnie getting the hump. He trusts her, but part of what attracted him to Ellen in the first place was the nymphomania and her general brassy, come-hither attitude. If he ever caught her shagging someone else, that cunt on the other side of her cunt would be absolutely fucked. That's why when Johnnie sees a portrait of Georgie all sleepy and content on a pink background, his heart expands into a big juicy strawberry. 'Can I get a picture of it?' he asks, leaning the painting upright, getting a bit of sticky acrylic on his fingers. 'I just twocked this mobile,' he goes on, unleashing the Siemens. 'It's got a camera and

that.' Bobby the Artist smiles while Johnnie figures how to work it, but even so the painting's totally dead to him. He believes in spontaneity, madness, pure psychic automatism, childish colours and sloppy brushstrokes, but this one's just a mess. He sighs while Johnnie snaps the disaster, although it is always nice to receive a compliment. There were these people in the 1940s who called themselves CoBrA and they believed in painting with that total abandon like a little child, but of course you do run the risk of making a massive boo-boo. 'You don't need a new phone, by any chance?' Johnnie asks, scarping the rest of the way up the stairs. Bobby the Artist shakes his mad brown mop-top. He stands silently for a bit weighing up the prospect of forcing sleep or saying fuck it and carrying on working, and in the fuzzy dawn he figures the most rock-and-roll option would be, 'Johnnie, you couldn't sort me another couple doves on tick, could you?' Johnnie feigns a look of you-fucking-bastard, but he loves Bobby the Artist and it's been a pretty fruitful night in terms of wheeling and dealing, and he just smiles and tosses over a few left-over halves and crumbly bits from his tracky-top pocket. Bobby grins and stuffs his face with the doves, although he soon realises his mouth's like sandpaper and the pills won't actually go down the chute, so he fumbles into the flat and into the kitchen and has to tapwater them down a few goes. But it's worth it – almost straight away the placebo effect of putting ecstasy between your lips perks him up, and despite the clock saying 5.31 Bobby decides he might go wake Georgie up and try to paint her properly. Georgie's not happy. She's been working all day behind the sweetie

counter at Bhs, and the vodka and sheer shatteredness of it all had her in one of those black-hole bottomless sleeps. She was dreaming of fairgrounds and carousels, not mermaids, imagining her and Bobby riding plastic horses high above the housing estate like a scruffier Mary Poppins. Bobby the Artist grabs her by the shoulders and gives her a little shake, but it's like being dragged from dream into reality through a mile of gravel or a thornbush. Her massive eyelashes part, and she glares up at Bobby with gigantic throbbing peepers. 'What?' she snaps. Bobby the Artist smiles blissfully, the love-doves already sending a sparkle in one or two veins, and he answers, 'Sorry, pet, it's just I scored more pills off Johnnie and, like . . . do you wanna do some poses for me? Painting and that?' If there's one thing that annoys Georgie, it's her boyfriend getting over-excited about a teeny-weeny tablet. She hates them – what does it say about your life if you keep having to gloss it in druggy lovey-doveyness? Georgie's perfectly happy with her life as it is, even though it was murder at work that afternoon. Mr Hawkson, her boss, keeps scolding her just because she's easy-going and cheerful on the counter. These kids of about age eleven came in around dinner-break and, even though they were clearly pilfering the milk-bottles and fizzy cherries and scoffing them on the sly, Georgie thought it was nice to see them enjoying themselves. The cherries were a fine choice. Hawkson could see it all unfolding from his hands-on-hips stance over by Womenswear, and he marched over and gave Georgie a bollocking. He's a prick – he's in his forties and apparently he's got a 'partner', but he still enjoys perving on Georgie in

the terrible stripey blouse. He'll never fire her – Hawkson's never seen anyone over twenty so enthusiastic about sweets before in his life. For Georgie sweets are her only vice – she's grown out of listing her top ten confectionery each month (the last instalment had rhubarb and custards knock white jazzies off the top spot), but much of the mess around 4E looks like a U-bomb hit a Haribo factory. She flings a few empty wrappers out from her bum-crack and elbows, although it sounds like the Smarties packet has something left in it so she munches those fellows for a bit. 'Bobby, I'm knackered,' she moans, her brain pulsing and threatening to run out of her nose, ears and mouth, like something from those manky manga films Bobby used to watch. It was his cousin from Eston who made him watch all the video nasties, and Bobby remembers vividly screaming and squeezing his face down the back of the sofa and bad-dreaming after seeing *Driller Killer* and *Hellraiser* aged nine and three-quarters. That bit where the man's face gets stretched and ripped off by hooks had him in tears for two weeks. Funny, though, how *Un Chien Andalou* doesn't have the same aaargh-factor (that insane Buñuel/Dalí film with split eyeballs and severed hands, and nuns), since it's really a horror film too, but Salvador Dalí's an artist, you see, and Clive Barker's just a sicko. Shivering, Bobby the Artist props one of his ready-stretched canvases against the coffee table (not that they drink coffee any more – Bobby had a horrible experience necking loads of espressos while on the Billy Whizz, finding himself fidgeting and spasming for approximately forty-eight hours), and gives Georgie the puppy-dog

eyes. Or the ecstasy eyes. Whenever Bobby needs canvases making, he snorts an amphetamine mountain over the course of a day, coming down in the evening surrounded by perfectly stretched frames and with blisters on his fingers. Such a hard-working drug! Bobby leaps and puts Galaxie 500 on moderately high volume, the guitars feeling particularly swoopy-loopy this daybreak. He starts to feel the smudgy rush of ecstasy spread through him; the perfect feeling for painting your girlfriend, he thinks. Sometimes he doesn't even realise he's irritating her. Georgie just sits there, not really fussed about posing, but the Smarties are a bonus. Lots of blue ones and all. She watches her boyfriend through slitted eyes, all those tell-tale signs of a man coming up such as manic eyeballs, can't-keep-stillness, and his jowls getting more and more demented. Bobby's feeling brilliant – he washes a brush, then sketches Georgie really large and cute and sailorish in a tiny fuchsia boat. He blocks her in with fleshy pink and navy blue, putting love-hearts in her eyes, then he rolls around the carpet laughing at it. 'Voilà!' he slobbers. Georgie's not impressed – all she got woken up for was a five-minute splasharound, not some highly considered jaw-dropping *coup de grâce*. Speaking of jaws, by seven o'clock Bobby's is all over the place. And Georgie's still knackered. At least she hasn't got work today – she thinks about slithering next door to go to bed, but Bobby the Artist keeps jabbering on in the swing of his druggy buzz. 'Aww, Georgie, you're gorgeous. I don't want to be a dickhead and that, you know, like all sloppy and that, but God you were made for painting. You know Modigliani? Well I feel like that,

you know; getting wrecked and just painting all these birds and that . . . not that I knock around with other girls like, don't worry . . . I just mean you're mint . . . like . . .' he blabs, frothing a bit at the mouth. At the moment he feels utter wonder and contentment sitting with Georgie, like nothing else matters to him in the big wide world, but as it always does when he finally comes down around ten o'clock (and Georgie's long gone, a sailor-sized lump in the bed next-door), he wishes she was more outgoing and would swallow drugs with him instead of just sweeties. It's totally depressing falling back to earth for the umpteenth time. Bump. Bobby the Artist sits on his own on the pink couch, still wired, but now the white morning outside just makes him queasy. He scours the carpet for any sort of intoxicant (Nescafé would do), but there's not even any Smarties left. 'Grrrr!' he says in his head. Unfortunately it's time to call it a day. Sniffing, Bobby pops through to the cool bedroom and changes into his kangaroo pyjamas, as is tradition after every long-haul inner flight. Speaking of which, he dribbles himself onto the edge of the bed and puts on Primal Scream's own beautiful 'Inner Flight', and the comfort's exhausting. Georgie makes a little gurgle as the song kicks in, and it's actually in the same key. She rolls over but doesn't wake up, and for five minutes Bobby just enjoys being there with her and the song, and he strokes her stray pinky shoulder poking out from the bronze bedcover. An eensy-weensy part of him wants to rouse Georgie again and have ravenous sex with her, but he doesn't want to push it. In any case, she looks so holy and adorable all wrapped up, it's nice enough just

to be sat in her presence. But sleep's still off the cards for Bobby for at least a couple more hours, and he just concretes himself to the duvet and stares at morning stretching until then. Georgie, unaware he's there, has sprawled herself across seventy-nine per cent of the bed but Bobby still feels happy perched precariously on the frame edge. He lets his mind wander, eyes closed, where quite a few trippy pictures still hang on the backs of his eyelids. Faint multicolour boxes unfold and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat, and it keeps him entertained for a bit before bedtime. Little spirographs rise and fall, easing Bobby the Artist into slumber with their soft swirly twirls. For a second he thinks he sees his face on the Haribo kid's body, and all of a sudden he wonders what it'd be like to be famous – he'd rather see his face on *Frieze* magazine, mind you. Imagine going to all those posh parties and sniffing all the free drugs! He dreams of getting a £1,000-a-day coke habit. But the opportunity seems so far away when you're holed up on the fourth floor of some tower block no one's even heard of, overlooking bumpy tarmac and unhappy little shops, though if Jean-Michel Basquiat could come out of a garbage can with rubbish paintings and still get famous then so could he. Basquiat's his big influence, just like smack was for Jean-Michel. There's this painting, 'Bombero', of Jean's girlfriend giving him a thump and, although Georgie would never lay a finger on him, Bobby can kind of relate to it. Georgie kicks Bobby in the face every time she goes to bed early in a strop. Every time she scolds Bobby for having too much of a good time. Every time she goes to work.

Every time she frowns. From day one they've been perfectly happy together, though Bobby sort of thought she could be weaned onto drugs or at least have her arm twisted once or twice. Georgie's dad's been clocking-on at BASF for twenty-five years (they gave him a stereo to celebrate), and it's his daft influence making her think you have to work so you can survive so you can die sometime later on. Bobby the Artist's ethic is: do what you want and enjoy it or else! But saying that, it's not really that much fun sitting next to a corpse at noon o'clock with nothing to do. With the teeniest dots of energy still left in his system there's the teeniest window of opportunity to carry on painting, but Bobby's head's got a rock in it instead of a brain and soon sleep takes over. He ends up squashed on the remainder of the mattress like a broken Sticklebrick. The instant relief of deep slumbers drops him straight into the same hole as Georgie, but just as he begins to snore the front door goes blam-blam-BLAM and he's spatten back out again. Poor Bobby the Artist. He rolls off the edge of the double bed, rubs his mop-top to and fro for a bit, then staggers sadly to the door as the next blam-blam-BLAM begins. Although he was only asleep for a millisecond it feels as if he's been brought out of a coma, and he can only offer extreme hostility to the Express Pizza boy standing there in the corridor. 'What?' Bobby the Artist snaps. The pizza boy wobbles a bit, dressed in his dingy olive-green company T-shirt and holding out the 12" box like a riot shield. 'Americano,' he mumbles, offering it. 'What?' Bobby the Artist snaps. 'Americano,' the pizza boy repeats, feeling all shitty. Bobby doesn't mean

to be a dickhead, but after a night gurning his chops off the last thing he wants is a fucking pizza crust to chew on. Bobby's about to slam the door in the pizza boy's mush, but then he remembers all those parties and sit-ins round Johnnie and Ellen's and the two of them always munching Americano pizzas, and he goes, 'You want 5E not 4E. See you later then.' As the door slaps shut, the Express boy pushes his bottom lip out then pushes on up the stairs. He hates his crap delivery job, especially when you get sent to weird tower blocks in the centre of dodgy estates, and people can be so rude sometimes. He passed his driving test first-go at age seventeen and got the job at Express at eighteen, and at first it was quite fun hurtling round town scoffing free Hawaiians, but the novelty wore off when he started getting lots of abuse, and when he started getting the spare-tyre belly. It's heart-wrenching trying to get money off stubborn cunts, usually hard-case lads at a party who grab the pizza then tell you to fuck off in various ways. Then you get back to the kitchens and Mr Ashram clips you round the head and grumbles and you feel like dog poo-poo. The Express boy sighs, stepping gingerly down the vinyl corridor as he searches for 5E. What he really wants to be is a fighter-plane pilot. Squinting in the fluorescent white light, he knocks three times on the correct door then holds out the pizza, bracing himself for more abuse. And he couldn't have knocked at a worse time – Johnnie and Ellen are in the bedroom having completely awful sex. As a rule their sex is typically shite with neither of them reaching orgasm, but this particular session reaches an all-time low. After getting in from pilfering

phones and suchlike, Johnnie slept next to Ellen till midday then drank some flat White Ace and ordered theAmericano on the promise of a quickie with his girlfriend. But it's a longie – Ellen managed to get him hard, stripping down to dandelion knickers and stroking her nails down his balls, but she was unable to get any sort of wetness going herself what with Johnnie's pathetic attempts at stabbing his fingers into her fanny, and when he swapped fingers for knob he might as well have been shagging a hole in the road. And thirty-seven minutes later it's not any more enjoyable for either of them. The front door suddenly goes blam-blam-BLAM, and Johnnie and Ellen prise themselves apart with equal parts relief and exasperation. Ellen drops back on the covers with an all-red minge while Johnnie yanks on his Boro FC dressing-gown and stamps through the flat like the Incredible Sulk. 'What?' he snaps, opening the door to the Express boy. He'd forgotten all about theAmericano. The 'quickie' should've been over ages ago, leaving Johnnie and Ellen in a warmish trance ready to gobble down some dinner. The pizza boy winces, then sucks in a little breath and mumbles, 'Americano?' Johnnie just yanks the 12" box off him, tosses the door shut and leaves the Express boy with a good old-fashioned, 'Fuck off.' He stomps his bare feet across the dog-eared carpet, growling to himself as he hops back into bed, then him and Ellen eat the pizza in painful silence. Ellen's tucked under the duvet again with a few undergarments back on, and she crunches her teeth softly with a face like sour cream. Useless prick. The most annoying part is she loves Johnnie as a person (he looks after her, he's

funny, he lets her live at the flat, he owns drugs . . .), but sex to her is the most wonderful part of a relationship and it feels like getting raped every time he's with her. With other lads it used to be lovely after a good fuck just to lie all tangled up chatting nonsense, but after a session with Johnnie she just wants to die. Often Ellen sucks him off in the beginning in the hope of him coming quickly and then not being in the mood for full-on sex. It kills him. Johnnie's sexual prowess is based largely on hardcore pornography, where butch men gang-bang vulnerable ladies, and where foreplay means sticking your hand up the cunt or getting a skull-fuck, and every episode ends in the man gobbing hot white filth in the girl's mush. It's strange how any hetero man's worst nightmare would be having a hard cock shoved up his arse, and yet their ultimate fantasy would be shoving theirs up a lady's. Admittedly, Johnnie has been able to make past girlfriends orgasm but those were the dominant types, riding his cock into all the right places. On one occasion, with this girl Sharon, he accidentally found the clitoris. Johnnie wonders if Ellen's just fucked so many lads she's become picky and pernickety about how she likes it, but there go them jealous thoughts again. Johnnie screws his face up, finishing the chewy Americano, feeling absolutely tortured. He wonders what it is about sex with Ellen that just doesn't hit the spot – the girls in the pornos all scream like cheery monsters! Maybe their bits don't fit together properly, or maybe they're just unlucky. The sex did get off to a crap start: Johnnie and Ellen first shagged each other on a Saturday back in January, and Johnnie remembers waking up that

morning with the shits after a bad Hot Shot Parmo. Him and his boys had been on a bit of a binge the night before, hammering the ecstasy and cheapo Cas-sini, oh and a Parmesan. Today Johnnie doesn't really take pills after suffering a wee bit of depression, but back in January he could nail ten in a night and still drive the Nissan Sunny home without much bother, and buzz off his tits. So anyway, the day after this binge he had severe diarrhoea, and spent most of the morn-ing sat on the lav in his family home somewhere down Ormesby. It was definitely the Parmo – his matey Bello warned him it was a bit on the old side, but Johnnie was pissed and he hadn't come up yet and he hadn't eaten owt. You could smell the sloppy chicken in the bottom of the toilet bowl. It was disgusting, but once he flushed it away the bathroom didn't stink so much and Johnnie started feeling better right away. He first noticed Ellen at the Jobcentre in a miniskirt and amber Puma top: she signed on at 10.33, Johnnie signed on at 10.36. After a few fortnights of shyness, they got talking and now and then Johnnie would bump into her wan-dering around town with her mates and a load of shopping bags. One night at the Purple Onion they had a kiss and a grope, and the week after that at the dole she got his number and, just as Johnnie was clean-ing his bottom, she vibrated in his trousers. 'Beep-beep!' said the phone. Ellen was wanting to meet him at Aruba that night, not so much a date but just check-ing he'd be out and whether or not his dole came through on time. There'd been problems with the pay-ments going through over Christmas, what with staff shortages and p-p-p-paperwork, but that morning

checking her balance at Halifax Ellen had a crisp £176.14 and she wanted to go out and get pissed and perhaps shag that charming, pale boy she'd found at the Jobcentre Plus. Ellen's attractive according to most men and despicable according to most girls (dripping toffee hair, too skinny, cream foundation acne, and a good arse even in her jogging bottoms), the type of girl who fucks a lad until she gets fucked about then fucks off to the next one, but she always seems happy. Johnnie hadn't had sex for four months so he said yes he'd meet up with her, and he rallied up a few of his less-favourite mates, and they all got pissed and supercharged in Spensley's before heading under the flyover to Aruba. The club had the bluey glitzy look of an aquarium but instead of fishies was full of skinhead lads in horizontal-stripe sweatshirts trying to pull, and noodle-haired girls looking sour in minimum clothes. Johnnie was pretty embarrassed meeting Ellen in a place like that – he used to go a lot when he was sixteen or seventeen, except back then it was the Royal Exchange and he used to exchange spit with girls without much hassle. His loudmouth patter gets him most things he wants out of life, despite him being rather ugly. And sure enough, by eleven o'clock he'd hooked up with Ellen and the two of them were bantering happily about each other and taking the mickey out of strangers while they sat together on the space-age settees. Johnnie liked to think of himself as a perceptive person, and he could clock all the signs of a prospective shag on the cards: Ellen's leg crossed in his direction, occasional stroking of the knee, over-the-top laughter at anything he said, snogs with more and more tongue.



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Richard Milward was born in Middlesbrough in 1984. His debut novel, APPLES, was published in 2007.

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