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Joe All Alone

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Not on the Choice:

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Media type:

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Joe's mum's boyfriend Dean is a drunken slob, but she's too needy to do without him. Perry Fletcher makes life at school a misery, especially since Joe's best friend Bradley now hangs out with Perry and won't talk to Joe. Then there are the Dooleys, who know too much about Dean's shady dealings around Peckham; and they want a share of the £2000 Joe knows Dean's hidden in the toilet cistern. Things couldn't get much worse for 13-year-old Joe. Except they do. He's been longing for the May half-term holiday but Mum and Dean announce they're off to Spain. Joe's not invited. Twenty quid to cover the leccy and everything else. In the fridge is what's left of a decaying lamb tikka masala. He mustn't answer the phone or the door or talk to the neighbours, since they'd guess he was on his own and then Mum and Dean would be in trouble. Not that he would, since they're not that friendly, except for Otis from the flat opposite, a bus conductor down Camberwell Garage. So, Joe tells himself (and us, since we're listening in to his story), 'I'm on my own now. I'm Joe Holt and I'm all alone.'

To begin with, it's brilliant. Dean's not there to hog the sofa and the Xbox, but as the days pass, things go downhill, and then downhill some more. The loneliness gives Joe space to wonder if he's still got a nan in Cornwall he could go and see; and how Carl, the only one of Mum's boyfriends he liked, is getting on in prison. And he wonders about girls and stuff like that.

Suddenly he meets one. Literally on his doorstep. She's not only good looking, she's funny, and she likes magazines and horoscopes and stories. And she's got X-ray eyes that see what Joe's feeling. She's Asha, and Otis is her sort-of grandpa. After a bit, Joe even tells her he's on his own, and she doesn't tell Otis. While things with Asha get better and better, the money, the food and the electricity are running out. And Joe knows what Dean will do when he gets back and finds he's made friends with a black girl. When it's time to go back to school and Dean and Mum still haven't come home, things get worse. Perry's seen Joe and Asha down the park; he wants a pound a day to keep quiet. Joe's run out of cash and gets badly beaten up behind the Chicken Hut.

What stops all of this being as desolate and joyless as it might sound is Joe's resilience, his touching determination to be grown-up about things. He's no whinger, and though the reader will blame his mum from page 1, Joe doesn't; she's the only mum he's got and if it weren't for Dean, things would be okay. There's Joe's growing friendship with Asha to enjoy - first love, really - since it's tender yet unsentimental; and Asha (who has parent troubles of her own) is so witty,

optimistic and resourceful. She thinks Joe's good at seeing her too and she's not afraid to tell him so.

You wouldn't expect a fairy tale ending. When Mum finally makes it back from Spain, she's maybe begun to sort out what really matters, and it helps that the law catches up with Dean and he's locked up for ten years or so. Joe's still very self-aware, but he's grown tougher and knows he's not the freak he thought he was. Narrow horizons, small cast, tight focus; and so Joanna Nadin ensures we care about Joe finding Asha and Otis, and his mum, and even himself.

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