

**EDWARD BOND**

TWO PLAYS

# THE CHILDREN

Both plays are set in the future and are concerned, not with sci-fi technology, but with our emotions, asking, 'How will we live then?'

**THE CHILDREN**  
A disturbed mother sends her son on a bizarre errand which has fatal consequences. Leaving home, he embarks on a journey with his friends. Encountering evil, destruction and eventually compassion, he is drawn into a world that is changed for ever.

**HAVE I NONE**  
A woman sitting alone hears a constant knocking at the door, but no one is there.

Her husband returns and tells her of an extraordinary meeting with an old woman found roaming in a ruined part of the city. Then a stranger comes to the door, like a visitor from an earlier, lost world. What follows is tragic and absurdly funny until both seem to melt into a strange, hallucinatory vision of the future.

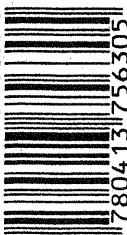
*The Children* (a Classworks Theatre production) and *Have I None* (a Big Brum production) were both toured to British schools during 2000.

# & HAVE I NONE



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of young people. The young people should perform their roles as they are printed in Scenes One, Two, Four, Eleven and Twelve. In all other scenes they should create their own parts, guided by the situations and words given to them in the text.

Sixteen young people performed in the first production. In further productions the number may be increased or decreased and the gender of the roles may be changed. Peterborough (the town named in Scenes Five and Six) may be changed to an appropriate local town.

## One

*Abandoned lot by a railway line.  
Dusk.*

**Joe** *comes on. He carries a stuffed puppet. It is about half his size. It is dressed in a brightly coloured jacket, dark grey trousers, white shirt, striped tie and brown shoes. Its clothes suggest school uniform.*

**Joe** Late. Dark soon. This used to be allotments. That's what the little sheds were for. They're falling down. They say they're haunted. Got spiders in them. (*Points.*) Railway line.

Don't cry. Shouldn't have brought you with me today. Brought you because you cried. Now you're crying even more. Are you afraid? You don't like the dark. You'll be all right for one night. Are you hungry? I'll bring you some sweets in the morning. What sweets shall I bring you?

My tea'll be cold. Mum'll be on the warpath. She's waiting to go out. If you could walk we'd go back together. I'd drop you at your front door. Stand out in the street. Hear them shout at you inside for being late. We'd laugh about it in the morning. That used to be my jacket. Passed it on to you when I grew out of it. Still put my things in the pockets. Secret hiding place. Don't cry. If you cry I won't bring you the sweets. Oh dear! — now he'll cry even more. What sweets d'you want? I'll buy them with Mum's fag money. Say I lost it. She won't believe me. I don't care.

Why do I drag you around? You get me into trouble. Didn't go to school today because of you. Mum won't have you in the house any more. She'd send you to the jumble sale. 'That's where you won him in the raffle. Take him back. Make some money out of him.' Or chuck you in the rubbish when I'm at school. You stare at me. If you were real we'd quarrel. That'd be that! I'd tell you to get lost! I even have to do your talking for you. Sometimes I hear myself talk and think it's you. Anyone listening now would think I'm mad. It's got to stop! I'm too old for you! You're nothing! A puppet stuffed with packing!

It's not my fault you're not real. You're better off like that. No exams. No errands. 'Clear that up. I'm not tidying your room!' What sweets d'you want? I don't even know what your favourites are. I give you mine. I just supposed they're yours. (*Doesn't look up.*) When it's getting dark the sky's dirty. Streaky. It's forgot to wash its face. I told you everything I didn't tell anyone else. It used to be such fun with you. It's not any more. I have to tell you the truth. I always have. No lies. I brought you here to get rid of you. You have to learn to be on your own. You can't. You'll never be able to look after yourself. That's why you can't let me go. You've got my comb.

*He takes a comb from the puppet's pocket. Combs his hair. Puts the comb in his own pocket.*

I'll have to kill you.

*He goes out. He comes back with a brick.*

You won't feel it. Cheerio. (*He drops the brick on the puppet's head.*) Shut your eyes. Be dead.

*He goes out. He comes back with a brick. He stops, wanders a few steps.* Anything goes wrong in our house Mum hits me. Don't know why. Am I supposed to change the world? (*He goes to the puppet. Looks at it.*) Got dirty green on your face. Off the brick. If I had a torch there'd be blood where I walk between you and the bricks.

*He drops the brick on the puppet's head. He goes out and comes back with a brick. He drops it on the puppet's head.*

That's enough. Won't leave you here when it's done. Stream at the back. Allotment holders got water from it for their plants. Mucky. Full of crates and trolleys. Won't throw you in the water. Lay you on the bank. Out of sight. The cats and dogs won't get you. If you turned into a ghost you'd hear the stream run when it rained. No ghosts. There's nothing like that.

*He picks up the puppet. Half-hugs and playfully half-swings it from side to side.*

You're nearly dead. One more.

*He puts down the puppet. Starts to go. Suddenly stops.*

Has to be! (*Runs back to the puppet. Picks up a brick. Hits the puppet with the brick.*) Has to be! Can't give you away to someone who doesn't care! (*Hits the puppet with the brick.*) Can't leave you on a bus! (*Hits the puppet with the brick.*) Someone might find you — who didn't humiliate you! (*Hits the puppet with the brick.*) Didn't hurt you! (*Hits the puppet with the brick.*) I can't! You're mine! (*Pause.*) Phew! (*Stands. Looks at his hand.*) Muck. (*Brushes his hands together.*) Dark. Mum'll rave. She's going out with her new boyfriend.

*Joe takes hold of the puppet by the leg and drags it out behind him.*

## Two

*Home.  
Later.*

**Mother** *sits on a wooden chair. Broods. A noise at the front door. She perks up.*

**Mother** (*calls*) You back dear?

**Joe** *comes in.*

**Joe** (*awkward*) Sorry I'm late.

**Mother** O I don't call this late. I expect you've been with your mates. Nice time?

**Joe** (*confused*) Well.

**Mother** Enjoy yourself your age. There isn't much enjoyment later.

**Joe** (*misunderstanding*) I stopped you going out.

**Mother** Didn't really want to. Didn't have the energy to dress up. Hard day at work. You gave me an excuse to stay in. Your tea's in the micro. Just needs switching on.

**Joe** *starts to go to the other room. Stops.*

- Joe** I lost your fag money.
- Mother** O? How?
- Joe** Lost it.
- Mother** (*irritated*) You can't have 'lost it'! Look in your pockets.
- Joe** Have.
- Mother** Look again. People don't just lose things. I had to work for that. I don't sit in a chair all day or make myself a nuisance hanging round bus shelters.
- Joe** I'll switch the micro –
- Mother** Don't walk away when I'm talking to you! (*She calms herself*) Well. I smoke too much anyway. Won't hurt me to go without till morning. I suppose. Give my lungs a rest.
- Joe** (*numbles*) Sorry – I'll go and switch the –
- Mother** I've got a favour to ask. Take your coat off. I told you before not to wear it round the house.
- Joe** *goes out into the other room.*
- Mother** (*calls*) And hang it up properly.
- Joe** *comes back without his jacket.*
- Mother** Promise me you'll do something.
- Joe** Can't promise till I know what it –
- Mother** I'm your mother. If I ask you to promise me you shouldn't raise objections. You should *want* to do it.
- Joe** OK.
- Mother** Don't be flippant. I don't often ask for anything.
- Joe** What is it?
- Mother** Don't change the subject. You can be damned annoying when you try. I'm not telling you till you promise. You'll have to show you're willing before I can take it any further. I can't involve you otherwise. It wouldn't be right.

**Joe** I'll pay the fag money back. I lost it on the –

**Mother** (*annoyed*) Stop talking about that blasted fag money! It's nothing to do with that! I try to be serious and you just pass silly remarks. I ask for help and all you can say is 'What is it?' Who else can I turn to? Not your father – even if I knew where he was. I do what I can. Go to work. Keep the home together. Provide the meals. Send you out decent. Then you turn your back on me when I ask you to –

**Joe** I can't do it unless I know what it is!

**Mother** Go and switch the micro on. Have your meal. You make me weary. I shouldn't have asked. Might've known what the answer would be. You're turning out just like your father.

**Joe** *turns to go.*

**Mother** Where you going?

**Joe** Turn the micro –

**Mother** You go when I say, not before.

**Joe** You just told me to switch the –

**Mother** Don't answer back! Save your lip for outside where it's appreciated. I'm upset because I don't know which way to turn. You can see the state I'm in. You can't give up even one meal to listen.

**Joe** Sorry.

**Mother** What's that supposed to mean? If you knew what you've done this evening you'd be sorry for the rest of your life. Any normal boy would put his arms round his mother and say 'I'll do it Mum. Anything!' It was a mistake to ask. You've got your own problems. I should never have involved you in mine. (*Sudden low anger.*) But I'd like to know where my fag money went! What shop that was lost in . . .

**Joe** Tell me, Mum.

**Mother** I can't. Not if you begged me. So don't waste your breath asking. I'd have to have your solemn word first. At least

I'd know you were grown up enough to understand what loyalty is. Your father never did.

**Joe** I'll do it.

**Mother** Too late. It's easy to offer when you don't know what it is. When you don't have to carry the responsibility.

**Joe** I promise.

**Mother** You expect me to believe that after the way you've just behaved?

**Joe** I'll do it.

**Mother** I don't want you to. I won't give you the chance.

*Silence.*

**Mother** You see the mess you've got us into? If I don't tell you now I'll never hear the last of it. You won't be fit to live with. I've seen too much of that in the past. And if I do tell you you'll say I forced you so you couldn't get out of it! I hope you're satisfied.

**Joe** Mum.

**Mother** Is that your solemn word?

**Joe** Yes.

**Mother** As God's my witness I didn't want to tell you. I've no choice. If I don't you'll say I don't trust you even when you give your solemn word!

**Joe** Mum, I don't understand any more. Tell me and I'll have my tea.

**Mother** O you poor kid you're hungry. I forget you're still a child. Put your arms round me. Give me a hug. I feel as if I've forced you. What I'm asking isn't for myself – it's for us.

**Joe** *puts his arms round her.*

**Joe** Don't cry Mum. Please.

**Mother** There. You know how to get your way with me. I have to admit it, you twist me round your little finger. You're all I've got in the world. I wouldn't go on without you.

**Joe** (*scared*) No no don't start it again! I don't want to hear it! – tablets – throw yourself off a bridge – (*Sudden panic.*) Oh no, Mum! – you don't want me to help you to – I can't! –

**Mother** No no it's not –

**Joe** No – no – no –

**Mother** – no – no – I couldn't! Couldn't! No – I'd never put you through that. If ever I kill myself I wouldn't tell you. You'd have to come home one day and find me on the floor. If you do this – for us – our suffering's over. (*She calms herself, straightens her dress.*) You haven't got a fag on you? I know what you kids get up to. I'm dying for a ciggie . . . (*No answer. She reaches for him.*) Don't pull away. I can tell you when you're close. Am I such a bad mother? – my own son thinks I'm asking him to help me do away with myself . . . poor kid.

**Joe** (*becoming calm*) Tell me Mum.

**Mother** I'll give you an address. A house on the new estate. You can't miss it. They've only finished one street. The rest's still mud. It's got a mauve door.

**Joe** Mauve.

**Mother** Go in daylight hours. Make sure you know the house. Go back in the dark. Set it on fire. Burn it down. Your father left his old cans in the shed – done some good for a change. Carry the petrol in that. The workmen leave wood and stuff lying round. It's all flammable. They're so lazy they probably left the petrol for the machines. Borrow that.

**Joe** Whose house is it?

**Mother** You read of houses set on fire. Offices. Sports pavilions. It's easy. I can't answer any questions. Don't pry. The less you know the better. There are secrets that can't be revealed. I'm not at liberty. Make sure it's the house with the mauve door.

**Joe** Why? Who lives there? I won't ask anything else.

**Mother** I'd do it but it's against the law. It's not *wrong*. If you knew the circumstances I'm shielding you from – you'd say burning wasn't drastic enough! I've thought about it for us. If you were caught – at your age they don't expect any better. They'd put it down to an absentee father. You'd only be sent away for a little while. I'd visit you. If I did it they'd send me away for years. You'd be alone. First you've got no father, then you'd be deprived of a mother – just at the age when you need parental guidance. Your life would be ruined. This will keep us together. Bring us closer. You could come in all hours – I'd never complain. (*Playfully wags her finger at him.*) And you could never answer me back – you'd be too scared I'd tell the police what you'd been up to! (*Little chuckle.*) I'm glad I spoke. Did you hang your jacket up?

**Joe** Mum –

**Mother** Look at me! – forgetting the tea of this starving boy! I'll put the micro on.

**Mother** *goes out into the other room.*

**Mother** (*off*) When you're older I'll tell you more. You wouldn't understand now.

**Joe** (*half loud, practising*) I won't do it.

*Silence. Mother comes back.*

**Mother** Wash your hands before you get up to table.

**Joe** I can't do it.

**Mother** It's too late to cadge a fag from next door. (*Slight pause.*) Of course if I thought like you you wouldn't be here. You'd've ended up in the pedal bin in an abortion clinic. I could've abandoned you when your father abandoned me. You can't always be a child. You grow up. Have to make hard choices. They can't teach you that at school. Some children inherit money from their parents – I inherited poverty from mine. Babies cry? – your mother cried herself to sleep every night. I scrimped and scraped for every penny. I don't ask for

gratitude or recompense. But if you love me you'd do what I ask.

**Joe** You don't know what you're doing.

**Mother** (*flaring*) Don't you cheek me! Don't tell me I don't know! Don't know? You little devil – what d'you know about anything? After all I've been through I know! You think I'd put you – with your moods – under an obligation if I didn't have to? Perhaps I'm the one under an obligation! Perhaps I'm doing it for someone else! You don't have to be my whole life, you know! I've got a life on the other side of that door! And this was the boy who gave his mother his solemn word! I'll tell you this – and I was never more sober in my life when I say it: that house'll be burnt!

**Joe** You'll get us into trouble!

**Mother** No more! Enough! Go and swallow your meal if you can!

**Joe** *goes out into the other room.*

**Mother** (*calls*) From now on this'll be a house of silence. O I'll talk to you: 'Shut the door – don't be late – wash your hands.' But it's the last time I'll tell you anything that matters to me. A stone'd say more than I will. You won't like that.

**Joe** *comes back. He is putting on his jacket.*

**Mother** You're not going on to the streets this time of night giving me a bad name.

**Joe** *goes out.*

**Mother** (*calls*) I exposed myself to you. I regret it. (*Goes to the door and shouts.*) If your father'd asked you you'd do it!

*Sound of the street door closing.*

*Mauve door. (She sits on the chair.)* How could . . . the insult, insult. (*Suddenly slowly and carefully.*) I wonder if he's gone to do it now? (*Off, bell.*) Micro.

*She goes out into the other room.*

**Three**

*Abandoned lot by a railway line.  
Morning.*

**Joe** sits huddled alone.

**Jill** comes in. **Joe** looks up.

**Jill** (*calls over her shoulder*) Here! Said he would be.

**Joe's Friends** begin to come in. *They are about his age.*

**Friends** Called at your place this morning.

Your mum said you'd left early.

**Joe** Didn't go home last night.

**Friends** Where were you?

**Joe** Here.

**Friends** All night?

What for?

**Joe** My mum's in trouble.

**Friends** Wow! — tell us!

What trouble?

**Joe** It's serious. You mustn't tell. I only know a bit of it. She wants me to burn a house.

**Friends** Burn it?

Burn it down?

Whose house?

**Joe** New estate.

**Friends** She serious?

He's having you on! — or she is!

What for?

**Joe** She wouldn't say. She's desperate about something — or she'd've gone to the police. I think she's in danger.

**Friends** New estate! — I'd burn the lot!

If it was my mum I'd set fire to her —

It's not funny.

— but I'd do it out the back: my room's just been decorated. Shut it!

You pile rubbish up against the door.

Soak rags in petrol. Push them through the letter box.

Light a match — drop it in —

And run!

(*Low, warning.*) Hang about — kid watching through the fence.

(*Calls.*) What you want?

Sod off spy!

Read the notice: 'trespassers prosecuted'.

Can't read!

*A Stranger comes in. He is dressed in the same way as the Friends.*

**Friends** Who're you?

This is ours. You're not invited.

**Stranger** Exploring.

**Friends** Go and explore somewhere else!

You're not from round here.

**Stranger** New estate. The other kids'll move in when it's finished.

**Friends** My mum says you've got big executive kitchens. You posh?

**Stranger** Don't know.

**Friends** Your people must be posh in them big houses!

Rolling in it!

Have to pay to join our club.

He's not joining — no new-estaters!

Bash you!

War!

**Stranger** My dad says only wineos and dossers come to this dump!

**Friends** Hop it!

Tie him on the rail-line.

*The Stranger runs off.*

**Stranger** (off) My dad says don't play with that riff-raff. You'll catch their stink!

*They duck.*

**Friends** Little bugger chucking stones! Skin him!

We'll throttle you! – tell your dad that! Murder the little sod!

*Some of them chase after the Stranger.*

Leave him!  
Do him later!

*The others drift back.*

... sod dodged off ...  
... wants thumping ...

*They stare at Joe in silence.*

**Friend** She's got to tell you why.

**Joe** *shrugs.*

**Friend** What'll you do?

**Joe** (slight pause) It's only a house.

**Friends** He's going to do it . . . !  
Phew! I'm not getting involved!

The cops'll question all of us.

They'll make us talk – they're trained. What chance we got?

One of us'll talk.  
Then we all will!

If we say we knew they'll say we're as bad as he is for not stopping him.

I wasn't here!

Nor me!

The kid saw you!

I'll break his neck!

Big help! – *he's* up for arson and *we're* up for murder!

**Joe** stands. Goes out.

**Friends** (calls) Oi! Don't bugger off!

(calls) Haven't finished with you yet!

(calls) Your mum gets these crazy ideas you wanna keep them to yourself!

(calls) Runs in the family!

(calls) His mum's a –

Shut up!

**Joe** comes back with the puppet.

**Friends** You still got that?

It's bashed in!

**Joe** Did it with a brick. If your mum asked you, you'd do it. Can't go home if I don't. It'd be hell. If the cops ask I'll say I didn't do it. So I couldn't have told you I was going to! You're in the clear. We were on the allotments – rowed with the kid – and that's all. If they ask what we're doing here: chucking bricks at this.

**Jill** goes out.

**Friend** You're not to blame. She made you do it.

**Joe** (Shakes head) If I do it I'm to blame. She asked me for help. I can't make it worse for her. I'll be all right.

**Friends** If only the little sod hadn't chucked stones!

They'll say we burnt the house for revenge!

You said 'It's war'!

I never – it was him!

I never said it!

Yes you did!

No I never!

Shut it! – you sound like kids.

**Jill** comes back with a greengrocer's carton filled with bricks. She drops the bricks on the ground. **Joe** sets the puppet upright.

**Joe** We promise not to tell. Brick him – and swear we won't.

**Friend** It's a pact! We swear to each other.



*Hesitation. One of them takes a brick.*

**Friends** What do I say?

I swear to — (*Stops. Shrugs.*)

Keep my mouth shut. I promise the others.

(*Drops brick on puppet.*) I swear to keep my mouth shut.

*The puppet sinks and falls back. For a moment they stare in silence. Then they rush to the bricks.*

**Friends** Brick it! Brick it! Brick it!

*They take turns to drop bricks on the puppet. Then they begin to throw them, jostle and push.*

**Friends** Brick it! Brick it! Brick it!

Swear! Keep your mouth shut! Promise the others!

You had your go!

(*Imitating the puppet.*) Ow! Ouch! That hurt!

**Naomi** I can't!

*They drag Naomi towards the puppet.*

**Friends** Brick! Brick! Brick! In her hand! Make her!

*They force a brick into Naomi's hand. Push her to the puppet. She drops the brick on the ground.*

Brick it! Brick it! Brick it!

*They force Naomi's hand round a brick. They form a circle round the puppet. They push her into the circle. Behind the screen of bodies they force her to beat the puppet with the brick.*

Brick! Brick! Brick! Swear! Swear!

**Naomi** Swear!

**Friends** Keep my mouth shut!

**Naomi** Shut!

**Friends** The others!

**Naomi** Others!

*They stand back. Look at the puppet.*

**Friends** It hurt.

That's all we could do for Joe.

*They start to go.*

**Friends** Look out for cops.

And the kid.

*They go. The puppet lies under heaped bricks. Joe comes back. He kneels by it. He takes a sweet packet from his own pocket. Puts a sweet in the puppet's mouth. It falls out.*

**Joe** Take it! I brought the sweets! I said I would! (*He crams the sweet packet into the puppet's pocket.*) Take it! Why is it always a mess? Always the same? What do they want? What do they want? (*In despair, beyond tears.*) Look at yourself!

*He clears the bricks, throwing them to the side.*

Look at yourself! Look at yourself! (*He looks round for the last brick.*) Look at yourself!

*He has cleared the bricks. He picks up the puppet by the leg. Drags it behind him.*

Look at yourself!

**Joe** goes.

**Four**

*Home.*

*Night.*

**Mother** waits tensely by the window. Arms crossed. She hears the sound of the front door. She hurries to the chair. Sits. Composes herself.

**Mother** (*calls*) What's the excuse this time? Becoming a regular habit. Haven't your mates got homes to go to?

**Joe** comes in.

**Joe** It's OK.

**Mother** I can't remember if I told you? - I'm changing my job. Handed in my notice today. I'm not appreciated. Look round for something better. Not any old thing. We might have to move further out.

**Joe** It's OK.

**Mother** Is it? I'll be the judge of that. Look at the state of you! - go round like a scruff to shame me. (*Sniffs.*) You smell. Hope you haven't been smoking? Bad enough one smoker in the family. I can't afford two on the habit.

**Joe** It's OK.

**Mother** Where've you been? You're a real worry to me sometimes.

**Joe** (*realising*) O - nothing.

**Mother** Wash your hands.

**Joe** *goes out to the other room.*

**Mother** (*half-trance, to herself*) Mauve door . . . their whole attitude's in that. The dishonesty of it! Not mauve now . . . I struck a blow.

**Joe** *comes in.*

**Mother** Did you hang the towel on the rail? -

**Joe** Hid in a ditch in the garden.

**Mother** - not drop it on the floor as per usual for me to pick up.

**Joe** They'd been laying drains. I waited. Thought it had gone out. Went back. Looked through the window. Nothing. Then a light flickered up in the hall. Saw the room full of black smoke - turning and turning.

**Mother** I hope you haven't been getting into mischief.

**Joe** I broke a window. Air went in: whoosh!

**Mother** You been watching videos again?

**Joe** I've got to tell you what it - I burnt the house.

**Mother** I wish I understood you sometimes. My own son's a riddle to me.

**Joe** Went back. Hid in the ditch till I was sure. Kept some petrol in the can in case. It took off: whaaahh! Ran. Tripped in the ditch. On a rat. Splashed petrol. My hands. Jeans.

**Mother** O God! - the fire engines I heard - was that - ?

**Joe** It's OK.

**Mother** You burnt a - ? You're pretending - to scare me -

**Joe** It's OK.

*Silence. Mother stands, goes to Joe and hits him across the face.*

**Mother** You wicked boy!

**Joe** Mauve door.

**Mother** You burnt a house?

**Joe** You said!

*Silence. Mother hits him across the face again.*

**Mother** You wicked, wicked, wicked boy!

**Joe** Pretend tomorrow! - have to tell you what it was like in -

**Mother** Stop it! Stop it! - He stinks of petrol! He must be telling the truth! Splashed when he tripped in the - ! O God, he's treading it in my floor! If the police come how could I protect you? If I said you'd been here with me all night they'd say 'What about the petrol on the floor?' Take your shoes off! Give me your jeans to - ! Get in the bath! I'll wash everything! No they'd still know! They detect everything! I was with Mrs Pierce all evening. I'll get her to say I was here - she phoned at half-ten when the fire engines - and while she was on I had to ask you something - she can vouch for that - which proves you were *here* - you couldn't have done it! (*She goes to strike Joe again but doesn't.*) You wicked boy!

**Joe** Mum you told me to do —!

**Mother** Stop it! Stop it! Don't ever say that! I'll wash your mouth out in disinfectant! Told you to burn a house? What mother would tell her child to do that. She'd be a monster! No one would believe you!

**Joe** It doesn't matter.

**Mother** Doesn't matter? You burn a house — then make a wicked accusation — and say it doesn't matter? What's the world coming to? Where did we go wrong with the young? I should take you to the police! Now! Let you suffer the consequence of your actions! I'm a fool to protect you. Did anyone — were you seen? Oh God, he's still got his shoes on! Off! Off! Treading in his filth! (*Joe tears off his shoes in panic.*) Burn them! Gimmee! I'll burn them! Security guards! — did they see? They put cameras in sites! Oh what a wicked wicked — I knew you were bad, but *this* —!

**Joe** (*panic*) Mum you —

**Mother** Don't you dare!

**Joe** Mum!

**Mother** Don't Mum me! I'm not your Mum! Don't come whining to me when they —

*Doorbell.*

Oh my God — it's started. It's coming to pieces.

**Joe** *turns to the door.*

**Mother** Stay there! You're not ducking off under their arms! Then they'd know this is a guilty house!

**Joe** We must —

**Mother** They don't know we're in. Wait till they go. It might be about something else.

**Joe** This late?

**Mother** How did they know it was *this* house? You were

seen. Stupid wicked boy . . . ! I'll be sent to prison for not keeping you under control!

**Joe** (*suddenly very tired*) I'll answer it.

*Doorbell.*

**Mother** In bed! They find you in your socks —!

**Joe** *goes out into the other room. Mother straightens her hair and dress. Goes towards door.*

**Mother** (*calls*) On my way.

**Mother** *sees Joe's shoes on the floor. Snatches them up, goes out into the next room. Doorbell. Mother comes back wrapped in a floral dressing gown. Goes out to the front door. The sound of it opening.*

**Mother** (*off*) This time of night? Come in. Next door'll gossip if you stand on the doorstep.

**Jill** *comes in in street clothes. After a few moments the front door is heard closing. Mother comes in.*

**Mother** All their lights on. Heard the sirens. What do you want?

**Jill** See Joe Mrs Carter.

**Mother** I'll take a message and give it to him in the morning.

**Jill** The fire —

**Mother** We know there's a fire. You got me up to tell me that?

**Jill** Can I speak to Joe?

**Mother** No. Bad enough fire engines racing up and down. I'm not waking him a second time. Now if you don't mind —

**Jill** Someone was in the fire. Trapped.

**Mother** I don't understand what you want to say.

**Jill** Someone's dead.

*A second's silence.*

**Mother** (*short, humourless laugh*) Dead. How stupid it is. Stupid. (*She sits in the chair. Calm.*) Thank you. I'll tell Joe in the morning. Can you see yourself out?

**Joe** comes in. *He has heard what Jill has said.*

**Mother** (*calmly*) Imagine Joe – the fire engines we heard. Someone's burnt. Might be serious. Let's hope the ambulance service got there on time for once. Your friend came to tell you. Wasn't that kind of –

**Joe** (*to Mother*) Dead.

**Jill** On the landing. Trapped. A boy. Running with his clothes on fire.

**Mother** Now – (*Stops.*) – I don't know your name?

**Jill** Jill.

**Mother** Jill – we mustn't exaggerate – we don't know any of the –

**Joe** I thought the house was empty. I waited till –

**Mother** (*horrified*) What are you saying? He's still asleep. He doesn't know what he – (*Explaining to Joe.*) There's been a fire Joe. Remember the sirens? They've given you a bad dream. Go back to bed. We'll get no sense out of you tonight.

**Joe** I heard someone screaming. I thought it was next door giving the alarm.

**Mother** He's suffered from his nightmares since his father left. We must – did you say *Jill*? – leave him or he gets upset. Go home – won't your parents be worried where you are? – or are they the modern sort? What were you doing out this late anyway? There's always mischief with you kids.

**Joe** (*to Mother*) You've got to help me!

**Mother** It's just rumour-rubbish she's picked up. Tittle-tattle. They enjoy grabbing the wrong end of the stick and beating everyone on the head with it. New estate? – some

squatter moved in – on drugs – burnt himself to death –

**Jill** A medic told the reporter.

**Mother** I'll complain to your parents about you. Write to the school. (*To Joe.*) It's all right, I'll get rid of her. (*To Jill.*) You've got no right to come round here making yourself a nuisance.

**Jill** You made him do it.

**Mother** (*horrified, to Joe*) Have you been talking outside to – how could you! – gossiping about me to –! (*To Jill.*) What else did he say? (*To Joe.*) Lies! Lies! Lies! Who else you told? Who else? It doesn't matter! If that little trollop knows everyone does! A poor dead boy! Not suffocated! Burnt! The worst way to go! On the landing! Now you see the difference between your games and the real world! Don't blame it on me! If I told you to do it, that's the first time you've done anything I've told you to!

**Joe** goes out into the other room.

**Mother** (*to Jill*) His vivid imagination. The sirens confused him Jill – what a nice name! (*Calls.*) Tuck yourself in. I'll bring you a hot drink. (*To Jill.*) Did he mention any of this to anyone else?

**Joe** comes back carrying his shoes. **Mother** is too preoccupied to notice. *She looks out of the window. Joe puts on his shoes.*

**Mother** The glow's died down already. Hardly worth the fire engines turning out. If you're in a fire it's your responsibility to keep calm – not get trapped on the landing. The school teaches you fire drill. These houses are just firewood waiting to go up. They shouldn't be allowed to build them. (*Sees Joe.*) You mustn't accuse your mother. A boy's been murdered. I sent my child out to do that? How could any mother survive it. They'd call her a monster. Even if it was true – if there was a particle of truth in it – you'd have to protect me. They make excuses if you're young. No one would make excuses for me. No one ever has. That's the story of my life. I know what the future would be . . . (*Breaks down.*) It'd

never occur to me – never – you were talking about me on the streets. They'll pry and pry till they wear me down. They'll take everything – the few bits and pieces I've managed to hold on to. I wish I'd died in the fire! (*To Jill*.) I'm a good mother! I wouldn't let him do wrong! Make him help me to – I've forgotten your name? (*To Joe*.) If you did anything for me – it's because you love me! If you accuse me I'll deny it! It's the only way I can hold on to you! I won't let them take your love away from me! (*Wail*.) Don't betray me! (*Breaks down in incoherent tears. To Jill*.) Please. Tell him he'll regret it all his life. I'll kill myself! I mean it this time! (*She sees Joe is wearing his shoes*.) Why's he got his shoes on? Standing there! Take them off! I reading filth in my – He wants to give them evidence! Get me sent away! – Where are you going?

**Joe** Out.

**Mother** To tell your friends more lies?

**Joe and Jill** start to leave.

**Mother** I forbid you to go! I'm ordering you! If you're seen out on the streets tonight – they'll pick you up! You go through that door over my dead body!

**Joe and Jill** go out.

**Mother** (*stouts*) I won't be here when you come back!

*The front door is heard opening and shutting.*

**Mother** (*trying to control herself*) What shall I do? Can't chase him through the streets. (*Panic*.) They've gone to the police! (*Rehearsing*.) I might have said something, as you do. We all say things officer. I'm certain I never meant –. As I told his teacher (which she'll corroborate) when he gets an idea in his head it's like prising nails out of solid iron . . . Mauve. Mauve. The insult. (*Looks round*.) I have nothing.

**Mother** goes into the other room.

## Five

*Abandoned lot by a railway line. Morning.*

**Joe** sits alone. *He is cold and hungry.*

*Some of the Friends come on.*

**Friends** Said you'd be here again!

Been here all night?

The others are looking for you.

The police are searching the house. It's a wreck. What you going to do?

**Joe** Run away.

**Friend** Where?

**Joe** Where they can't find me.

**Friends** You run the cops'll know you did it. Go to them. Tell them your mother made you.

**Jill** and the rest of the **Friends** come on.

**Friend** He's running away.

**Joe** Been round my mother's?

**Jill** Yes.

**Joe** How is she?

**Jill** Crying.

**Friends** We're all suspects

The cops'll come to the school.

We'll tell them your mum made you do it.

They won't believe us.

Worse if they did – they'll want to know why we didn't stop him.

Chriss!

They'll say if we didn't stop him we're as bad as he is.

I didn't know. Never told me.

Nor me.

I'm not telling the cops anything.  
*(Laugh.)* You will! Who told them I smashed the car?  
 It was my dad's car!  
 Shut up! Don't start that!  
*(To Joe.)* We'll go and collect your things.  
 Can't. His mum'd tell the police.  
 They'd follow you back here.  
 He can't go like that - *(To Joe.)* you need your things.

**Jill** I'll go with you.

**Joe** That's stupid. You'd mess your life up.

**Jill** Messed it up already. Worse the longer I stay.

*Slight pause.*

**Friends** A kid's dead. That's serious.

They'll clobber us.

We didn't know he'd be dead.

Nor did Joe!

We didn't think. *That's* why he's dead.

We're all to blame.

We're not! *They're* to blame. There wouldn't have been a fire if his mother hadn't said.

If we don't get it in the neck for this they'll find something else.

**Jill (to Joe)** I'll come with you.

**Friends** And me.

We should all go.

Shall we?

Least it's out of this dump!

Let's go! All of us!

When?

Now!

Fetch our things first.

No just go!

This is crazy!

Haven't fed my rabbits -

No one's going back!

-if I don't no one will.  
 They'd ask questions - then we've all had it.  
 Hope your family like rabbit pie.

Let's go!

Where?

North!

Peterborough!

*Silence. They look at each other.*

Their faces in the morning . . . !

Be a laugh.

Teach them a lesson.

Serves them right!

Joe? Can we? With you?

*They stare at Joe. He sits with his face in his hands.*

**Joe** I can't manage it any more. My hands - stink of petrol . . . I wouldn't be alone . . .

*Behind them a Man comes on slowly. He is tall and thin, his face is white, his hair is matted. He wears a long black overcoat, dark trousers, black boots and pearl-grey cloth gloves. He moves as if he does not see the others. He stops, stares at the ground. Falls. The friends turn to look at him. He lies completely still.*

**Friend** Sloshed.

**Joe** *remains sitting. The others cluster round the Man.*

**Friends** My old man drinks. Doesn't look like that. Dead.

Chriss! - now we'll be blamed for that.

He's breathing.

*They edge back cautiously. Joe stands up to to watch.*

**Friends** Look in his pockets.

Be empty - dossier.

Can't leave him here.

He'll be dead in the morning!

Sod him that's his fault! Leave him!

Let's go like we said!

Sod it! Sod it! – a tramp turns up and we're trapped.

*They hesitate.*

Take him till we meet someone – let them look after him.  
Get a door from the sheds. Stretcher him on that.

*Some of them go to fetch a door.*

He's not from round here.

On his way through.

Think he heard what we were saying?

In his state?

*The others have come back with a door.*

**Friends** My mum can't cope in her wheelchair. I do our shopping – cooking –

What are neighbours for?

They don't help.

They'll have to. Why is it always us?

She'll break her heart.

A boy's dead. No one else'll help us. We have to stick together.

We're not chucking it in before we start!

Let's go! Let's go!

*The Man is lifted on to the door.*

**Friends** Heavy! Not carrying this far!

Typical! – tramp who can't walk!

*They go.*

## Six

*Journey.*

*Evening a few days later.*

*Some of the Friends come on.*

**Friends** Must be an emergency.

You keep saying that.

Must be.

Can't. There was no explosion. No bodies.

No cars or lorries. Roads empty.

If there was an emergency they'd be choked.

No dogs. Not even dead ones.

No washing on the lines.

Everyone's vanished.

Weird.

I'm scared.

We saw some people going over a hill. We shouted. They

didn't stop.

Perhaps everyone's been moved to Peterborough.

Why?

Safety.

Scares me.

*The rest of the Friends come on with the door. The Man sleeps on it.*

**Friends** See anyone?

*Head shakes.*

Take a rest. He's pulling my arms off.

Didn't wake up?

*Head shakes.*

If he doesn't eat he'll die.

I'm not going to his funeral. He's not our responsibility.

Should've left him. His mates'll be looking for him.

What mates? – everyone's vanished.

Where's the others?

Reccyng Peterborough. (Points.) That's them coming back.

*The Man's arm slips from the door.*

**Friends** His arm!

His eyes are open.

Who are you?

Where you from?

D'you know where everyone's gone?

He can't hear.

D'you know what's going wrong?

Don't be scared.

We wanted to take you to a hospital.  
Perhaps there'll still be one in Peterborough.  
**Joe** *and the rest come in. They have a couple of sacks.*

**Friends** Empty. No one.  
Whole town deserted.  
All of it?  
Everywhere's deserted.  
Now what do we do?  
*They stare at each other.*

It's us. We're still back at the allotments. We're not here. We imagined it.  
Don't start that! We've got to keep our heads.  
Look at that raw on my hands - carrying him. I didn't imagine that!  
He's the cause of it! If we dump him it'll all go back to normal.  
I said don't start! How could one man control everything?  
Get rid of him!

**Joe** We can't leave him now! There's no one else. He'd die.

**Friend** His eyes are shut.

*One of them puts the Man's arm back under the pieces of blanket.*

**Friends** What's in the sacks?  
Tins. Grub.  
Nicked from the empty houses.  
Great! - a proper meal! I'm starving.  
Could be contaminated.  
Got to eat. There's nothing else.  
Look - the street lights are coming on.  
*They gaze towards the town.*

Automatic when it's dark.  
Won't the power run out?  
Wind farms keep feeding the grid.  
We could go and live there.  
Not me! You haven't seen it. Ghost town. Gives me the creeps.

We've got to keep going till we come to people. They must be somewhere.  
Let's find a place for the night and open the tins.  
I can't carry him with my raw hands.  
Give it here.

*They start to carry out the Man.*

**Friend** *(gazing at the town)* All the empty streets lit up for nobody.

*They go.*

### Seven

*Journey.  
Evening, a week later.*

**The Friends** *come on together. One carries a sack. Others carry the Man on an old army stretcher. It has short legs and wheels that are too small for distances but can be used to manoeuvre it. The Man sleeps. He is covered with bits of old blankets. One of them is rolled up for a pillow.*

**Friends** This'll do for tonight.  
Let's go a bit further. We must keep on.  
Why? Where're we going?  
We should go back.  
Where to? - there's nowhere anymore.  
We're here - we know that. We've got each other.  
Stick together. No rows.  
I want a drink.  
The tins are for the morning.  
Want mine now.  
What if we can't find any more tomorrow?  
I want my tin now! Hands up who wants their drink.

*Hands go up.*

Drinks!

*The cans are handed round from the sack. They drink.*



Don't have to swallow the whole can. Save some for tomorrow.

Too thirsty.

(Points to the **Man**.) One for him?  
Offer him. See if he takes it.

One of them holds a can in front of the **Man**'s face. No reaction.

**Friend** Where's Lisa?

They look round.

**Friends** Lazy cow. Skived off somewhere.  
Who saw her last?

No response.

Someone must've spoken to her!

Me! Asked her to help me – no, that was yesterday.

One of us must've seen her! No one? – all day?

I wanted her this morning. I couldn't find her. I thought she was around . . .

Where's Becca?

She is not there.

**Friends** They've gone off together.

Last night.

Crept off while we were asleep.

Where?

To find the cops?

The rats!

There's no cops!

Get out of carrying him.

Rats!

They're lost.

(Calls.) Lisa! Lisa! Becca!

No answer.

We could've wasted hours looking for them.

What if they've had an accident?

Two of them? – they'd've shouted.

Gone a whole day and we didn't notice . . .

They might turn up.  
They're gone.

They finish the drinks.

**Adam** Few cans left for the morning.

**Friends** Least there's food in the gardens.  
Could be contaminated.

So could the tins.

Let's go to sleep.

They settle down. Silence.

We're lost.

Like being shipwrecked in the empty fields.

Why've they knocked the houses down?

We don't know where we are. We don't know where we're going. What we're doing.

What'll become of us? What we're here for?

Is it a joke?

What's the point? – there's no one to ask.

Sleep.

They fall into an exhausted sleep. **Adam** lies with the sack behind the stretcher. He sits up and looks round. Slowly the **Man** lifts his head and sits up. His eyes meet **Adam**'s. They stare at each other. The **Man** feebly puts out both hands as if in blessing.

**Man** (half-trance) Bless you . . . good kids . . . bless . . .

The **Man** sinks back onto the stretcher. **Adam** goes to the **Man** and looks down at him. The **Man** sleeps. **Adam** looks wearily round at all the sleepers and discarded cans. Chaos. He touches an empty can with his toe. He goes to the sack. Stoops over it. Suddenly **Tasha** jumps up and hurls herself on to **Adam**'s back.

**Tasha** Bastard! Bastard!

**Tasha** and **Adam** fight. The others wake.

**Friends** What? What? What's that?

Attack! Cops!

(Sleeper trodden on.) Ouch! Get off!

**Tasha** Nicking!

**Adam** Liar!

*Suddenly half the friends are fighting and shouting. The others try to stop them. The Man sleeps in the middle of it. He turns on his side and curls up like a baby.*

**Friends** What is it?

They've come!

Get off!

Kill you!

**Tasha** Nicking! Nicking!

**Adam** Liar.

**Tasha** Nicking! Saw you!

**Adam** Let go! I'll break your neck!

**Friends** Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!

*The fighting stops. Tasha is holding on to Adam.*

**Friends** You tore my jacket!

You hit me first!

I never!

Did! Did!

**Adam** Get off!

**Friend** You started it!

**Tasha** I started it! He was nicking cans!

**Adam** Liar! Take it back!

**Tasha** I saw you! (Points to the sack.) There!

**Adam** You're mad! Say it once more - I'll break your neck!

**Tasha** Thief.

**Tasha and Adam** fight. *The others stop them.*

**Friends** Stop it! Break it up!

Let him speak.

**Tasha and Adam** are parted. *They shout across the sleeping Man.*

**Tasha** Saw him! Nicking cans out the sack!  
All we got left!

**Adam** She accuses me again I'll kill her!

**Tasha** Thief! Thief!

*They restrain Adam. He breaks away. They stare at him.*

**Adam** I was clearing up the cans.

**Friend** (sarcasm) Can't you think of something better than that?

**Adam** I can't stand the mess! (He starts to gather the empty cans.) We're walking through a desert! Ruined houses! Everything falling down! And we drop our litter like pigs! (Someone is in his way.) Move! (He picks up a can.) I don't know what's happening! Why it's falling apart! Where everyone's gone! But I'm not an animal! (A few of the others help him. He picks up the last can.) It offends me!

*A Friend holds the sack open. Adam puts the cans into it. He takes the sack and starts to go.*

**Tasha** Where you going?

**Adam** Chuck your rubbish in the ditch! Objections?

**Adam** goes out. Silence.

**Friend** Lisa and Becca should've said they were going.

Not slunk off. If anyone wants to go they can.

We're free. But we ought to say.

*The Friends nod and murmur agreement.*

**Tasha** (looking off) Look at him emptying the sack in the ditch. Going through the motions as if he meant it. I saw him!

**Friend** We've got to stick together.

*Silence. They settle down again. Adam comes back. He carries the empty sack.*

**Tasha** Don't look at me like that!

**Adam** I can look how I like.

**Friends** *groan.*

**Tasha** You were stealing!

**Adam** Say that again!

**Tasha** Thief!

**Tasha and Adam** *fight. Suddenly they are all fighting – lashing in panic, shouting, crying.*

**Friends** Kill you!

**Bastard!**

Kill you!

Kill you!

Kill you!

*Some of them chase others off.*

Come back! Come back!

Stop!

*The rest go out fighting and calling. The Man lies alone. He does not move. Off, calls and sounds of the fight. Jill and Mark come back.*

**Mark** Bring him! We'll lose them in the dark!

**Jill** *throws the sack on to the stretcher.*

**Mark** Quick! Take your end! Catch them up!

**Jill** They're crazy!

**Jill and Mark** *carry out the stretcher. Off, sounds of fighting.*

**Eight**

*Journey.*

*Afternoon, a week later.*

**Joe and Jill** *come on walking ahead of the others. Jill stops.*

**Jill** *(points)* Those trees are dying. I think the soil's turning grey.

*They sit.*

**Joe** They said this would happen. It was on the news.

**Jill** Not this. This is too quick.

**Joe** Suppose it comes to a point where it *has* to happen. After that you can't stop it.

**Jill** Perhaps we should camp here and let it happen.

**Joe** Have to move on for food.

**Jill** When winter comes –

**Joe** *(stands, calls)* Oi! **(To Jill.)** We'll manage all right.

**Jill** Don't believe it any more. We're going towards something terrible.

**Joe** Don't scare the others.

**Jill** Why did your mother make you burn the house?

**Joe** *(calls)* Keep up! **(To Jill.)** She was confused.

**Jill** She must have known the people in it.

**Joe** *(calls)* You can do it! **(To Jill.)** Perhaps she didn't. She wasn't happy. That's why she was always trying to enjoy herself. *(Calls.)* Come on!

**Jill** Hard work carrying him. D'you think it's time to . . . ?

**Joe** No.

**Jill** Do we have to carry him all the way?

**Joe** We can't leave him.

**Jill** Some of them want to. That's why they go. It gets harder for us.

**Joe** Let them go. They don't say goodbye because they're ashamed. It's like walking off and leaving us at our own funeral. If we stick together we've got a chance. He's getting

better. He sits up. When he can walk, he can choose what he'll do. I think he's the only thing keeping us together. After all this, if we could walk off and leave someone to starve to death — what's the point of anything? If there was only *me* left — I still wouldn't leave him. They need a hand. (Calls.) Hold on. We're coming.

*They go out the way they came.*

### Nine

*Journey:  
Evening, two weeks later.*

**Matt and Georgie** carry on the stretcher. *The Man lies flat with his eyes open.*

**Matt** Take a rest.

**Georgie** Fifteen minutes to go.

**Matt** Carried him up the hill. Counts as double.

*They put down the stretcher.*

**Man** Good kids. Bless you.

*The others have come back from the path ahead. Eleven are left. Their clothes are torn and dirty.*

**Friend** You stopped!

**Matt** Arm ache.

**Jill** Village up there. Found a tap. Had a wash. You go up. You'll feel better.

**Matt** In a minute. Breathe back first.

**Friend (to Man)** You can wash too.

**Jill** We'll bring you a basin of water.

**Joe** No let him walk.

**Man** My legs.

**Joe** We'll help you.

**Man** They won't hold up.

**Joe** You're afraid we'll leave you when you can walk. You can stay with us as long as you like. It'd be easier for us if you can walk. (Goes to the stretcher.) I'll help you.

**Joe** pulls back the blankets and takes the Man's hands. *Helps him to stand. The Man collapses, puts his arms round Joe and clings to him.*

**Man** My legs!

**Joe** Try! (To the others.) Grab the other side.

*They help the Man to walk. One of them takes a piece of towel from the stretcher.*

**Joe** See! — you can!

**Man** No no.

**Friends** Great!

Like teaching a baby to walk!

**Man** Ah! Ah!

*They take the Man out. Matt and Georgie are left. Matt drops on to the stretcher to rest. Georgie sits with his back to it.*

**Matt** My whack for today.

**Georgie** It was easier when we had the others.

**Matt** Don't blame them for going.

**Georgie** Why do they go in pairs? Ron and Paul didn't even like each other.

**Matt** Coincidence. Have you thought of it?

**Georgie** What?

**Matt** Do a runner: We don't have to stay. It was Joe's problem. I'm sorry I came.

**Georgie** (changes the subject) Let's make his bed!

Give the blankets a shake! Up — lazy sod! Grab that end!

**Matt** stands. *They take a piece of blanket from the stretcher. Shake it.*

**Georgie** Phew — dust! We're carrying round an acre of dirt!

**Matt** Do the pillow!

**Georgie** picks up the pillow. *Shakes it. A brick falls out.*

**Georgie** A brick!

**Matt** Brick? That's why he's heavy! A blinking brick!

What's he want a brick for?

**Georgie** Chuck it!

*The Man lurches on.*

**Man** Don't!

**Georgie** throws the brick aside.

**Man** My things! My things!

**Matt** Making your bed!

**Man** Don't touch!

**Georgie** Make you more comfortable!

**Man** Leave it!

**Matt** It's full of dust!

*The Man holds out both his hands as if he is about to fall forwards.*

**Man** Help me.

*They catch him and help him to the stretcher. He sits on the side, fidgets with the covers, straightens them.*

Yes yes . . . shouldn't have walked . . . the pain's worse . . . didn't mean to shout . . . get angry. You're good kids, bless you. (*Pats the stretcher*). My home. Wouldn't have survived without you.

**Matt** What's the brick for?

**Man** My head. A hard pillow helps the pain!

*The others have come back along the path. One carries the piece of towel.*

**Joe** He's all right!

**Friend** (*towel*) Dropped it.

*The Man takes the piece of towel. Tucks it under the pillow.*

**Matt** Stop here for the night.

**Jill** Too late to go on. We'll go up to the village tomorrow.

Nick some breakfast.

*They settle down. The Man lies on the stretcher. Quiet.*

**Matt** Should post a lookout.

**Friend** No one'll bother us here.

**Matt** You don't know.

**Friends** Need our sleep if we're keeping this pace up. He means to keep a watch on us. We don't trust each other any more.

**Matt** Do two-hour turns.

**Friend** You go first.

**Matt** All right. Who's second?

**Georgie** Me.

**Friend** I'll go third.

**Matt** That's settled then.

*They settle down and fall quiet.*

**Jill** We don't say good night any more.

*No one responds. Matt stands guard at the side, looking off. The others sleep. Silence.*

*The Man sits up on the stretcher. He looks round. Stands slowly. Takes the piece of towel from under the pillow. Starts to go to the brick. Stops once to look round at Matt — Matt has his back to him. He reaches the*

brick, picks it up and puts it in his pocket. He goes silently to Matt. Throws the towel over Matt's head — rapid mechanical efficiency — smothers him — brings him down. Takes the brick from his pocket — his Matt once on the head. Drags him out. He has done everything with lethal military neatness.

**Friend** (asleep, murmuring) No . . . please . . .  
All the sleepers begin to murmur. The Man comes back. He holds the brick in one hand, the piece of towel trails from the other. His coat is longer and his face is whiter. He goes to the sleepers to choose the next walking among them, stepping over them. The murmur rises in piteous sobs and wails. Slowly it swells into a great arc of lamentation and tumult — echoes sounding inside echoes — born, solemn, beautiful — the sorrow, frustration and longing of childhood.

The Man chooses Tasha. Swoops over her.

**Tasha** (asleep, sobs) His shadow's falling on me in the dark.

The Man turns away. The sound begins to die into stillness and peace. The Man goes to the stretcher. Puts the brick under the pillow. Wipes his hands on the piece of towel and neatly tucks it under the pillow. Lies down to sleep.

The sleepers are silent. Georgie wakes. Looks round.

**Georgie** (whispers) Matt . . . (Gets up. Whispers.) Time to stand down.

He looks round. Goes out.

(Off, calls in a whisper) Matt you there? My turn.

Silence. He comes back.

He's gone! That's why he wanted to be lookout! So he could run! (Tells into the darkness.) Bastard! Bastard! You bastard!

The others are waking, getting to their feet.

**Friends** What is it?  
Matt's gone!  
Traitor!

Don't call him names! — he must've heard something — gone to look —

**Georgie** The bastard! When you were at the tap — he tried it on with me! Tried to talk me into it!

**Naomi** (hysteria) No! No! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!  
You're playing with me!  
You'll all run — leave me to die!

**Tasha/Jill** (comforting Naomi) We won't — we won't.

**Naomi** It's him! He burnt the house! Burnt the boy! He'll kill me! Murderer! Murderer!

**Naomi** runs out.

**Friends** I've had enough! I'm off too!  
Stop!

You'll break your necks in the dark!  
Hold on! I'm coming! It's a trap!

They all run out after Naomi. The Man is alone. He does not move.

**Gemma** and **Frank** run in.

**Georgie** (off) Bring him!  
**Gemma** and **Frank** pick up the stretcher. Off, Naomi screams, others shout.

**Gemma** Careful! Get the end!

**Frank** It's all right! The walking's put him out!

**Gemma** and **Frank** start to carry out the stretcher.

**Georgie** (off) Here!

**Gemma** and **Frank** swing the stretcher round and go in the other direction.

**Frank** (calls) Hold on! Wait!

**Gemma** and **Frank** run out with the stretcher. Off, screams and shouts.

**Ten**

*Journey  
Night, a week later.*

*The stretcher is carried on by the five survivors — Joe, Jill, Stacey,  
Marvin, Donna. The Man lies prone.*

**Marvin** Stop now please.

**Stacey** It's dark. It scares me.

**Marvin (stops)** Can't anymore.

**Jill** We'll leave you behind.

*The others go on. They stop and look back at Marvin.*

**Marvin (lowers his head)** Sorry.

**Donna** Perhaps we should split up. Try our luck on our  
own.

*They put down the stretcher.*

**Stacey** I'm scared of the dark. I'd grown out of that.

**Donna** I think the world's dying. There's no one any more.  
No one looks for us. No one remembers us. I feel old. It must  
be like this. We've grown old and don't understand it yet.  
Shall we split up?

*The Man sits up on the stretcher.*

**Man (points)** Look — dark shapes on the horizon.

*They look and see nothing.*

See!

**Stacey** No.

**Man** Like dark mountains. *The port!* I worked there.

*They look and still see nothing. They turn to look at each other.*

**Man** You're good children. Carried me so far. Now I can  
help you. Stay together. You'll reach the port in two days. The

warehouses are like great cliffs — both sides of the street — they  
make the highways look like little alleys. They're stacked with  
food and clothes and videos and discs. All you want. Now  
everywhere's deserted it's yours. Go in and take your pick.  
There'll be chemists — medicines — my cure. *(Points.)* I see the  
dark shape with my sailor's eyes. The lights'll come on soon.  
It's where we've been coming all the time. In two days we'll be  
there. The dark port on the edge of the sea.

*They look away.*

**Donna** Marvin?

**Joe** Asleep.

**Jill** We ought to eat.

**Stacey** Sick of mouldy scraps. Let's get up early. Reach the  
port tomorrow. In a day.

*They stand and stare towards the port. Marvin sleeps at their feet.*

**Stacey** ... have a feast ...

**Joe** ... a party ...

**Jill** ... burn our rags ... dress up ...

*They stare in silence.*

**Donna** Marvin's turn to be lookout.

**Man** I'll do it for him. Let me.

**Jill** Are you sure?

**Man** It's only right I do my share. I can watch from my  
bed. *(Points.)* Move it there.

*They move the bed to the side.*

Bless you. Sleep while I watch.

**Jill** Wake me. remember. It's my turn next.

*They settle into exhausted, feverish sleep.*

**Man** If you make an early start you'll be in port tomorrow.  
*(He hums a few notes.)* Sea shanty. We sang ourselves to sleep at

sea . . . In port the streets were lit all night, Houses, Halls, Docks, side taverns, Music, and dancing. The smell of food on spits. (Sings a few notes. His voice breaks.) I caught a sickness in a foreign port. The lungs. I couldn't speak. A strange croaking in my throat. I left the sea. Went inland. (Points.) The lights are on. We saw them from the other side — the middle of the dark sea. The pilot took us in — past little boats bobbing like hands drowning by the quays. Different colours. Cardigans on the wrists. The mothers knit them.

*The sleepers begin to talk.*

### Joe/Jill/Donna/Stacey/Marvin

. . . port . . . tomorrow . . . music . . . clothes . . . dancing . . .

**The Man** stands. *He takes the towel from under the pillow. Unwraps the brick. Goes to Stacey. Kneels.*

**Stacey** . . . in a day . . . in a day . . .

**The Man** throws the towel over **Stacey's** face — fast, mechanical, efficient — **Stacey** stiffens — smothered — struggles — he drags her to the stretcher — throws her on it — his her-*once* with the brick, she is still. He lifts the towel from her face. Stoops to peer at her for a moment. Swings her fully onto the stretcher. He walks among the sleepers — the brick in one hand, the towel trailing from the other — searching as if he were lost. He sits down in the middle of the sleepers.

**Man** When I was a sailor one day I said I'll take my son to sea. Show him the world. The good. The bad. The violence that destroys it. (Looks at the sleepers.) If it was different we'd be friends. Take care of you. Treat you as mine. So much to learn before we know ourselves. (He has begun to cradle the brick and stroke it.) Lately my sickness has been worse. I stan't survive. A few more days then dead. (Humms a few notes.) My son my son . . . (Stops.) Time!

Suddenly he twists to the side — flaring the towel — falls on **Donna** smothering her — kills her with a blow of the brick.

**Man** Hgn.

Immediately he jumps up — runs to **Marvin** — drops the towel — runs

back for it — **Marvin** stirs — he leaves the towel — turns to **Marvin** — falls on him — raises the brick — brings it down — **Marvin** — half-asleep — moves his head aside — the brick hits the ground: crash!

**Marvin** wakes — the brick is striking at him again — he swings his head — the brick misses — hits again — head swings — misses — hits — head swings — misses — hits: kills!

**Jill** is on her feet. **Joe** is kneeling. Both transfixed in a nightmare. **The Man** lurches towards **Jill**.

**Man** Hgn. (He swings the brick at her.) Hgn! —!

**Jill** backs. **The Man** doubles over — retching — frantic — swings like a hamstringed beast.

**Man** (harsh, strangled croaking) Hhggnnnn! — (Still doubled — swaying — advancing — swings at **Jill**.) Hgn! — Hgn! —

**Jill** and **Joe** run out. **The Man** still doubled — swaying like a wounded beast — scything the ground with the brick.

**Man** Hgn! Hgn!

He falls on his knees and beats the ground with the brick.

**Man** (Calls.) Feel it! Shake! The ground! My footsteps!

He gets to his feet. Looks at the bodies. Kicks at one of them.

Get them! — like you!

He mutters to himself as he drags **Donna** and **Marvin** to the stretcher and throws them on it.

No matter. No matter. (He collapses on the bodies.) You. In it. All of you. All pay! (Calls.) All! All! With your brick! Yours! I saw you at it! (Almost inaudibly.) No matter. No matter.

He goes to the towel. Picks it up. Stands still and straight. Wipes his face on the towel with one upwards movement of his hands. Presses it against his face.

(Groans.) No matter.

He takes the towel from his face. Goes to the stretcher, unlashes it round. Stops to breathe. Wheels out the stretcher.



**Eleven***Port.**Morning.*

**Joe** *comes on. He carries bags of tins, gadgets, clothes. They spill on to the ground. He is playing a radio. He can't find the music he wants. He puts the bags on the ground. Fiddles with the tuning.*

*The ghost of the Stranger appears. He wears the puppet's clothes and has the same hair and eyes.*

**Joe** Boy from new estate. You're not real. In my head. Make you up. Did the fire hurt?

**Stranger** At first. It didn't last.

**Joe** *(gestures to bags)* Tins. Racks of clothes. Videos. Shopping city — empty — no one selling — music — power from the sun. Go in and take. *(Turns radio off, drops it.)* Trash.

**Stranger** My father drove down the street. Saw the fire. People watching. Tried to put his key in the lock. I wasted by the heat. He kicked the door in. A great red tongue of fire roared out at him — the door was like an open mouth, the house shouting in pain. Firemen tried to stop him. Black suits. I was dead but I saw them. My father running up the stairs. They fell down as he jumped on them. His coat was burning. He reached out to grab me. I was a bundle of fire. I burnt in his arms. He dropped me. I fell down into the house. The ground was burning. It was a burning pit. I was dead, I didn't feel it. My father breathed the fire. Black smoke burnt his lungs. They took him to hospital on a stretcher. I think he couldn't forget he saw me in the fire. He left the hospital to find you.

**Joe** Why don't I like the music? Or dress up? Or pig myself on grub?

**Stranger** I'm glad you brought me here.

**Joe** I heard you in the fire.

**Stranger** I know.

**Joe** I could have called the firemen sooner.

**Stranger** I know.

**Joe** I ran along the ditch. Tripped over the rat.

**Stranger** I came to forgive you.

**Joe** Forgive me?

**Stranger** Yes you didn't mean to kill me —

**Joe** But —

**Stranger** And anyway I was dead by then. Don't forget me. I wish we could be friends. We could play your radio. Explore the port. Go to the —

*The Man charges on. His face is whiter, his coat is longer — it whirls round him as he runs.*

**Man** The last!

*The Man leaps on Joe. A fight. The Man gasps for breath, breathes hoarsely. He reels from the fight.*

**Joe** Your son! There!

*The Man looks. The ghost has gone. The Man howls in despair.*

**Man** My son's dead! *(Turns to Joe and suddenly shrinks into petty, seething rage.)* Your mother was a whore. She worked for me. I kept the money. Bought the house. She wanted to move in with me. No! I moved in with my wife! Your mother wanted revenge! She burnt the house! *(Gestures.)* They only knew — the ones I killed. You did it! *(Shudders as he takes the brick from his pocket.)* You killed my son!

*He lunges at Joe. Joe runs out. The Man collects the dropped gear.*

*(Mutters as he picks up the pieces.)* . . . his . . . his . . .

*He becomes very old and frail. His breath rattles in his throat. He drags out the bags.*

52 The Children

**Twelve**

*Port.*

*Later.*

**Joe** *comes on. He carries nothing.*

**Joe** I've got everything. I'm the last person in the world.  
I must find someone.

*Goes.*