



Tamara, left, arriving at Barton Hill council estate in Bristol - 'The first thing I notice is the silence' - and, above, with Julie and her three-year-old daughter Jade

When *Marie Claire* asked me how I would react to living on a council estate on under £80 a week, I took up the challenge. I went to one of the most deprived areas of the country, where I stayed with Julie - a single mother, like me - and kept a diary of the events. Photographs by Karen Robinson

WHY I SWAPPED THE HIGH LIFE FOR A HIGH RISE

by It girl Tamara Beckwith

Wednesday, 2pm

I only flew back from Los Angeles yesterday and I'm preparing myself to live someone else's existence for two days. I'm going to stay with 25-year-old Julie, a single mother, who lives on a council estate in Barton Hill, Bristol, with her three-year-old daughter, Jade.

When our car pulls into Bristol city centre I'm slightly apprehensive. I become aware of some tall, imposing tower blocks on the horizon. As I get closer, I feel as though I'm entering a time warp. There are a few cars in the car parks, some old-fashioned terraced cottages, and no real shops – by that I don't mean clothes shops, but those selling simple, basic provisions. Deciding where to park is a trauma, since I've already spotted my first burnt-out car. I grab my holdall and start walking towards Longland's House, where Julie lives.

The first thing I notice is the silence – not like at night, when everyone's asleep, but more of a deathly hush. The people on the estate are all walking about purposefully, going somewhere, fetching something or someone. I have been to council estates before. Until the age of eleven, I went to a state school in Kew and I had two friends who lived on a council estate – one whose father was in prison.

Standing outside my host's address I feel more relaxed – so far, so good. I didn't know what to expect, but wouldn't have been shocked if someone had approached me to ask who I was, or even to mug me. People are staring, but then, on an estate, everyone knows everyone else. No one recognises me, but I look different in my combats and leather jacket. I ride the lift to the eleventh floor, where Julie nervously opens the door to her flat.

Her apartment is small, but is probably the most immaculate home I have visited. To say she is house-proud would be an understatement. I like to think I keep my house tidy too, but then I have a cleaner at both my homes, in London's Chelsea, and in LA.

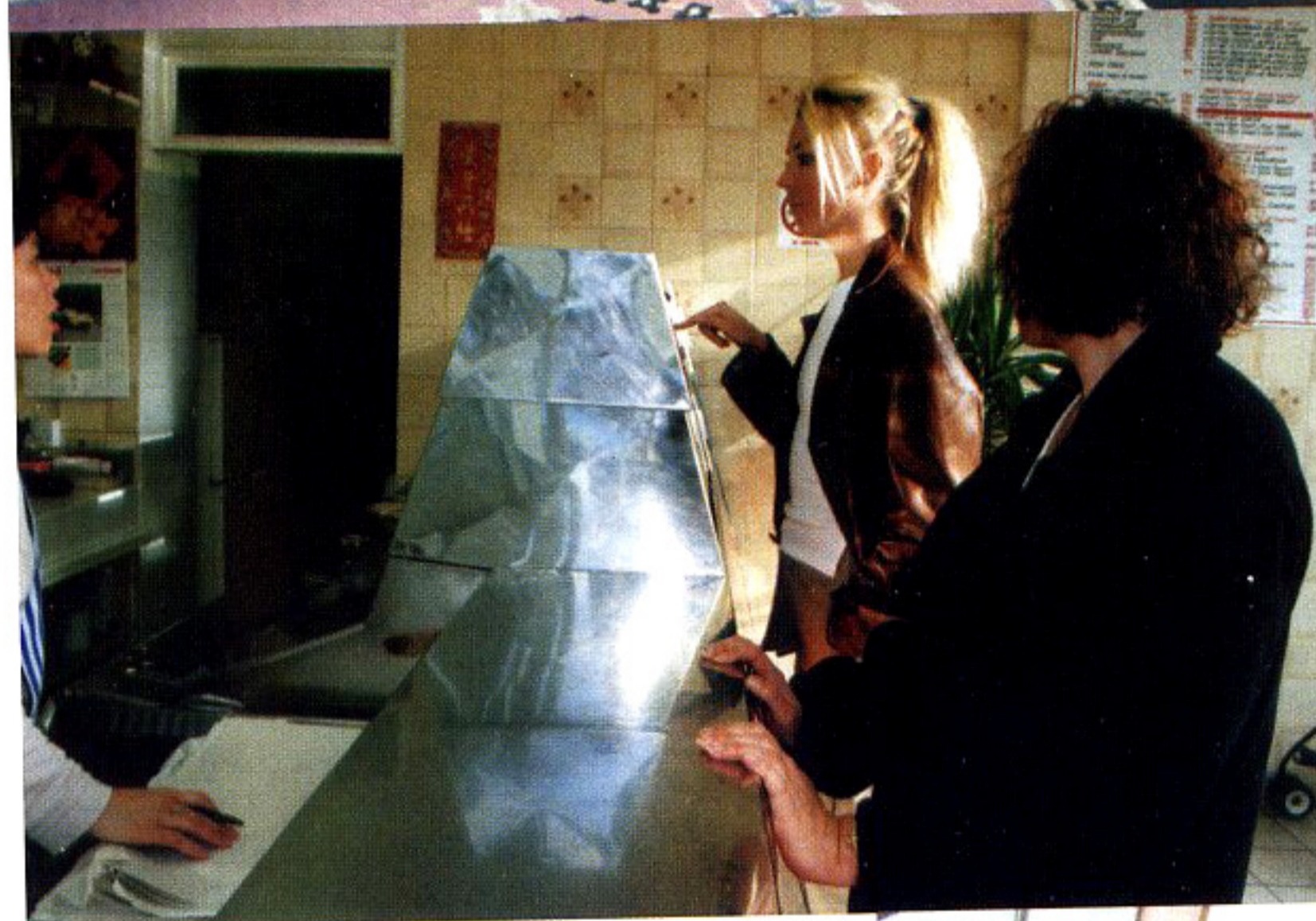
I hadn't been too sure of how Julie would react to me, but she's very kind and friendly, and immediately offers me a cup of tea or coffee. At first, her daughter Jade is shy, but that soon changes. We're all on our best behaviour, trying to act as though we swap lives every day, when I notice a framed poster on the wall. I giggle and tell Julie that the model in the picture is a friend of mine, called Adam Perry. After gasps of amazement and a few, "What's he like?" and "Is he really gorgeous?" questions, I realise we've broken the ice and found some common ground.

3pm

Julie decides that we should go and do her weekly wash. I can't say I'm whooping with enthusiasm, but off we go. We get Jade into her buggy and lock both sets of doors to the flat – there are half a dozen locks in all. When we arrive at the laundry, which is in the basement, we find three women there already.



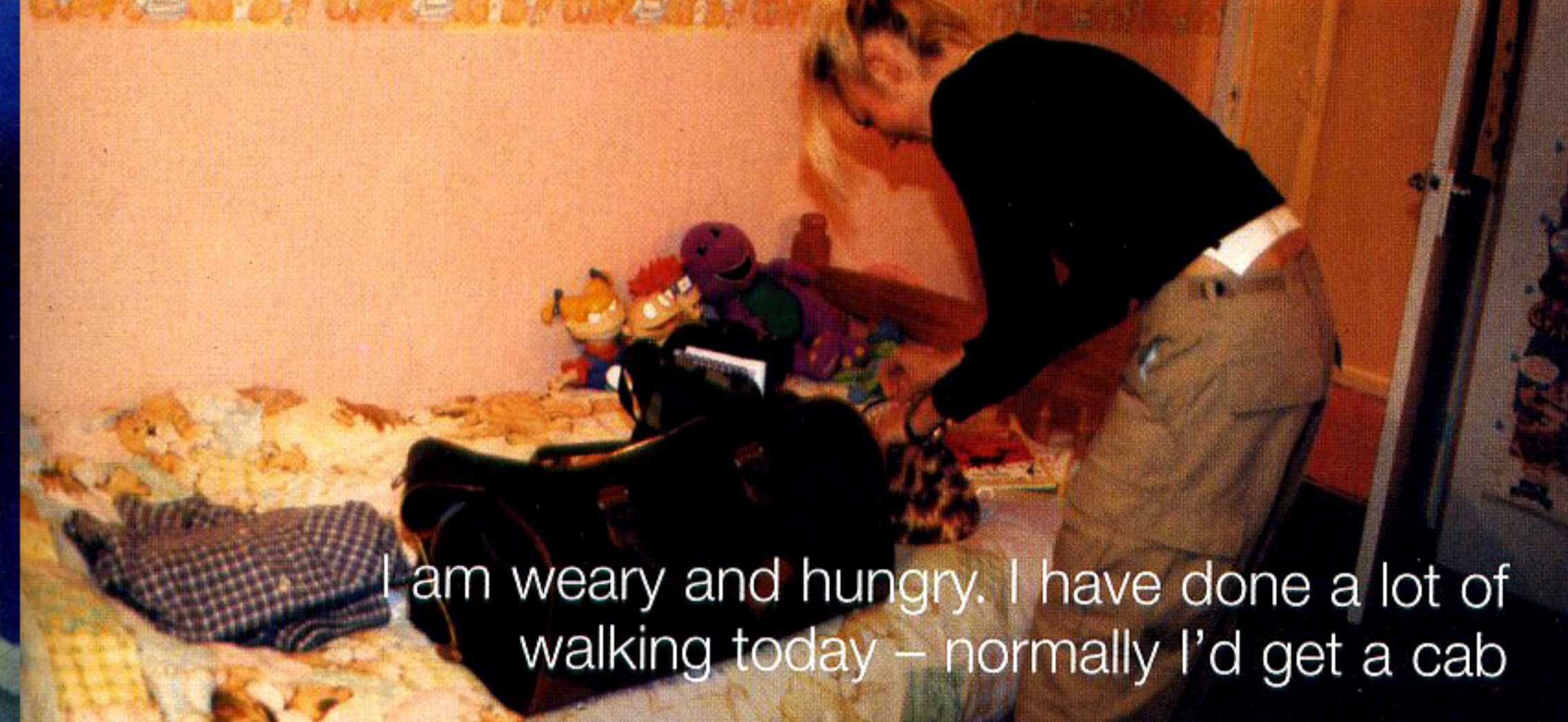
Her apartment is immaculate. I like to think I keep my house tidy too, but then I have a cleaner



Tamara, above, in the living room with Jade: 'I'm her new best friend, having put some of my Elizabeth Arden Eight-Hour Cream on her lips'; left, buying fish and chips for supper, 'something I only eat once every six months'; and, below, struggling up the steps of one of the other blocks on the estate – because the lift is broken – to see Julie's friend, Stacey

A small boy is rushing around shouting. Julie says hello and introduces me to everyone. I feel hugely out of place, but force myself to ask questions without sounding like a school teacher with a plum in her mouth. They're all single mothers too – Julie says that about 30 per cent of the estate's residents are sole parents. Two of the women live in the tower block and one in a house in the street where we parked. Much to my horror, I'm told this is the worst area in Bristol for drug dealers. No one ventures out very far unless it's absolutely necessary.

One woman starts talking to me about her son, who has behavioural problems. He has a habit of setting fire to things, missing school and wetting his bed. Her main concern is to have him officially designated as 'special', so that she can claim more money for him. Anouska, my daughter, ▷



I am weary and hungry. I have done a lot of walking today – normally I'd get a cab

Tamara in Jade's 'beautiful pink bedroom', above, where she spent the night 'counting the rise and fall of the lift', while Jade shared her mother's bed; and, right, spending the evening watching TV, something Julie does every night except for an occasional trip to the pub if a friend offers to babysit



◁ is twelve, and at boarding school. A lot of the women's talk is bravado. Sure, they want to better themselves, but in the meantime it's all about making ends meet and staying safe. The general impression I get is of their frustration at being placed in a tower block rather than a house. Things like cars and holidays, and other such status symbols, simply don't come into the equation.

3.30pm

We decide to visit the playground, which looks harmless enough, until Julie explains that a caretaker has to check every morning for used syringes. There is graffiti on the surrounding walls and a smell of rubbish in the air. I spot two little girls aged nine or ten wearing high heels, spangly tops and make-up. I don't get the feeling they're just dressing up; this is what they wear every day. Kids grow up quickly at Barton Hill.

The kids' hunger is suppressed with packets of chocolate buttons. I worry that they are being pumped full of 'E' numbers. I often give Anouska an apple for a snack. Julie always tries to keep fruit in the house. 'A lot of the other mums will only buy sweets and crisps as snacks,' she says. 'That's what the kids want,

and sometimes it's easier just to give in.' It's beginning to get chilly, so we decide to go to the shops, but not for a big stock-up, as we will have to carry it all home in the buggy. 'I spend £6 a day on food,' says Julie. 'I pay all my bills on a weekly basis, and that comes to about £30. Fags cost me £3.50 a day, and there's nothing left after that.' She and Jade live on £78 a week. Julie has no financial support from Jade's father, although he regularly buys her clothes and shoes when she needs them, and sees his daughter at least once a week.

4.30pm

When we reach the lone stretch of shops, I feel sad. The butcher, the hairdresser and the greengrocer have closed down, and just a small mini-market remains. With its steel shutters, the shop's security seems to be quite hard core, but when I ask, I'm told that the only things the local thieves are after are cigarettes.

On leaving the shop, I ask Julie about safety. She shudders and says it's not safe, and that she never goes out at night. There are muggings, and drug addicts lurking about, and she is scared she might be raped. She sleeps with a baseball bat by her bed.

Julie says there is little for children and teenagers to do on the estate, and takes me to a place called The Dugout. This is like a youth centre, where the children can play football and other organised games. But it's not enough to stave off the inevitable boredom. 'Most of the teenagers hang around the stairwells all day,' says Julie. 'The older ones burn out cars.' Sometimes they break fences on the estate, or go joyriding in stolen cars.

7pm

Dinner is fish and chips, which is not unusual for Julie, but something I eat only about once every six months. Now is not the time to be worrying about calories, though, as I realise I am both weary and hungry. I have done a lot of walking today – everywhere, in fact. Normally, I'd get a cab.

8.15pm

We have eaten and I feel tired. Jade has hardly touched her food, and is on overdrive. I'm her new best friend, having put some of my Elizabeth Arden Eight-Hour Cream on her lips. Julie asks how much it costs – when I say about £18 she rolls her eyes. 'I don't really buy beauty products,' says Julie. 'Other than deodorant, hair mousse and moisturiser – which cost me a pound a month.'

We spend the rest of the evening watching TV. I usually only stay in a couple of nights a week, but Julie stays in almost every night. 'I can't afford childcare, but friends occasionally babysit if I want to go to the pub,' she explains. Some of her friends call on her mobile – it's a lifeline for Julie, but she doesn't use it to call out because she can't afford to.

11pm

We turn in for the night. I sleep in Jade's beautiful pink bedroom with pictures of Barney the giant pink dinosaur on the wall, while she shares her mum's bed. I call my boyfriend in LA, and tell him I'm fine and that I love him. He's a musician and says he's about to go into the recording studio. Eventually, I drift off into a troubled sleep – maybe I'm more tense about being here than I'd realised.

6.30am

I wake up and realise I've been counting the rise and fall of the lift, which has been constant all night. I go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, wash my face and forget my usual routine of eyebrow plucking, cleansing, moisturising and flossing. Breakfast is black coffee for me, cereal for Jade, and a cup of tea and a fag for Julie.

10am

We head off to the community centre, where the women go every morning to gossip and talk about the courses they're taking. Their goal is to get qualifications so that when the kids go to school they can get a job. They organise jumble sales and trips for the children, and run the estate's Credit Bank, set up by the residents. 'If you don't have a job you can hardly get a ▷