

**Today a  
Reader  
Tomorrow a  
Leader**

*Grade VII - Reading Booklet*

## THE PIECES OF SILVER

**KARL SEALY**

When, at five minutes to ten, the bell started to ring, a pall of silence settled over the noisy playfield.

Reluctantly games of cricket and pickups were abandoned; climbers came slithering down from the old tamarind tree on the school grounds or dropped quickly from its branches, making haste to clear their mouths of the green, acid fruit they had been enjoying.

The school of four hundred-odd boys assembled in ranks across the pebbled playfield, waiting for inspection before they could file into the red-walled school. Some glanced apprehensively at their dusty, naked feet, while others tried feverishly to make their nails and hands presentable.

The teachers came from the schoolroom in a leisurely bunch, laughing and joking in quiet voices as they sauntered towards the boys.

The stout, pompous, acting Headmaster came to the window that opened off his platform onto the playfield, still making an unnecessary clangour with his bell, and looked sternly over the assembled rows of scholars. The smaller boys straightened and stiffened under his cold gaze.

As the teachers passed slowly along the ranks the boys turned their hands back and forth and grinned to show their teeth. A number of boys who failed to pass the teachers' inspection of health were hailed out of the ranks and ordered into the acting Head. There were three strokes with his cane of plaited tamarind stalks for unclean hands: four for improperly brushed teeth and six for an uncombed head.

After the inspection the boys filed quietly into school and to their different classes. When you could have heard a pin drop the schoolmaster, rapped out the order: "Shun!" The entire school of boys flung their hands to their foreheads and chanted: "Good morning to

our teachers."

The schoolmaster announced a hymn, and emitting an untrue, faltering note, invited the scholars to take it. The boys rendered a rich improvement of the sound, and when the schoolmaster flung his hand up and stamped his foot, they tore full-throatedly into the hymn. At the conclusion of the hymn, the boys sang Amen, bringing their hands up to their faces in an attitude of prayer. The schoolmaster submitted a long, impromptu supplication, rambling and ill-worded, at the end of which the boys said Amen once more. Again, the schoolmaster ordered, "Shun!" The boys came to attention, and school was ready to begin.

But this morning the schoolmaster did not order the school to be seated as was the normal custom after prayers. Instead, he fixed the school with his cold eyes and said:

"Those who have brought contributions to Mr. Megahey's purse will give them to their teachers."

Hands delved into pockets, while, in the lower classes, a number of small, moist fists closed still more tightly over the pieces of silver which had been wrapped in paper and pressed carefully into their palms.

The teachers drew chairs and stools to their respective desks and sat down. Each produced a foolscap sheet on which were recorded the names of those of his class who had contributed to the purse for the retiring Head, Mr. Megahey.

No commendation seemed due to the donor of three pence. A sixpence was held up between the thumb and forefinger of the receiving teacher and displayed before the class, while the name of the boy who had presented it was repeated some half a dozen times. Still, more ado was made of the bestower of a shilling. In addition to being patted on the shoulder and beamed on by his teacher, and basking in the envy of his class, he was sent up to be thanked by the acting Head who shook his hand heartily and showed the gleaming

gold of his teeth, and who, with a grave gesture, bestowed upon him the fag-end of a stick of chalk with the injunction that it be not used about the school.

The receipt of the contributions was over, and the last boy had returned to his seat. On the platform the acting Head cleared his throat for attention and said:

“Those who have contributed to our retiring Head’s purse will now sit. Those who have not will remain standing.”

When the scuffling tumult of a school of boys taking their seats had subsided, here and there about the schoolroom a scattered few stood with downcast eyes.

The acting Head was a squat jug of a man, fierce-eyed and unsmiling. He now sauntered along the edge of his platform and fixed, one after the other, each of the standing boys with a look of complete scorn. Then, mopping his brow, he ordered those who had brought no gifts to come up and mount the platform where the dozens of them were lined up.

Taking a stick of chalk he scrawled an X upon the forehead of each boy, to the huge delight of the rest of the school. When he had imprinted this symbol of shame upon the brow of each unhappy child, he turned to the laughing school, and holding his hand up to check the gusts of merriment, said,

“Look! They bear the symbol of ingratitude!”

The cruel laughter went up to the rafters. The schoolmaster permitted it free swell for a few moments before raising his hand once more.

“Ingratitude,” he went on “ingratitude, more strong than human hand... . Come, Clement. You’re in the fourth. Step forward and let’s hear Mark Anthony on ingratitude. Surely our old Head would expire if he knew that in his school, he harboured so many thankless Brutuses. Come, Clement, let us hear you recite the piece, and well.” Clement stepped forward, shabby and barefoot, and with eyes downcast, began to recite the passage in a choked, monotonous

tone. Now and again the schoolmaster threatened him with his rod, exhorting him to speak up. The boy would then raise his voice and quicken his words under the threat of the lash, but soon his voice sank back, and the recitation resumed its muttered vein.

At last, however, the passage was finished. The acting Headmaster then spent some minutes more making the hapless boys the laughingstock of their school friends. Only when he thought the school on the verge of becoming unmanageable did he dismiss the tormented boys with the words:

“Now go to your places. But bear in mind: Every morning, until you show some appreciation for your resigning Headmaster, you shall come up here and stand in shame before the whole school.”

It was dusk, and the Dovecots were taking their one substantial meal of the day.

No one could think, looking at their home, that three penny pieces, or even halfpennies, were to be had there for the asking.

The house was a poor, wretched coop of a room, through the black, water-stained shingles of which you could count a dozen blue glimpses of sky. The walls of the shack were papered with old newspapers and magazines, discoloured with age and stained and spotted from roof to floor, torn in a score of places to reveal the rotting, worm-eaten boards beneath. The small room was divided by a threadbare cotton screen depicting seagulls soaring up from a sea of faded blue. In the midst of this drab poverty the free, scaring seagulls, and the once gay pictures of the magazine pages were an unkind comment.

The Dovecots were a family of four: Dave and his wife Maud, Clement and his older sister Evelina.

Clement sat on the sanded floor of the poor sitting room, his plate of rice between his legs; Evelina lolled over the one battered, depreciated mahogany table, picking at the coarse food with an adol-

escent discontent; Dave Dovecot, a grizzled, gangling labourer, held his plate in his left hand, while with his right he plied his mouth from a peeling metal spoon; at the propped- open window of the room sat Mrs. Dovecot a long thread of a woman whose bones want had picked like an eagle. Her plate was resting on her lap, and she scraped and pecked and foraged her food like a scratching hen, while she took stock of the passers-by.

When Clement had finished, he took up his empty plate and getting to his feet, went and stowed it away in the dark box of a kitchen. Returning, he slumped down beside his mother's chair and rested his head against her bony thigh.

After a time, he said:

"Ma, I could have the three pence I's been asking for Mr. Megahey?"

"Hmn. Wa' three pence boy? Why In de name of de Lord must poor starving people got to find three pences for Jim Megahey what's got his belly sitting so pretty wi' fat'" parried Mrs. Dovecot, though she knew well enough.

"I's told you and told you and told you Ma. He's resigning and we've all got to take three pence to give him," explained Clement patiently once more.

"Hmn. Three pence is a lot o' money for us poor folk. Hmn. Go ax your father. See what he says." Clement got to his feet reluctantly and moved slowly, over to where his father was sitting, for he knew from experience that, in parting with money, his father was a far harder nut to crack than his mother.

Dave Dovecot utilized the approach of his son by extending his empty plate. Clement took the plate to the kitchen. Then he turned once more to tackle his father.

"Can I have a three pence Papa?" he shouted in his father's ear, for the old man was pretty nigh stone deaf.

"Eh-eh! What's that about a fence, Clement?"

This time Clement put his mouth completely into his father's ear and shouted until his dark face grew darker.

"Eh-eh Don't shout at me," was all he got for his pains. "Don't you deafen me. What's that the young varmint says, Maud?"

Mrs. Dovecot came over and got him to understand after two or three attempts.

"Three pence, Maudie," he cackled, "three pence!

Did yo' hear thet Maud? Did yo' ever hear the like? I'll bet you ain't never did. Three pence! The lad'll have money what I's got to sweat blood for, just to gi to thet Megahey what's got his bread so well buttered off 'pon both sides not to mention the middle. Three pence! ha ha!... oh Maudie..... And he broke down once more in helpless laughter. Clement went out and sat under the breadfruit tree that grew before the door, resting his back against the trunk.

Evelina came to him there when the dusk was thick and sat beside him.

There was a close band of understanding and companionship between these two. Clement leaned against her so that he could feel the cheering warmth of her arms, warm as the still warm ground beneath him. Biting his nails, he told her of his morning's shame. She listened as attentively as a mother, and as she listened, she put her hand around his neck and drew his head gently down upon her young bosom.

When he had finished talking, she put her lips down to his harsh, curls, and thought for a long time. Then she said, with a little sigh:

"I know what we'll do, Clemmie. 'Member how 'fore I was taken from school we big girls used to go out singing at Christmas? Well, we'll play waits. Only tonight there'll be only you and me."

Clement raised his head and gazed into her face in the starlight.

"Oh Eve," he said, "but it ain't anyways near Christmas."

"Never you mind," she said; "There's still some who'll give us a penny or two. You wait. I'll get our hats and then we'll be off."

She got to her feet and slipped quickly into the house. She returned in a few moments carrying his cap in her hand, her own hat of straw on her head. She settled his cap, then produced a comb.

‘When we come to the shop we’ll ask for a piece of bread paper,’ she said; ‘then you’ll play the sax while I sing.’

They roamed far that night. Evelina’s voice rose clear and true to the accompaniment of the paper and comb, long after the moon came up and laid white hands upon the countryside.

At last, Evelina said, jingling the coins which they had earned in the pockets of her dress:

‘Let’s make this our last and call it a day.’

The house with which they proposed to round off their tour had a pretentious front of red brick. The greater part of the house was in darkness, but from the street, the two children could see a couple sitting in the open veranda.

Bravely, Evelina unlatched the street gate and led the way up the steps to the veranda.

“Good night,” she greeted the pair in the shadows. “We would like to sing for you.”

The woman chuckled softly, and Evelina could see the white gleam of the man’s teeth when he said: “Sure.”

The children rendered their song. When they had finished the man got to his feet and approached them, delving in his pocket.

“Thanks for your singing,” he said kindly. “It was very nice. May, give us some light for a moment.”

The woman got from her chair and, leaning through a window pressed a light switch.

And as the light flooded the veranda little Clement was turned to stone for the tall, greying man foraging the handful of coins was the retiring Headmaster Mr. Megahey.

Clement’s scrambled retreat after Evelina had made her little curtsy which was perhaps unnecessary, since Mr. Megahey had his glasses off and he didn’t seem to recognize him.

Out in the road, Evelina let out the laughter that had been welling inside her.

“Just think how we never thought of where your old Head might’ve

moved to after he left the Schoolmaster’s house,” she laughed. “But he’s gi’n us our biggest taking for the night, anyway. He’s gi’n us six pence.”

They counted their takings in the middle of the white road in the moonlight. When they had finished, Evelina poured the coins back into her pocket and said:

“Now I am going tell you how we’ll fix that brute Mr. Chase.”

On the following morning the acting Head, Mr. Chase kept his word. Immediately after prayers the boys who had brought no silver were lined up across the platform. They were but eight of them this morning. Two had somehow managed their three penny pieces, white two or three others had absented themselves. Clement counted the line of boys as he took his place among them.

As Mr. Chase eyed their bowed heads in enjoyment Clement stepped forward, the eight pieces of silver upon his extended palm.

“There are eight,” he told the gaping schoolmaster. ‘One for each of us.’”

His voice struck through the silent school, clear and thrilling as a star’s light.



## THE GOLD CADILLAC

MILDRED D. TAYLOR

### BACKGROUND

The novella *The Gold Cadillac* takes place around 1950. African Americans, especially those living in the South during this time, continued to be treated unfairly. Experiences like the one the family in the story have when entering Mississippi outraged blacks and many whites. During the Civil Rights Era of the mid-1950s and 1960s, many people demanded changes in the laws across the nation.

My sister and I were playing out on the front lawn when the gold Cadillac rolled up and my father stepped from behind the wheel. We ran to him, our eyes filled with wonder. "Daddy, whose Cadillac?" I asked.

And Wilma demanded, "Where's our Mercury?"

My father grinned. "Go get your mother and I'll tell you all about it."

"Is it ours?" I cried. "Daddy, is it ours?"

"Get your mother!" he laughed. "And tell her to hurry!"

Wilma and I ran off to obey, as Mr. Pondexter next door came from his house to see what this new Cadillac was all about. We threw open the front door, ran through the downstairs front parlor, and straight through the house to the kitchen, where my mother was cooking and one of my aunts was helping her. "Come on, Mother-Dear!" we cried together. "Daddy says come on out and see this new car!"

"What?" said my mother, her face showing her surprise. "What're you talking about?"

"A Cadillac!" I cried.

"He said hurry up!" relayed Wilma.

And then we took off again, up the back stairs to the second floor of the duplex. Running down the hall, we banged on all the apartment doors. My uncles and their wives stepped to the doors. It was good

it was a Saturday morning. Everybody was home.

"We got us a Cadillac! We got us a Cadillac!" Wilma and I proclaimed in unison.<sup>1</sup> B C

We had decided that the Cadillac had to be ours if our father was driving it and holding onto the keys. "Come on see!" Then we raced on, through the upstairs sunroom, down the front steps, through the downstairs sunroom, and out to the Cadillac. Mr. Pondexter was still there. Mr. LeRoy and Mr. Courtland from down the street were there too, and all were admiring the Cadillac as my father stood proudly by, pointing out the various features.

"Brand-new 1950 Coupe deVille!" I heard one of the men saying.

"Just off the showroom floor!" my father said. "I just couldn't resist it."

My sister and I eased up to the car and peeked in. It was all gold inside. Gold leather seats. Gold carpeting. Gold dashboard. It was like no car we had owned before. It looked like a car for rich folks.

"Daddy, are we rich?" I asked. My father laughed.

"Daddy, it's ours, isn't it?" asked Wilma, who was older and more practical than I. She didn't intend to give her heart too quickly to something that wasn't hers.

"You like it?"

"Oh, Daddy, yes!"

He looked at me. "What 'bout you, ' Lois?"

"Yes, sir!"

My father laughed again. "Then I expect I can't much disappoint my girls, can I? It's ours, all right!"

Wilma and I hugged our father with our joy. My uncles came from the house, and my aunts, carrying their babies, came out too. Everybody surrounded the car and owwed and ahhed. Nobody could believe it.

Then my mother came out.

Everybody stood back grinning as she approached the car. There was no smile on her face. We all waited for her to speak. She stared at the

car, then looked at my father, standing there as proud as he could be.

Finally, she said, "You didn't buy this car, did you, Wilbert?"

"Gotta admit I did. Couldn't resist it."

"But . . . but what about our Mercury? It was perfectly good!"

"Don't you like the Cadillac, Dee?"

"That Mercury wasn't even a year old!"

My father nodded. "And I'm sure whoever buys it is going to get themselves a good car. But we've got ourselves a better one. Now stop frowning, honey, and let's take ourselves a ride in our brand-new Cadillac!"

My mother shook her head. "I've got food on the stove," she said and, turning away, walked back to the house.

There was an awkward silence, and then my father said, "You know Dee never did much like surprises. Guess this here Cadillac was a bit too much for her. I best go smooth things out with her."

Everybody watched as he went after my mother. But when he came back, he was alone.

"Well, what she says?" asked one of my uncles.

My father shrugged and smiled. "Told me I bought this Cadillac alone, I could just ride in it alone."

Another uncle laughed. "Uh-oh! Guess she told you!"

"Oh, she'll come around," said one of my aunts. "Any woman would be proud to ride in this car."

"That's what I'm banking on," said my father as he went around to the street side of the car and opened the door.

"All right! Who's for a ride?" D

"We are!" Wilma and I cried.

All three of my uncles and one of my aunts, still holding her baby, and Mr. Pondexter climbed in with us, and we took off for the first ride in the gold Cadillac. It was a glorious ride, and we drove all through the city of Toledo. We rode past the church and past the

school. We rode through Ottawa Hills, where the rich folks lived, and on into Walbridge Park and past the zoo, then along the Maumee River. But none of us had had enough of the car, so my father put the car on the road, and we drove all the way to Detroit. We had plenty of family there, and everybody was just as pleased as could be about the Cadillac. My father told our Detroit relatives that he was in the doghouse with my mother about buying the Cadillac. My uncles told them she wouldn't ride in the car. All the Detroit family thought that was funny, and everybody, including my father, laughed about it and said my mother would come around.

It was early evening by the time we got back home, and I could see from my mother's face she had not come around. She was angry now not only about the car, but that we had been gone so long. I didn't understand that, since my father had called her as soon as we reached Detroit to let her know where we were. I had heard him myself. I didn't understand either why she did not like that fine Cadillac and thought she was being terribly disagreeable with my father. That night, as she tucked Wilma and me in bed, I told her that too.

"Is this your business?" she asked.

"Well, I just think you ought to be nice to Daddy. I think you ought to ride in that car with him! It'd sure make him happy."

"I think you ought to go to sleep," she said and turned out the light.

Later I heard her arguing with my father. "We're supposed to be saving for a house!" she said.

"We've already got a house!" said my father.

"But you said you wanted a house in a better neighborhood.

I thought that's what we both said!"

"I haven't changed my mind."

"Well, you have a mighty funny way of saving for it, then. Your brothers are saving for houses of their own, and you don't see them out buying new cars every year!"

"We'll still get the house, Dee. That's a promise!"

“Not with new Cadillacs we won’t!” said my mother, and then she said a very loud good night, and all was quiet.

The next day was Sunday, and everybody figured that my mother would be sure to give in and ride in the Cadillac. After all, the family always went to church together on Sunday. But she didn’t give in. What was worse, she wouldn’t let Wilma and me ride in the Cadillac either. She took us each by the hand, walked past the Cadillac where my father stood waiting and headed on toward the church three blocks away. I was really mad at her now. I had been looking forward to driving up to the church in that gold Cadillac and having everybody see it.

On most Sunday afternoons during the summertime, my mother, my father, Wilma, and I would go for a ride. Sometimes we just rode around the city and visited friends and family. Sometimes we made short trips over to Chicago or Peoria or Detroit to see relatives there or to Cleveland, where we had relatives too, but we could also see the Cleveland Indians play. Sometimes we joined our aunts and uncles and drove in a caravan out to the park or to the beach. At the park or the beach, Wilma and I would run and play. My mother and my aunts would spread a picnic, and my father and my uncles would shine their cars.

But on this Sunday afternoon, my mother refused to ride anywhere. She told Wilma and me that we could go. So, we left her alone in the big, empty house, and the family cars, led by the gold Cadillac, headed for the park. For a while I played and had a good time, but then I stopped playing and went to sit with my father. Despite his laughter he seemed sad to me. I think he was missing my mother as much as I was.

That evening, my father took my mother to dinner down at the corner cafe. They walked. Wilma and I stayed at the house, chasing fireflies in the backyard. My aunts and uncles sat in the yard and on the porch, talking and laughing about the day and watching us. It was a soft summer’s evening, the kind that came every day and was

expected. The smell of charcoal and of barbecue drifting from up the block, the sound of laughter and music and talk drifting from yard to yard were all a part of it. Soon one of my uncles joined Wilma and me in our chase of fireflies, and when my mother and father came home, we were at it still. My mother and father watched us for a while, while everybody else watched them to see if my father would take out the Cadillac and if my mother would slide in beside him to take a ride. But it soon became evident that the dinner had not changed my mother’s mind. She still refused to ride in the Cadillac. I just couldn’t understand her objection to it.

Though my mother didn’t like the Cadillac, everybody else in the neighborhood certainly did. That meant quite a few folks too, since we lived on a very busy block. On one corner was a grocery store, a cleaners, and a gas station. Across the street was a beauty shop and a fish market, and down the street was a bar, another grocery store, the Dixie Theater, the cafe, and a drugstore. There were always people strolling to or from one of these places, and because our house was right in the middle of the block, just about everybody had to pass our house and the gold Cadillac. Sometimes people took in the Cadillac as they walked, their heads turning for a longer look as they passed. Then there were people who just outright stopped and took a good look before continuing on their way. I was proud to say that car belonged to my family. I felt mighty important as people called to me as I ran down the street. ““Ey, ’Lois! How’s that Cadillac, girl? Riding fine?” I told my mother how much everybody liked that car. She was not impressed and made no comment.

Since just about everybody on the block knew everybody else, most folks knew that my mother wouldn’t ride in the Cadillac. Because of that, my father took a lot of good-natured kidding from the men. My mother got kidded too, as the women said if she didn’t ride in that car, maybe some other woman would. And everybody laughed about it and began to bet on who would give in first, my mother or my father. But then my father said he was going to drive the car south



into Mississippi to visit my grandparents, and everybody stopped laughing.

My uncles stopped.

So did my aunts.

Everybody.

“Look here, Wilbert,” said one of my uncles, “it’s too dangerous. It’s like putting a loaded gun to your head.”

“I paid good money for that car,” said my father. “That gives me a right to drive it where I please. Even down to Mississippi.”

My uncles argued with him and tried to talk him out of driving the car south. So did my aunts, and so did the neighbors, Mr. LeRoy, Mr. Courtland, and Mr. Pondexter. They said it was a dangerous thing, a mighty dangerous thing, for a black man to drive an expensive car into the rural South.

“Not much those folks hate more’n to see a northern Negro coming down there in a fine car,” said Mr. Pondexter. “They see those Ohio license plates, they’ll figure you coming down uppity, trying to lord your fine car over them!”

I listened, but I didn’t understand. I didn’t understand why they didn’t want my father to drive that car south. It was his.

“Listen to Pondexter, Wilbert!” cried another uncle. “We might’ve fought a war to free people overseas, but we’re not free here! Man, those white folks down south’ll lynch you soon look at you. You know that!”

Wilma and I looked at each other. Neither one of us knew what lynch meant, but the word sent a shiver through us. We held each other’s hand.

My father was silent, then he said: “All my life I’ve had to be heedful of what white folks thought. Well, I’m tired of that. I worked hard for everything I got. Got it honest, too. Now I got that Cadillac because I liked it and because it meant something to me that somebody like me from Mississippi could go and buy it. It’s my car, I paid for it, and I’m driving it south.”

My mother, who had said nothing through all this, now stood. “Then the girls and I’ll be going too,” she said.

“No!” said my father.

My mother only looked at him and went off to the kitchen.

My father shook his head. It seemed he didn’t want us to go. My uncles looked at each other, then at my father. “You set on doing this, we’ll all go,” they said. “That way we can watch out for each other.”

My father took a moment and nodded. Then my aunts got up and went off to their kitchens too.

All the next day, my aunts and my mother cooked, and the house was filled with delicious smells. They fried chicken and baked hams and cakes and sweet potato pies and mixed potato salad. They filled jugs with water, punch and coffee. Then they packed everything in huge picnic baskets, along with bread and boiled eggs, oranges and apples, plates and napkins, spoons and forks and cups. They placed all that food on the back seats of the cars. It was like a grand, grand picnic we were going on, and Wilma and I were mighty excited. We could hardly wait to start.

My father, my mother, Wilma, and I got into the Cadillac. My uncles, my aunts, my cousins got into the Ford, the Buick, and the Chevrolet, and we rolled off in our caravan headed south. Though my mother was finally riding in the Cadillac, she had no praise for it. In fact, she said nothing about it at all. She still seemed upset, and since she still seemed to feel the same about the car, I wondered why she had insisted upon making this trip with my father.

We left the city of Toledo behind, drove through Bowling Green and down through the Ohio countryside of farms and small towns, through Dayton and Cincinnati, and across the Ohio River into Kentucky. On the other side of the river, my father stopped the car and looked back at Wilma and me and said, “Now from here on, whenever we stop and there’re white people around, I don’t want either one of you to say a word. Not one word! Your mother and I’ll do the talking. That understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Wilma and I both said, though we didn’t truly understand why.

My father nodded, looked at my mother, and started the car again. We rolled on, down Highway 25, and through the bluegrass hills of Kentucky. Soon we began to see signs. Signs that read: “White Only, Colored Not Allowed.” Hours later, we left the Bluegrass State and crossed into Tennessee. Now we saw even more of the signs saying: “White Only, Colored Not Allowed.” We saw the signs above water fountains and in restaurant windows. We saw them in ice cream parlors and at hamburger stands. We saw them in front of hotels and motels, and on the restroom doors of filling stations. I didn’t like the signs. I felt as if I were in a foreign land.

I couldn’t understand why the signs were there, and I asked my father what the signs meant. He said they meant we couldn’t drink from the water fountains. He said they meant we couldn’t stop to sleep in the motels. He said they meant we couldn’t stop to eat in the restaurants. I looked at the grand picnic basket I had been enjoying so much. Now I understood why my mother had packed it. Suddenly the picnic did not seem so grand.

Finally, we reached Memphis. We got there at a bad time. Traffic was heavy and we got separated from the rest of the family. We tried to find them, but it was no use. We had to go on alone. We reached the Mississippi state line, and soon after, we heard a police siren. A police car came up behind us. My father slowed the Cadillac, then stopped. Two white policemen got out of their car. They eyeballed the Cadillac and told my father to get out.

“Whose car is this, boy?” they asked.

I saw anger in my father’s eyes. “It’s mine,” he said.

“You’re a liar,” said one of the policemen. “You stole this car.”

“Turn around, put your hands on top of that car, and spread-eagle,” said the other policeman.

My father did as he was told. They searched him and I didn’t understand why. I didn’t understand either why they had called my

father a liar and didn’t believe that the Cadillac was his. I wanted to ask, but I remembered my father’s warning not to say a word, and I obeyed that warning.

The policemen told my father to get in the back of the police car. My father did. One policeman got back into the police car. The other policeman slid behind the wheel of our Cadillac. The police car started off. The Cadillac followed. Wilma and I looked at each other and at our mother. We didn’t know what to think. We were scared.

The Cadillac followed the police car into a small town and stopped in front of the police station. The policeman stepped out of our Cadillac and took the keys. The other policeman took my father to the police station.

“Mother-Dear!” Wilma and I cried. “What’re they going to do to our daddy? They going to hurt him?”

“He’ll be all right,” said my mother. “He’ll be all right.” But she didn’t sound so sure of that. She seemed worried.

We waited. More than three hours we waited. Finally, my father came out of the police station. We had lots of questions to ask him. He said the police had given him a ticket for speeding and locked him up. But then the judge had come. My father had paid for the ticket and they had let him go.

He started the Cadillac and drove slowly out of the town, below the speed limit. The police car followed us. People standing on steps and sitting on porches and in front of stores stared at us as we passed. Finally, we were out of the town. The police car still followed. Dusk was falling. The night grew black, and finally, the police car turned around and left us.

We drove and drove. But my father was tired now and my grandparents’ farm was still far away. My father said he had to get some sleep, and since my mother didn’t drive, he pulled into a grove of trees at the side of the road and stopped.

“I’ll keep watch,” said my mother.

“Wake me if you see anybody,” said my father.

“Just rest,” said my mother.

So, my father slept. But that bothered me. I needed him awake. I was afraid of the dark and of the woods and of whatever lurked there. My father was the one who kept us safe, he and my uncles. But already the police had taken my father away from us once today, and my uncles were lost.

“Go to sleep, baby,” said my mother. “Go to sleep.” But I was afraid to sleep until my father woke. I had to help my mother keep watch. I figured I had to help protect us too, in case the police came back and tried to take my father away again. There was a long, sharp knife in the picnic basket, and I took hold of it, clutching it tightly in my hand. Ready to strike, I sat there in the back of the car, eyes wide, searching the blackness outside the Cadillac. Wilma, for a while, searched the night too, then she fell asleep. I didn’t want to sleep, but soon I found I couldn’t help myself as an unwelcome drowsiness came over me. I had an uneasy sleep, and when I woke, it was dawn, and my father was gently shaking me. I woke with a start and my hand went up, but the knife wasn’t there. My mother had it.

My father took my hand. “Why were you holding the knife, Lois?” he asked.

I looked at him and at my mother. “I—I was scared,” I said.

My father was thoughtful. “No need to be scared now, sugar,” he said. “Daddy’s here and so is Mother-Dear.” Then after a glance at my mother, he got out of the car, walked to the road, looked down it one way, then the other. When he came back and started the motor, he turned the Cadillac north, not south.

“What’re you doing?” asked my mother.

“Heading back to Memphis,” said my father. “Cousin Halton’s there. We’ll leave the Cadillac and get his car. Driving this car any farther south with you and the girls in the car, it’s just not worth the risk.”

And so that’s what we did. Instead of driving through Mississippi in golden splendor, we traveled its streets and roads and highways in Cousin Halton’s solid, yet not so splendid, four-year-old Chevy. When

we reached my grandparents’ farm; my uncles and aunts were already there. Everybody was glad to see us. They had been worried. They asked about the Cadillac. My father told them what had happened, and they nodded and said he had done the best thing.

We stayed one week in Mississippi. During that week I often saw my father, looking deep in thought, walk off alone across the family land. I saw my mother watching him. One day I ran after my father, took his hand, and walked the land with him. I asked him all the questions that were on my mind. I asked him why the policemen had treated him the way they had and why people didn’t want us to eat in the restaurants or drink from the water fountains or sleep in the hotels. I told him I just didn’t understand all that.

My father looked at me and said that it all was a difficult thing to understand, and he didn’t really understand it himself. He said it all had to do with the fact that black people had once been forced to be slaves. He said it had to do with our skins being colored. He said it had to do with stupidity and ignorance. He said it had to do with the law, the law that said we could be treated like this here in the South. And for that matter, he added, any other place in these United States where folks thought the same as so many folks did here in the South. But he also said, “I’m hoping one day though we can drive that long road down here and there won’t be any signs. I’m hoping one day the police won’t stop us just because of the color of our skins and we’re riding in a gold Cadillac with northern plates.”

When the week ended, we said a sad goodbye to my grandparents and all the Mississippi family and headed in a caravan back toward Memphis. In Memphis, we returned Cousin Halton’s car and got our Cadillac. Once we were home, my father put the Cadillac in the garage and didn’t drive it. I didn’t hear my mother say any more about the Cadillac. I didn’t hear my father speak of it either.

Some days passed, and then on a bright Saturday afternoon while Wilma and I were playing in the backyard, I saw my father go into the garage. He opened the garage doors wide so the sunshine streamed

in and began to shine the Cadillac. I saw my mother at the kitchen window staring out across the yard at my father. For a long time, she stood there watching my father shine his car. Then she came out and crossed the yard to the garage, and I heard her say, “Wilbert, you keep the car.”

He looked at her as if he had not heard.

“You keep it,” she repeated and turned and walked back to the house.

My father watched her until the back door had shut behind her. Then he went on shining the car and soon began to sing. About an hour later he got into the car and drove away. That evening when he came back, he was walking. The Cadillac was nowhere in sight.

“Daddy, where’s our new Cadillac?” I demanded to know. So did Wilma.

He smiled and put his hand on my head. “Sold it,” he said as my mother came into the room.

“But how come?” I asked. “We poor now?”

“No, sugar. We’ve got more money towards our new house now, and we’re all together. r. I figure that makes us about the richest folks in the world.” He smiled at my mother, and she smiled too and came into his arms.

After that, we drove around in an old 1930s Model A Ford my father had. He said he’d factory-ordered us another Mercury, this time with my mother’s approval. Despite that, most folks on the block figured we had fallen on hard times after such a splashy showing of good times, and some folks even laughed at us as the Ford rattled around the city. I must admit that at first, I was pretty much embarrassed to be riding around in that old Ford after the splendor of the Cadillac. But my father said to hold my head high. We and the family knew the truth. As fine as the Cadillac had been, he said, it had pulled us apart for a while. Now, as ragged and noisy as that old Ford was, we all rode in it together, and we were a family again. So, I held my head high.

Still, though, I thought often of that Cadillac. We had had the Cadillac only a little more than a month, but I wouldn’t soon forget its splendor or how I’d felt riding around inside it. I wouldn’t soon forget either the ride we had taken south in it. I wouldn’t soon forget the signs, the policemen, or my fear. I would remember that ride and the gold Cadillac all my life.



## JEFFIE LEMMINGTON AND ME

### MERLE HODGE

I was seven and I had thought how snow was like cotton wool, so I had always wondered how the children in books made snowmen stand up without the breeze blowing them away.

When my mother woke me up one morning, she said, 'There's snow, darling, come and see!'

We stood at the window looking down. The tops of the parked cars were covered with thick white hair, as though they had grown old in the night. The pavement was covered with it, too, and the roof — the long row of joined-together roofs — of the opposite side of the street, everything. It was very mysterious. A giant had come and quietly laid his fluffy white towel down over the whole street and vanished again.

My mother was holding me. 'Pretty, eh?' she said. I did not answer. Instead, I squirmed with shyness. I was shy of my mother. I did not know my mother, I did not know my father, and — I did not trust the little boy they had with them who did not talk like me and didn't seem to feel cold, who they said was my little brother.

I had looked forward to seeing my little brother. When I was going to take the plane, Granny had given me a paper bag full of sweets to bring for him, and he had sniffed and nibbled at them, screwing up his face, and handed them back to my mother.

In the night when I was falling asleep, or when I woke up in the middle of the night, this place seemed to be a dream that I was having. It was always close and dark here, as in a dream, and there was no midday; the whole day was the same color. And you could never just scamper out through the front door if you felt like it, you had first to pile on all those clothes that made you feel heavier than when you had got soaked in the rain.

But when I was up and about, then it was Granny and Uncle Nello who seemed to be tucked away in a dream somewhere, or in some

bright yellow storybook.

Granny was both sad and happy when they'd written and said that I could go to them now. Happy for me because at last I was going Up There. They were rather put out when I announced that I wasn't going anywhere. I hadn't the slightest interest in my mother and father — only when I got parcels from them with sweets and toys; but when I had gobbled up the sweets and broken the toys or exchanged them for things my friends had, then I forgot about my mother and father until the next parcel came.

But I didn't mind going Up There to have a look at this little brother who seemed to have crept into the world behind my back, for Granny and Uncle Nello said that I had never seen him. (They also said that I had seen my mother and father and that they had seen me, but I knew they were only fooling me.)

And now I had come to this uncomfortable place, and I had seen my little brother, and now I was ready to go back to Granny and Uncle Nello.

We put on all our clothes, my mother and I, and set out for school. But . . . snow was crunchy to walk on, like biscuit crumbs, not a bit like cotton wool! My mother was picking her way carefully along, and I soon discovered why. For we had made only a few steps when my shoes played a trick on me, and I sat down in the snow. It was hard, and I stayed sitting and bellowed at the top of my voice. This was enough. I wanted to go home to Granny and Uncle Nello. Enough of this foolish place.

Every day my mother took me to school and came and fetched me in the afternoon. Even when I knew the way myself. I wanted to walk with Jeffie Lemmington. We lived on the same street. And besides, hardly anyone else's mother brought them to school and came to fetch them like gates and so on afternoons when I came through the school gates and out of the corner of my eye had checked to see that

my mother was standing there, I then ignored her and walked a little way behind her all the way home.

But after a while, she stopped corning and then Jeffie Lemmington and I made our joyful way together to and from school. We walked along the tops of little garden walls, our arms cutting through the air like windmills; we played hide and seek in and out of the crowd along the street that was always full of people; When we had to cross the road, we stood on the pavement and held hands, and he looked to the left and looked to the right, and then we raced over; we fished a tin can out of a dustbin and kicked it all the way home, enjoying the delightful noise it made on the concrete. And we played together at school, too, Jeffie Lemmington and me. When Jeffie Lemmington and I were playing together, then almost forgot that I didn't like this place and wanted to go back to Granny and Uncle Nello.

One morning, Jeffie Lemmington did not meet me at our gate, and I set out alone. Then I saw him a little way ahead of me and, called happily to him as I charged down the street. but when I caught up with him, he looked at me miserably.

My mum says I'm not to play with you,' he said, kicking a stone.

'Why?' I asked in astonishment.

'Because she says you prob'ly smell and you'll give me lice.'

'What is lice?'

His face brightened for a moment. 'Don' you know what lice is?' he said, sticking his chest out. 'Ha , I've 'ad lice heaps of times!'

`Lice I pictured as some tempting dessert that wasn't really too good for you. His face fell again, and we walked along thinking, trying to puzzle the whole thing out.

At recreation time we did not play, we stood near each other on the playground with our hands in our pockets each sadly kicking at a blade of grass or spinning slowly on one heel. Then suddenly Jeffie Lemmington stood stock still. 'I know what!' he said, running towards me. 'I'll take you to my mum so she can smell you, and when she smells you don't smell of anything, then we can play!'. We at pebbles, when I had an idea this time: 'Let's run away!'

hugged each other and danced round and round.

We could not wait for that school day to end. In the classroom we looked at each other every now and then and smiled. When school was over, we burst out of the gates, almost dragging each other along by hand as we pelted down the road.

Jeffie Lemmington was ringing the doorbell, still gripping my hand. A lady opened the door, smiling. But suddenly her mouth gasped like a fish's and her eyes grew wide, then her eyes got small and her mouth clamped together hard and angry, and I was terrified. And the next thing I knew Jeffie Lemmington's hand was pulled from mine and he was disappearing headfirst through the door by no will of his own, and BRAM I was standing in front of a dirty cream door in a cold passage in a strange house.

I dashed down the stairs as fast as my legs could carry me and ran all the way home, crying.

My mother said, with a strange look on her face, well that was that I couldn't play with him any longer; maybe the best thing to do would be to find a little boy lust like me to play, with; there were some little boys like me at school, weren't there? But Jeffie Lemmington was just like me! He was seven and he was going to be a footballer and he hated; milk. But my mother clamped her mouth together and wouldn't say a word more.

I threw a tantrum. If I couldn't play with my friend Jeffie Lemmington, then I wasn't staying in this place any longer; I was going home. My little brother stood with his thumb in his mouth and stared, impressed, as I bravely kicked and writhed and roared. I made a face at him, and he stepped back.

The next day, Jeffie Lemmington and I walked to school on opposite sides of the street. Every now and then we peeped sideways at each other; every time we came to a corner, each took a quick look to see that the other was crossing safely.

At recreation time we were standing near to each other again, kicking Underground with our mothers - and the giant centipede rushed in.

What I had in mind was running away to Granny and Uncle Nello. Jeffie Lemmington said that we would run away to a farm and be farmhands, shearing sheep and slaughtering cows, until we were older, then we'd become footballers because they didn't take little boys of seven to be footballers. The idea wasn't a bad one, and at any rate I would go along with it until I could get back to Granny and Uncle Nello.

We would get on the train, and when we had been on the train long enough then we'd be in the country, where farms were, said Jeffie Lemmington. He knew he'd been to the country once, to a farm.

We did not shoot out of the school gates as we had done the day before. But we held hands even more tightly than the day before. Looking neither right nor left, nor, above all, at each other, we set off down the road. At the corner where we usually crossed over; we firmly turned right instead, and after we had gone a few steps, we could look at each other and smile happily, and then break into a run. Down in the Underground, the escalators were a temptation, we had to ride on them for a bit. We rode up and down and backward on the escalators until suddenly a million people were hurrying down the passage, clattering with their feet, and they filled up the escalator and there were still more coming; so, we decided to continue on our way to the country.

And there wasn't much else we could do, for now, we were being sucked along in a kind of wave, like the time when the sea grabbed me and was dragging me away when I was little, but Uncle Nello had been there to pull me out; and Jeffie Lemmington was terrified, too, for he held on to me as we were carried forward.

But all of a sudden, the crowd came loose, and we were free. We were on the train platform. We wanted to go home.

'Fun, ain't it?' squeaked Jeffie Lemmington.

'Yes, fun, ain't it?' I squeaked in agreement. A fearful thundering - the train never thundered so when we were down in the

We were pushed into it, and we clutched each other again. When the doors slid shut and locked us away, Jeffie Lemmington and I were standing pressed tightly together stomach to stomach, so that we had to take turns drawing breath.

We travelled like this for a long time, shaken to and fro, not saying a word, until the train began to empty itself. 'I think the next stop's the country,' came Jeffie Lemmington's frightened voice.

We followed some people off the train and up the stairs, walking quietly behind them so they wouldn't notice. We were oozing through a small space in a barrier, and just as we escaped to the other side a voice called out sharply:

'Tickets! You two! Come back here!'

'Run!' said Jeffie Lemmington; and we ran.

But at the door, Jeffie Lemmington stood stock still and looked as if he was going to cry. He was staring about. 'But this isn't the country!' he said.

We had no idea how long we had been walking in the streets. But it was dark now, and we were cold. There was food in lighted windows. We had not spoken for a long time. We were too frightened. We were more frightened than we were hungry, or tired, or cold. Our mothers would never find us, and what was going to become of us? I thought of my mother and father and little brother sitting eating, indoors, in the warm. How dare they! - when I was not there. Sometimes people looked at us curiously.

Suddenly Jeffie Lemmington sat down, in the middle of the pavement, and bawled. Right away I dropped down beside him and did the same. We sat on the pavement side by side and bellowed at the tops of our voices. People passing stopped and stood around us, looking as if they were not sure what they should do; and then a lady bent down and asked us where we lived.

We don't really remember the ride in the police car, because by then we were fast asleep, but all the other boys think we do. We've told

them how they let us blow the siren and make the light on top flash as we tore through the streets, and other cars had to move aside as we raced along . . . All really remember is the lady taking us to her house and giving us dinner; and she tried to give us milk, and we fell asleep.

And then us in the newspaper. "Ow do we know it's you?" said George Tiller, but he was only jealous. Of course, he is right, maybe; if you didn't know, you'd think it was just some policemen and my mother and Jeffie Lemmington's mum holding two bundles with legs and looking right silly, laughing like twits.

And my mother has told everybody, a million times (if you knew my mother, you'd expect her to tell one story a million times), how funny it was, when the policemen came in with the two bundles in blankets and how they each rushed and grabbed one, and how the two bundles were exactly the same size and only our shoes and socks were showing, black shoes and grey socks with a green stripe — and if you knew my mother, you'd expect her to get the wrong bundle, and so did Jeffie Lemmington's mum. So that's why they're all laughing in the picture like twits. I wish they'd turned us around so everybody could see it was us, Jeffie Lemmington, and me.



## SHARLO'S STRANGE BARGAIN

### RALPH PRINCE

In Glentis Village, when people notice that you love your belly, they often say: "You belly goin "bring you to de same en 'like Sharlo'. And then they will tell you the story of Sharlo and his strange bargain. It is an old, old story, and they say its story. This is how it goes:

There once lived a man in Glentis Village named Sharlo. Some called him Long-belly Sharlo', because he loved food too much. Others called him 'Shark) the fifer', because he was the best Fife player in the village. The fife was made from bamboo in Sharlo's own secret way, and it was the sweetest fife the villagers had ever heard. They believed that the music he played on it was the sweetest in all the world.

One afternoon Sharlo was returning home after working in his lands in the mountain. He was on the lower slopes, but still a long way from home, when a heavy shower of rain began to fall. He sheltered under a tree, but he got slightly wet all the time. The rain poured in torrents all afternoon and evening, enveloping the mountain in a thick, white sheet.

When darkness gathered, Sharlo felt cold and miserable. So, he took out his fife and played it. He played all the old songs he could remember—song of the old folk when they lived in the mountain, songs of the fishermen in Glentis village, sad songs, merry songs. All these and more he played and played, sweeter than he had ever played before.

Then suddenly he stopped playing. Right before him appeared a tall, red man. Sharlo was astonished, for he had not seen where the man had come from. 'Go ahead playing', said the man. 'You played so sweet that I came up from down yonder to hear you'.

Sharlo asked him who he was, and the man said that everybody knew will give it to you. But you must say it in rhyme, like this:

him. Sharlo then looked at him closely to see if he really knew him. The man seemed neither young nor old, but ageless. His skin was red and looked like the shell of a boiled lobster. His hair was white and flowing. His eyes were red, and they glowed as if fires burned within them. 'Never see you before, 'said Sharlo. after looking at him searchingly and long.

'You will soon remember who I am,' declared the man, 'and you will get to know me more, Sharlo'.

'How you know me name?' asked Sharlo, in surprise.

'Aha! laughed the man. 'I know everybody, Sharlo —everybody in this world!'

Meanwhile Sharlo was still getting wet, so he edged up closer to the trunk of the tree. But the rain ran off the man's body like water sliding off a duck's back.

Would you like to come down to my place for shelter?' asked the man.

Sharlo wondered where that place was. But he was wet and above all, hungry, so he agreed to go, hoping to get some food there. The man led the way and Sharlo followed. As fast as the man walked, a hole opened in the mountain before him, going downwards all the time.

At last, he stopped. Sharlo found himself in a large, oven like room with fires burning along the walls. It was so hot that his clothes soon became dry, and he had to take off his shirt; but the man was not even sweating.

He offered Sharlo a chair before a table, and then sat facing Sharlo. The man said nothing but watched him intently. Sharlo yawned several times, expecting the man to offer him something to eat. But the man just watched him intently and said nothing. At last, Sharlo could bear it no longer. 'You got any food?' he asked.

'Plenty,' the man replied. I was waiting for you to ask for Some.' He then put a large, empty calabash on the table before Sharlo.

What would you like to eat?' asked the man, smiling.

'Anything,' answered Sharlo.

'Just say what you want,' the man explained, 'and this magic calabash

Calabash, calabash, food time come;  
Bring, bring pepper pot an gee me some.'  
And so Sharlo did as the man said, and repeated the rhyme:  
Calabash, calabash, food time come;  
Bring, bring pepper pot and 'gee me some.'  
And then like magic, hot pepper pot sprang up in the calabash, filling it to the brim. Sharlo was amazed. His eyes bulged. But already his mouth was watering.  
'Have the bellyful,' said the man. 'Eat your pepper pot—it's yours, all yours. So Sharlo ate and ate, until his stomach was full, and the calabash was empty. Then he licked his fingers.  
The man then asked Sharlo to play the fife for him. As his stomach was full. Sharlo played even sweeter than before.  
' You played wonderfully' said the man, smiling. 'I wish I could as sweet as you.' And he borrowed the fife and played the tune. To Sharlo's surprise the man played beautifully, though not half as sweet as he.  
'A wonderful fife you have here,' said the man, rubbing his hand over the keys, 'Mmrnm hmmm. A wonderful fife.  
But Sharlo was hardly listening. He was gazing at the calabash and imagining how wonderful it would be if he could have one like it, to give him all the food he wanted.  
'You seem to like the calabash, Sharlo, the man remarked.  
Sharlo smiled  
'Would you like to have it?' asked the man.  
Sharlo smiled again.  
'Very well,' said the man, 'then we can make a bargain'  
'A bargain?' asked Sharlo, in surprise.  
'Yes replied the man, rubbing his hand over the keys of the fife, 'a bargain that we must keep secret.  
Wha is de bargain?' asked Sharlo.  
'You take my calabash,' the man explained, 'and I take your fife,'

Sharlo considered the matter for a while. He wanted the calabash, but he didn't want to part with his fife. He had it since he was young. It was the best fife in the village. And playing it was the best joy—next to eating. He hesitated, unable to make up his mind.  
'Come Sharlo,' said the man, 'be sensible. You can always get another fife, but never another calabash like this again,'  
'Even in hard times,' the man went on, 'this magic calabash will give you all the food you want. Think of the fungee and saltfish; the dumplings and pork ; the rice and meat ; the pepper pot ; the souse ; the ackee—all these and more are yours, all yours, just for the asking—and the eating.'  
These were the very dishes Sharlo loved most. And with the calabash, so near, the temptation was too great.  
'Alright,' he said at last, 'gimme de calabash an' tek de fife.' And so the man gave Sharlo the calabash and kept the fife.  
He then led Sharlo back up the hole. The rain was over. 'Mind you, Sharlo!' said the man as the shook hands y, 'keep our bargain a secret—otherwise it will be hell with me and you.' Sharlo promised to keep the bargain a secret, and they parted.  
As he walked home Sharlo wondered who the strange man was. But he soon dropped the matter from his mind as he thought of the magic calabash, he had got all for himself. And to test it again he said:  
'Calabash, calabash, food time come;  
Bring, bring ackee an 'give me some '  
And he ate the ackee all the way home.

From then onwards the calabash provided Sharlo with all the food he fancied. But from that same time, he stopped cultivating his mountain lands or doing any other work. He did not get another fife, for he did not love music anymore. All he now lived for was to eat.  
So as the weeks passed, he waxed fatter and fatter, and he became bigger than anyone else in Glentis village. His face was round like the dumplings he ate every day, and it became so fat that he could barely

open his eyes. His body took on a barrel-like bulge, and his belly sagged over his belt like that of a pig hanging down. Six months went by, and life for Sharlo went on like this--- no work, no music, and food in abundance whenever he wanted.

Then hard times struck the island. There came a long drought and life became hard for the people of Glentis village. Many of them starved, and sometimes their only food was sugarcane. But Sharlo's magic calabash continued to give him all he wanted. He ate more than ever, sometimes feasting like a king.

Then suddenly his dream of endless feasting ended. It happened this way. The drought had been on for three months and the villagers began to wonder where Sharlo was getting food from. For he did not go to the shops to buy anything. And his neighbours did not see him cook anything. So, when he walked down the road people sometimes asked; 'But Sharlo, how you doin so well an 'we ketchin so much hell?'

This always made him laugh. And as he laughed his eyes would close, and his many chins would tremble, and his belly would shake like that of a pig when it runs. But all he would say was; 'Shutmout' no ketch fly.

' So, the source of his food supply remained a mystery, even to his best friends. An old friend of his named Zakky was constantly trying to find out, but Sharlo would not tell. All he would say was; 'Shutmout' no ketch fly.'

But as the drought wore on, Zakky became desperate, for he had a wife and ten children to feed. One evening he went to see Sharlo. Sharlo was finishing a calabash of calaloo. He swallowed the last mouthful, rumbled a belch, licked his fingers, stretched his legs across the floor, and peered out of his fat, fleshy eyes at Zakky.

'Ay Sharlo,' Zakky called out, 'villa do?'

'Ah bwoy,' Sharlo replied, 'me day—jus' a-mek out.'

'Man you nah mekkin out ,' Zakky declared, 'you fat like mud.'

Sharlo rumbled another belch and laughed as he clasped his fat

hands across his barrel of a stomach, Zakky gazed hard at the calabash for a while and then said: 'But Sharlo, man you wort 'less.'

'Wha' me do?' asked Sharlo.

'Man, you wort 'less, Zakky repeated. 'You know me an' me wife an' ten pickny an' dem-a dead fo' hungry an'you never one time say, "Here Zakky, tek dis food fo' all-you nyam!"

'Me food too poor fo' you,' said Sharlo

'Too poor!' cried Zakky, 'an' de calaloo you jus' done nyam smell so nice? Man, me could nyam de calabash full o' calaloo clean right now!' Sharlo gazed at Zakky's thin body and bony face and hollow eyes and felt sorry for him. 'All right, Zakky,' he said, 'ah given' you some food, but you mustin' tell anybody 'bout it,' He then recited the magic rhyme:

'Calabash, calabash, food time come;

'Bring, bring, calaloo an' gee me some.'

Immediately the calabash became filled to the brim with hot calaloo. Zakky was amazed. He stared at the calabash with bulging eyes. At last, he said, ' Well, well, well! So, dis is how you getting' food --- by obeah!'

'Is not obeah,' Sharlo replied.

'Is by obeah!' Zakky repeated ' So you become a big obeah man, eh Sharlo?'

'Is not obeah,' Sharlo repeated in defense. 'Zakky, ah tell you is not obeah.' Sharlo was afraid that Zakky would spread the word around, because it was an awful thing in Glentis village to be called an obeah man.

'Well if is not obeah,' said Zakky, ' wha it is eh? Tell me, Sharlo, how else you get dis calabash full o' calaloo but by obeah?'

'All right, Zakky,' replied Sharlo ah will tell you, but you mus' keep it a secret. Go ahead eat de calaloo, is good food; ah goin' tell you de story,'

Zakky began to eat the calaloo, and as he ate, Sharlo told him the whole story. When he mentioned the tall, red man, Zakky laughed.

After a while he laughed so much that he had to stop eating. By the time Sharlo had finished his story, Zakky was rocking with uncontrollable laughter, holding his sides as if they were bursting.

`Wha mek you so laugh so?' asked Sharlo.

`Is de bargain you mek wid de devil,' Zakky replied.

`De devil!' cried Sharlo, in surprise.

Zakky explained that the tall, red man who appeared suddenly from nowhere, and who lived in that hot place down below, And who had provided such a magic calabash, could have been no one else but the devil. it was only then that it slowly dawned on Sharlo that the man he had made the bargain with was indeed the devil.

Sharlo had always heard that it was not wise to deal with the devil, and he began to imagine what the devil had meant when he said it would be hell if the bargain was not kept a secret. He became fearful, and shuddered. He begged Zakky again and again not to tell anyone about the bargain.

Zakky promised to keep the secret. And to encourage him, Sharlo repeated the magic rhyme several times and filled a bucket of food for him to take home and told him to return any time for more.

The next morning Zakky and his wife and their ten children went to Sharlo's home with the empty bucket for more food. They met the house open, with the front door broken off.

`Sharlo!' Zakky called.

No answer came.

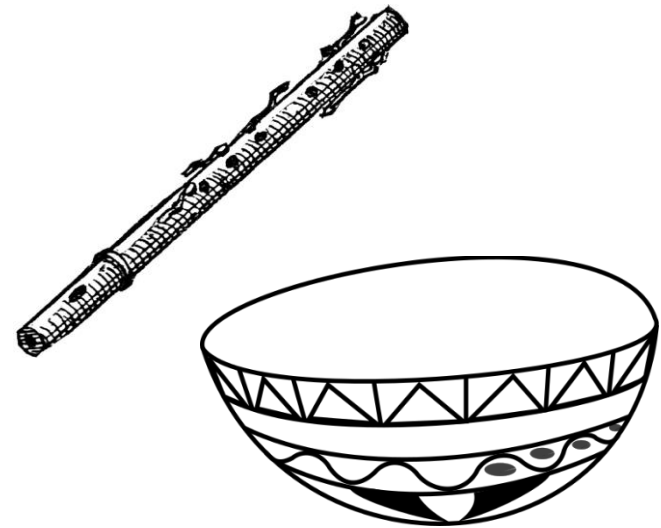
Zakky and his wife and their ten children went inside.

`Sharlo!' Zakky called again, 'a whey you? A whey de calabash?'

No answer came.

They searched all over the house, and outside in the yard, and everywhere in Glentis village, but neither Sharlo nor the calabash was anywhere to be seen.

The villagers searched for him for a long time, even in his mountain lands. But Sharlo was never seen again.



## THE TOAD

**MELANIE BUSH**

The day I finished Kafka's Metamorphosis father disappeared and a toad appeared in the cellar. At first, the connection between Kafka's story and Father's disappearance did not occur to me. How could Father turn into a toad? Yet as the days went by and there was still no sign of Father I began to wonder. Was the slimy toad which sat faintly pulsating in the cellar under the worktable my father? Impossible! And yet ...

I spent most of the evening watching the toad, trying to find some resemblance between Dad and this creature. It was proving hard. The fat toad did nothing but sit there, staring at me with its glassy, eyelid-twitching eyes. It occasionally made an odd sort of belching noise. Surely this could not be Dad. The toad was an ugly brown colour with huge eyes which stuck out of its head. Every so often, when some unwary spider scuttled by, the toad's tongue would flick out. Seconds later the spider was nothing but a tasty morsel. The toad was deadly accurate. It never missed. I think it was this accuracy which convinced me of the toad's identity. It reminded me that my father was the best bowler in the Brayington cricket club first team. I realised that, although his outward appearance had changed considerably, this damp creature was my father.

Now I knew that the toad was Father my opinion of it altered. It was no longer 'the toad' but became 'my toad. It was not quite so fat and ugly. Father could not possibly be allowed to live in the dark, dank cellar. I went upstairs and into the kitchen.

"Mum?" I asked.

'Yes?'

'Well, er, well. You may not believe this but there's a toad in the cellar.'

'That's not unusual,' she interrupted.

'But this one is Dad!'

She threw back her head and laughed. Put that way, I suppose it did sound a bit stupid.

'It's true,' I said.

She continued to laugh. I was about to lose my temper. 'I don't see how you can laugh when your husband is sitting in that cellar gulping down spiders,' I hissed at her.

She only laughed.

'Don't you care?' I screamed at her.

She was angry now.

'Don't you speak to me like that either,' she shouted back.

'And don't you shout at me!'

She started to laugh again. She refused to take me seriously.

'I have just read Kafka's Metamorphosis in which a man woke up and found he was a beetle. My father has just disappeared, and a large toad has turned up in the cellar. I have put two and two together . . .'

'And got five,' interrupted my brother who entered the room at that moment. 'What's the matter with her?' He jerked his thumb at Mum.

'She finds something very amusing,' said I sarcastically.

'She says your father has changed into a toad,' Mum burst out.

This set my brother off as well. I watched them both and thought how stupid they were. I walked out of the room. I returned to the cellar. The toad was still sitting under the worktable. I fetched a cardboard box from my bedroom. There was still one problem. Even though the toad was my father I still could not bring myself to touch it. In the end, I had to resort to the coal shovel. I took the box upstairs and placed it in front of the coal fire in the sitting room. The toad remained in the box for several minutes. It then struggled out, using all the strength it possessed. With a disturbing hop it was seated on the best armchair. This toad, without a doubt, was Father. I left the room.

'Sarah?' came a small voice from the top of the stairs.

'Yes?' It was my younger brother, John.

'When is Daddy coming home?'

'He is home except . . . well, he's changed quite a lot,' I answered.

John just looked at me.

'Where is he?' he asked innocently.

'In the sitting room.

I was speaking to the wall. John had gone. I only wished that I could have explained first. I followed him into the sitting room. The small figure stood in the middle of the room gazing around.

'He's not there. You lied,' came a reproachful murmur. I did not know quite what to say.

'And what's that nasty old toad doing on Dad's chair?' In the corner stood a wing-back armchair upholstered in red velvet. In the center of the plump cushion sat the toad. The ugly toad was staring at us. He was ugly! I could not be persuaded to think otherwise.

'That toad is Dad,' I replied.

My brother looked at me and then laughed in delight. He loved to be teased.

'You're teasing,' he said.

'No, that's the truth.'

He walked over to the toad and began to talk to it, addressing it as 'Dad'.

'No, really and truly. Where's Dad?' he persisted.

'Dad has changed to be a toad.'

'Like a princess?'

'No, not like a princess.'

'How do you know?'

'He was right. How did I know? It had seemed obvious before, but now I was not so sure.'

'I read a book where a man turned into a beetle.'

'Oh! Then it must be Dad.'

The little figure crouched by the velvet chair and said:

'Today we made pictures of Father Christmas and mine was the best.'

No answer.

"We wrote stories and mine is to be put upon the wall.'

'Are you listening, Daddy?'

The road belched.

'How I wish I could speak toad language,' the boy declared dolefully. It's going to be hard to have our little talks now.'

I left them to it.

Our house is the type with inch-thick walls separating each room. As you enter the house by the front door there is a sitting room on your right and a little further on is the kitchen. From the kitchen came the laughter of my Mum and brother. They could not understand. Then I could hear Mum talking. She seemed concerned. Her voice was low so I could only catch some of the words. She was talking about my father. I did not want to listen. My father was a toad and that was that.

'Does Mum know about Dad?' came my little brother's voice.

"Yeah, but she doesn't believe me.'

'She doesn't?' His face expressed amazement, 'I'm going to tell her.'

'Go on, then. She'll just laugh.'

He ran through to the kitchen. I could hear his plaintive voice explaining the situation to Mum. She was not laughing.

Who told you that?' she asked.

'Sarah.' 'Do you believe her?'

"Yes. She read a book.'

'Sarah, Sarah. Come here immediately,' Mum shouted. I went to the kitchen.

Yes.' What rubbish have you been telling your brother?'

"The same as I told you,' I answered.

Nobody spoke. Mum was shaking and then she was crying. At first, she tried to hide the tears but soon she was sobbing uncontrollably. She stood up and left the room. She paused at the door. She looked rundown.

'And you, stop making up stories about your father. It's bad enough without you...'

She was unable to finish. She broke down in tears. She took one look at the room before running upstairs. The three of us just stared at each other.

What's the matter with her?'

'I don't know,' replied my elder brother. I thought he did know. He looked apprehensive. His hands shook slightly.

'What's for dinner?' said my younger brother. He was not old enough to realise that Mum was in a state,

'I dunno.

He accepted that.

"Sarah, you'd better shut up about Father, you know.

Mum is pretty cut up about it,' said my elder brother.

'What, about her husband being a toad?'

Look, Dad has gone, and I reckon she thinks he has gone for good. She wanted to put off telling you. It doesn't help: you making up stories.'

'I'm not making up stories.'

'It's all true,' chipped in John.

'Look, just stop it. It's only upsetting her.'

"The story, as you call it, about Dad being the toad is true, I asserted. My brother opened his mouth to speak.

'It's not a story, it's not made up,' I screamed at him.

'Sorry I spoke,' he replied.

From then on there was a definite split in the family. John and I seemed to be the optimists and my elder brother and mother were the renlists. It made life difficult. At about eight o'clock Mum reappeared and set about preparing tea. She made a lot of noise in the process. She refused to say a word and simply gave us filthy looks. Her face was blotchy from crying, John and I went through to the sitting room and played Monopoly. It was a good game. The toad looked on.

Your tea is ready,' said Mum, poking her head round the door.

We trooped through to the kitchen. Mum slammed a plate of

spaghetti in front of each of us. She sat down and stared at her plate.

My younger brother slurped away at his spaghetti. My older brother did not eat in his normal, hearty manner. I ate but felt self-conscious.

Every scrape or clatter of cutlery on plate seemed to cut through me.

'Mum, I'm sorry if I upset you, but it is true.'

'I am not interested,' she answered with a forced smile.

'You should read the book.'

Be quiet.'

She began to pick at her food. "

The toad ...

'Shut up about the toad,' she shouted at me.

O.K. I will.'

I picked up my plate and left the room. John followed me out, slamming the door behind him. In silence, we finished our meal in the sitting room.

"And don't forget to bring your plates back after you,' she screamed.

We did not answer her. The toad still sat in the pride of place. My elder brother opened the door.

'Sarah?'

'What?'

The book, can I borrow it?'

'Sure.'

One thing that had not occurred to me in bringing the toad upstairs from the cellar was what to feed it on. Flies were the obvious answer.

There were a couple buzzing around the bay window. The newspaper was at hand and after several attempts I managed to kill both of them.

Toad demolished them in seconds. Maybe we should have left it in the cellar. Yes! I could put him back. But he was my father. It was an impossible situation. I either had to look after and feed a large toad

which was not an easy task, or I would have to turn my father out of the house. I had to look after the toad, even though it would upset

my mother.

We sat and watched TV for a while. My elder brother was sprawled last night?

across the couch reading *Metamorphosis*. John was constructing a Lego model.

'Sarah, I think you've got it,' my elder brother exclaimed.

'Got what?' I replied suspiciously, "That toad. It could be Dad.'

'Oh, then it's not such a stupid idea now, is it? Now you agree it must be a toad,' I replied.

He looked surprised.

'Sorry, there's not need to be sarcastic,' we said.

I just shrugged my shoulders. He was only baiting me. I snuggled into the chair and tried to sulk. He did not say anything. He continued reading; I continued to sulk.

'Sarah, I believe you. I'm not just being sarky,' he said. 'Honestly?'

He just nodded. At that moment a comedy duo came onto the screen. It really was funny and set us all laughing. My brother continued to read the book. He seemed to find it interesting.

"It's time for bed,' called Mum.

We all trooped upstairs to bed. I now realised that instead of a two/two split it was now a three to one split. We were succeeding, but it was upsetting Mum. I lay awake for hours worrying about our toad.

The following day was Saturday. We got up at the normal time, but Mum lay in bed most of the morning. The toad was still seated in the chair. It seemed dopey and its skin was rather dry. I placed some bread and milk before it, but it hardly ate any. However, then my elder brother brought a dish of dead flies. The toad gobbled them up eagerly.

'Hello. Is this the famous toad?' said Mum in a pleasant voice. Normally I would have asked her why she had got up late, implying that she was lazy, but today I could not bring myself to do it. I frowned. Why had she suddenly changed? I knew her moods well. She usually took time to get over them. Could my toad, the one she called famous, be the same toad that she was having a fit about only

What are you frowning for, Sarah?'

"Nothing, Mum.'

'I've been reading that book of yours. Maybe I misjudged you. Your idea about Dad is good.

' You really think so?'

"Yes,' she said, 'And I suppose he is hungry.'

"You bet he is.'

She walked over and patted the toad on the head.

'He has changed a lot.' The three of us could not believe our eyes.

It was amazing. She went through to the kitchen to prepare some toad food. The toad seemed contented. It began to move about. It hopped off the chair and made its way across the carpet which was the same muddy colour as itself. Mum entered.

Mum! I screamed.

It was too late. Mum had trodden it into the carpet. My younger brother began to whimper. Mum's face filled with horror and grief. Then the doorbell rang, and we heard someone entering by the front door. The day Mum trod on the toad was the day Dad returned home.





## JOE'S CAT

**GENE KEMP**

The cow parsley stood higher than his head as Joe Sprague whistled his way along the lane that led home. He carried a large bag with his cricket gear in it and he whistled because he'd just made sixty-nine runs for his team, the highest score in the last match of the year. Joe loved cricket. His dad played in the village cricket team, and Joe scored for them, and he would play for the team when he grew up. Only one - thing he liked better than cricket and that was football, and soon the season would be starting and Joe in his second year at the County Comprehensive would have a good chance of playing for the second team. The school had a fine Games record, and the first team was the County Champions, but Joe felt fairly sure of a place because he knew he was good. But before then, the summer holidays were nearly here, long days of helping Dad on the farm and camping with his mates in the last week of August. And so, Joe whistled even louder as he made his way along the lane to the thatched cottage where he lived, a cottage so beautiful he did not even notice that it was.

He noticed the kitten, though.

It lay in the tufty, seeding grass that grew down the middle of the lane, where too few cars ever travelled to keep the grass down. The kitten lay so still that when Joe bent down and touched it, he thought it was dead. But the thin chest moved up and down like a whisper. Joe stroked the little body very gently and the kitten stirred and rasped his hand feebly with a rough tongue. He picked it up, cradled it in one arm - it weighed as much as a leaf-picked up his bag, and went on his way. He was ravenously hungry by now and had no doubt that his mother would feed the animal, as she did everything and everybody finding their way to the door.

The ham and eggs and chips and fruit pie and cream were delicious, in fact, all his meals were so good that he took them for granted. He

gave the kitten some milk and it slept in a corner. The other animals took no notice of it, there were so many in Joe's house that they didn't get jealous of one another but lived together with a fair amount of toleration. There was nothing wrong with the kitten, only it was very weak as if it might have been shut away in the dark for a while with no food. No one objected to its being around. Sometimes children at school would say that they weren't allowed to have a cat or a dog or a hamster or whatever it was they fancied. Joe did not even try to understand this. A world without animals he could not imagine, it would be like a world without seasons or football and cricket.

The kitten grew fatter and stronger, and very playful. It especially liked the rabbit's foot tied to a piece of string that Joe would trail along the floor for it to pounce on, pretending it was a rai. And as it grew stronger, it grew bolder, disappearing for large parts of the day into the farmyard, but always returning for its food. It was a tom kitten, and Joe called it Boots, on account of its wide furry legs. None of the other animals bothered it much. School broke up, the holidays began and Joe at last went camping.

It was a wonderful holiday, marvelous weather, everything was perfect. Only, the day Joe came home his father was killed by a tractor overturning on him at Wither's Edge, a steep field with a wooded stream in it where Joe and his mother used to picnic when he was a little boy.

There were two Joes, he sometimes thought, the Joc that had been, and now, this one who stood outside himself and watched and helped, as his mother, doing everything as carefully as ever, packed the furniture and all their things, and arranged for their successors at the cottage to have the animals, as there were none allowed in the city flat, where they were going to live to be near his mother's work. Apparently, the cottage did not belong to them but had only been rented while their father had the job that went with it, and They did not have enough money to buy a house, and there were no jobs for

his mother in the country. She had worked in a clothing factory before she married Joe's father, and at this, she could earn enough to keep them now. She had loved the farm, running the garden and the dairy, but those days were gone.

She did not cry: Neither did Joe, and it would have been better if they had. But they were quiet people, Joe and his mother.

And it was even quieter in the flat alone all day, knowing no one, his mother out at work. Joe had never been lonely before and had not known what loneliness was. But now he knew. His mother came home almost too tired to talk. They ate their meal silently and went to bed.

So, he was glad when school started.

Only, it was terrible.

Joe had not realized he was so slow. He'd gone at five, to the village school, where he managed his reading and math, and then to the County Comprehensive, where his skill at games had made him well liked and by hard work he had kept up, but here, here it was different. In a vast, dirty - building surrounded by asphalt and railings, called the annexe - you went to a huge, new complex in the third and fourth year - Joe was hopelessly lost. The plan and timetable of the school were so complicated that Joe never had any idea where he was supposed to be and why. No one explained anything, and he was too shy to ask. Somehow, he just got brushed aside and submerged in enormous queues, it seemed they queued for everything. Meals, for instance; there was a choice of menu, but that choice had always gone by the time Joe arrived at the front. He couldn't quite keep up, with his work, with anything, he was always not quite ready, not quite there, he couldn't get to sleep at night and when he did, the nightmares were horrifying. He grew tall and thin instead of short and stocky. His summer tan faded.

Football. He pinned his hopes on football. He had to make a breakthrough with that, for it would bring fun, and with it, friendship.

The first practice was with a master with eyes and a tongue as sharp

as needles. Joe didn't especially shine but he didn't make a fool of himself either. He made some useful passes, scored a goal, and found his name up on the board for another practice the next day.

And he messed up the entire game. He had never played so badly in the whole of his life. Late that night, unable to sleep for thinking of it, he got up, at last, to get a drink, and as he moved about in the cramped flat, he remembered how sometimes in summer he would get up and wander about, and smell the honeysuckle and the roses, instead of the diesel fumes from the lorries roaring past, and the animals would stir and greet him lazily, rubbing round his legs.

He heard a noise. It was his mother crying for the first time. He went into her room, sat on the bed, put his arms around her and they cried together.

It was late when he awoke, for he had forgotten his alarm, and his mother had already gone to work. In the tiny kitchen with just a sink and a kitchen cabinet, so different from the kitchen at the cottage, he helped himself to cornflakes, carried them back to the living room, and bent to light the gas fire. There in front of it, fast asleep, was Boots.

Boots woke up, wrapped himself around Joe's legs, and purred with a full-blooded roar. In fact, he had grown into a pretty full-blooded cat by now, heavy and powerful, with big, furry legs. He stretched his long length up to the table, cheekily stuck his paw into the bowl of cornflakes and scooped some out. Joe didn't mind, for he had little appetite these days, so he put them on the floor, where they rapidly disappeared into Boots's tum. Then he leapt onto Joe's lap and listened attentively while Joe talked about everything, how lonely he was, how he missed his dad, how he hated seeing his mum so miserable, how he was useless at school, -how he couldn't play football anymore, and how he hated the city. Boots twitched an ear and licked Joe's hand with his harsh tongue. It was fairly obvious that Joe was not going to get to school that day, so after a while, Joe got dressed, raided the reserve tin money, and travelled back to his old

home on the bus, accompanied by the cat.

'I'd like to keep you,' he said to it. But there's just no way.'

It felt strange walking up the lane with the grass growing down the middle, unreal somehow, perhaps because he'd grown so much that everything looked smaller. A youngish woman answered the door.

"What do you want?"

'I used to live here. I - I brought back the cat.'

What cat?'

Boots had run off as soon as Joe put him down, off to investigate the farmyard, as usual.

The woman looked harassed. A few spots of rain fell.

'Come in for a minute, if you like.' The house looked sharp and ugly to Joc. It wasn't the same place. He asked about the animals, for there were none in the kitchen.

"They're outside. I don't like them indoors. I couldn't keep track of them all.

Upstairs a baby started to cry.

'I'll have to go, I'm sorry,' she said. 'Can I get you a cup of tea or something?'

The baby wailed even louder.

'No, thanks. I'd better go.'

A flurry of wind followed him down the lane. He looked back once or twice but could see no sign of the cat, ungrateful animal, he thought. Nearly back at home he passed a florist's and, feeling daft but determined, he bought a bunch of flowers for his mother. Once in the flat, he put them in water and began to prepare a meal.

Boots was asleep in front of the gas fire.

This time, Joe made no attempt to guess how the cat had got in. He was just there, that was all, and he wasn't taking him back again at this time of day, no thanks.

'My, that smells good,' said his mother, coming in, 'and those flowers, where did they come from? They're lovely.'

'Look who's here ...' he began, but the doorbell rang; their landlady,

who seemed to have taken to them.

'Now, I can't stop...' she was a woman who hurried all the time . . . 'downstairs tenant ... leaving ... flat vacant ... from next week ... garden ... you'd like that ... only a pound a week extra ... paper round for the lad ... know somebody ... I'll fix it ...'

And she was gone. Later, his mother said:

'I'll rent a TV set and make some new curtains. And if we have a garden I can plant some bulbs for the spring, and maybe we'll have an animal again, a cat perhaps?'

Boots purred with great vibration from his seat on Joe's knee.

'We can keep him then?' he asked, but his mother was reading the paper and didn't answer.

But the next day, Joe had the old sick feeling again. School. School. Failure. Misery.

The first lesson was Language, which Joe used to call English in his old school. It might have a different name but what they had to do seemed familiar, write a description of a scene you know well. Joe had never been able to write descriptions, except for one he'd done of a tractor years ago, and he didn't exactly fancy that now. His hands turned to feet somehow when it came to writing, and those feet had none of the wizardry that they could sometimes-though not lately - show on the field.

But as he sat there something wrapped round his legs under the table. He shot down a hand, a furry face rubbed against it and a harsh tongue licked it. Good Lord, Boots was here. That cat had a genius for getting into places. Well, they'd better both keep quiet, or there would be trouble. He looked round furtively. No one appeared to have noticed anything. The best thing was to start writing and pray that Boots sat quietly till mid-morning. Joe picked up his pen, and the sights and smells and sounds of the farmyard came to him so vividly that the words flowed out of his head and poured down the page. He had never in his life written like that. The buzzer, usually so long and anxiously awaited, rang before he'd finished.

'Can I go on with it later?' he asked the teacher. He noticed in surprise that she had a kind and pleasant face.

'Miss Downes,' she prompted, smiling. 'Of course, you can. And oh, Joe, do come and see me if you are worried about anything.'

He'd got outside before he remembered Boots, but when he returned to the classroom there was no sign of the cat anywhere. A West Indian girl stood by the door, very pretty, and laughing. She terrified him, he was always shy of girls, and the girls in this class seemed so sharp and clever and shiny, somehow. Then she stopped laughing and smiled at him, instead.

'Come with us, and we'll show you around. Reckon you might need a bit of looking after.'

Suddenly he was surrounded by three of them and scared out of his wits, but then a boy appeared out of nowhere, a boy he'd noticed before and liked, a boy who was very nippy with a football.

Together they all made their way into the playground.

Joe found his name on the practice list again. And this time he was determined to do well. He had friends now, lots of them, but especially Mark, the footballer, and Davina the girl who had spoken to him first. He felt happy and confident as he ran onto the pitch.

Yet some of his old skill had left him, try as he might, and after ten minutes or so, a wave of such misery swept over him that he felt like running off the pitch and leaving everything. And out of the blue, through the tears that blurred his sight, a furry figure appeared, standing on bulky back legs, and, trapping the ball in them, he sent it directly to Joe, who scored a superb goal. The next day his name went up among the team.

He walked home with Mark and Davina. When he got in Boots was asleep in front of the fire. He woke, stretched right up to the table on his big back legs, licked Joe's face with a sandpaper tongue, and vanished. Joe searched and called he was nowhere to be found.

When he asked his mother about him, she said she'd never seen the cat, either at the farm or the flat.

Joe never saw him again.

Only, sometimes, when things grew difficult or he was unhappy, it would seem that he would feel the fleeting rasp of a sandpaper tongue on his hand and the flourish of a bushy tail around his legs.



## LENNY'S RED-LETTER DAY

**BERNARD ASHLEY**

Lenny Fraser is a boy in my class. Well, he's the boy in my class when he comes. But to tell the truth, he doesn't come very often. He stays away from school for a week at a time, and I'll tell you where he is. He's at the shops, stealing things sometimes, but mainly just opening the doors for people. He does it to keep himself warm. I've seen him in our shop. When he opens the door for someone, he stands around inside till he gets sent out. Of course, it's quite warm enough in school, but he hates coming. He's always got long tangled hair, not very clean, and his clothes are too big or too small, and they call him 'Flea-bag'. He sits at a desk without a partner, and no one wants to hold his hand in games. All right, they're not to blame; but he isn't, either. His mother never gets up in the morning, and his house is dirty. It's a house that everybody runs past very quickly.

Bui Lenny makes me laugh a lot. In the playground, he's always saying funny things out of the corner of his mouth. He doesn't smile when he does it. He says these funny things as if he's complaining. For example, when Mr. Cox the deputy head came to school in his new car, Lenny came too, that day; but he didn't join in all the admiration. He looked at the little car and said to me, 'Anyone missing a skateboard?'

He misses all the really good things, though - the school Journeys and the outing. And it was a big shame about his birthday.

It happens like this with birthdays in our class. Miss Blake lets everyone bring their cards and perhaps a small present to show the others. Then everyone sings 'Happy Birthday' and we give them bumps in the playground. If people can't bring a present, they tell everyone what they've got instead. I happen to know some people make up the things that they've got just to be up with the others, but Miss Blake says it's good to share our Red-Letter Days.

I didn't know about these Red-Letter Days before. I thought they

were something special in the post, like my dad handles in his Post Office in the shop. But Miss Blake told us they are red printed words in the prayer books, meaning special days.

Well, what I'm telling you is that Lenny came to school on his birthday this year. Of course, he didn't tell us it was his birthday, and, as it all worked out, it would have been better if Miss Blake hadn't noticed it in the register. But 'How nice!' she said. 'Lenny's here on his birthday, and we can share it with him.'

It wasn't very nice for Lenny. He didn't have any cards to show the class, and he couldn't think of a birthday present to tell us about. He couldn't even think of anything funny to say out of the corner of his mouth. He just had to stand there looking foolish until Miss Blake started singing 'Happy Birthday'- and then half the people didn't bother to sing it. I felt very sorry for him, I can tell you. But that wasn't the worst. The worst happened in the playground. I went to take his head end for bumps, and no one would come and take his feet. They all walked away. I had to finish up just patting him on the head with my hands, and before I knew what was coming out I was telling him, 'You can come home to tea with me, for your birthday.' And he said, yes, he would come.

My father works very hard in the Post Office, in a corner of our shop; and my mother stands at the door all day, where people pay for their groceries. When I get home from school, I carry cardboard boxes out to the yard and jump on them, or my big sister Nalini shows me which shelves to fill, and I fill them with jam or chapatis - or birthday cards. On this day, though, I thought I'd use my key and go in through the side door and take Lenny straight upstairs - then hurry down again and tell my mum and dad that I'd got a friend in for an hour. I thought I could get a birthday card and some cake and ice-cream from the shop, and Lenny could go home before they came upstairs. I wanted him to do that before my dad saw who it was because he knows Lenny from his hanging around the shops.

Lenny said some funny things on the way home from school, but you

know, I couldn't relax and enjoy them properly. I felt ashamed because I was wishing all the time that I hadn't asked him to come home with me. The bottoms of his trousers dragged along the ground, he had no buttons on his shirt so the sleeves flapped, and his hair must have made it hard for him to see where he was going. I was in luck because the shop was very busy. My dad had a queue of people to pay out, and my mum had a crowd at the till. I left Lenny in the living room and I went down to get what I wanted from the shop. I found him a birthday card with a badge in it. When I came back, he was sitting in a chair and the television was switched on. He's a good one at helping himself, I thought. We watched some cartoons and then we played Monopoly', which Lenny had seen on the shelf. We had some crisps and cakes and lemonade while we were playing, but I had only one eye on my Monopoly' moves - The other eye was on the clock all the time. I was getting very impatient for the game to finish because it looked as if Lenny would still be there when they came up from the shop. I did some really bad moves so that I could lose quickly, but it's very difficult to hurry up 'Monopoly', as you may know.

In the end, I did such stupid things - like buying too many houses and selling Park Lane and Mayfair - that he won the game. He must have noticed what I was doing, but he didn't say anything to me. Hurriedly, I gave him his birthday card. He pretended not to take very much notice of it, but he put it in his shirt and kept feeling it to make sure it was still there.

At least, that's what I thought he was making sure about there inside his shirt.

It was just the right time to say goodbye, and I'm just thinking he can go without anyone seeing him, when my sister came in. She had run up from the shop for something or other, and she put her head inside the room. At some other time, I would have laughed out loud at her stupid face. When she saw Lenny, she looked as if she'd opened the door and seen something really unpleasant. I could gladly have given

her a good kick. She shut the door a lot quicker than she opened it, and I felt really bad about it.

'Nice to meet you,' Lenny joked, but his face said he wanted to go, 100, and I wasn't going to be the one to stop him.

I let him out, and I heaved a big sigh. I felt good about being kind to him, the way you do when you've done a sponsored swim, and I'd done it without my mum and dad frowning at me about who I brought home. Only Nalini had seen him, and everyone knew she can make things seem worse than they are. I washed the glasses, and I can remember singing while I stood at the sink. I was feeling very pleased with myself.

My good feeling lasted about fifteen minutes; just long enough to be wearing off slightly. Then Nalini came in again and destroyed it altogether.

'Prakash, have you seen that envelope that was on the television top?' she asked. 'I put it on here when I came in from school,'

No,' I said. It was very soon to be getting worried, but things inside me were turning over like clothes in a washing machine. I knew already where all this was going to end up.

"What was in it?' My voice sounded to me as if it was coming from a great distance.

She was looking everywhere in the room, but she kept coming back to the television top as if the envelope would mysteriously appear there. She stood there now, staring at me. 'What was in it? What was in it was only a Postal Order for five pounds! Money for my school trip!'

What does it look like?' I asked, but I think we both knew who I was only stalling. We both knew where it had gone.

'It's a white piece of paper in "Postal Order" on it, in red.'

My washing-machine inside nearly went into a fast spin when I heard that. It was certainly Lenny's Red-Letter Day! ... how could he be so ungrateful, I thought, when I was the only one to be kind to him? I clenched my fist while I pretended to look around. I wanted to punch

him hard on the nose.

Then Nalini said what was in both our minds. 'It's that dirty kid who's got it. I'm going down to tell Dad. I don't know what makes you so stupid.'

Right at that moment I didn't know what made me so stupid, either, as to leave him up there on his own. I should have known. Didn't Miss Banks once say something about leopards never changing their spots?

When the shop closed, there was an awful business in the room. My dad was shouting angrily at me, and my mum couldn't think of anything good to say.

You know where this boy lives,' my dad said. "Tell me now, while I telephone the police. There's only one way of dealing with this sort of thing. If I go up there, I shall only get a mouthful of abuse. As if it isn't bad enough for you to see me losing things out of the shop, you have to bring untrust. worthy people upstairs!'

My mum saw how unhappy I was, and she tried to make things better. 'Can't you cancel the Postal Order?' she asked him.

'Of course not. Even if he hasn't had the time to cash it somewhere else by now, how long do you think the Post Office would let me be Sub-Postmaster if I did that sort of thing?'

I was feeling very bad for all of us, but the thought of the police calling at Lenny's house was making me feel worse.

I'll get it back,' I said. I'll go to his house. It's only along the road from the school. And if I don't get it back, I can get the exact number of where he lives. Then you can telephone the police.' I had never spoken to my dad like that before, I was feeling all shaky inside, and all the world seemed a different place to me that evening. I didn't give anybody a chance to argue with me. I ran straight out of the room and down to the street.

My secret hopes of seeing Lenny before I got to his house didn't come to anything. All too quickly I was there, pushing back his broken gate and walking up the cracked path to his front door. There wasn't.

a door knocker. I flapped the letter-box, and I started to think my dad was right. The police would have been better doing this than me.

I had never seen his mother before, only heard about her from other kids who lived nearby. When she opened the door, I could see she was a small lady with a tight mouth and eyes that said, 'Who are you?' and 'Go away from here!' at the same time.

She opened the door only a little bit, ready to slam it on me. I had to be quick.

'Is Lenny in, please?' I asked her.

She said, 'What's it to you?'

'He's a friend of mine,' I told her. "Can I see him, please?'

She made a face as if she had something nasty in her mouth. 'LENNY!' she shouted. 'COME HERE!'

Lenny came slinking down the passage, like one of those scared animals in a circus. He kept his eyes on her hands, once he'd seen who it was at the door. There weren't any funny remarks coming from him. She jerked her head at me. 'How many times have I told you not to bring kids to the house?' she shouted at him. She made it sound as if she was accusing him of a bad crime.

Lenny had nothing to say. She was hanging over him like a vulture about to fix its talons into a rabbit. It looked so out of place it didn't seem real. Then it came to me that it could be play-acting - the two of them. He had given her the five pounds, and she was putting this on to get rid of me quickly.

But suddenly she slammed the door so hard in my face I could see how the glass in it came to be broken.

'Well, I don't want kids coming to my door!' she shouted at him on the other side. 'Breaking the gate, breaking the windows, wearing out the path. How can I keep this place nice when I'm forever dragging to the door?'

She hit him then, I know she did. There was no playacting about the bang as a foot hit the door, and Lenny yelling out loud as if a desk lid had come down on his head. But I didn't stop to hear anymore. I'd heard enough to turn my stomach sick. Poor Lenny - I'd been worried

about my mum and dad seeing him and look what happened when his mother saw me! She had to be mad, that woman. And Lenny had to live with her! I didn't feel like crying, although my eyes had a hot rawness in them. More than anything, I just wanted to be back at home with my own family, and the door shut tight.

Seeing my dad's car turn the corner was as if my dearest wish had been granted. He was going slowly, searching for me, with Nalini sitting up in front with big eyes. I waved and ran to them. I got in the back, and I drew in my breath to tell them to go straight home. It was worth fifty pounds not to have them knocking at Lenny's house, never mind five.

But they were too busy trying to speak to me.

'Have you been to the house? Did you say anything?'

'Yes, I've been to the house, but –

'Did you accuse him?'

No. I didn't have a chance -'

They both sat back in their seats as if the car would drive itself home.

'Well, we must be grateful for that.'

We found the Postal Order.'

I could hardly believe what my ears were hearing. They had found the Postal Order. Lenny hadn't taken it, after all!

It wasn't in its envelope,' Nalini was saying. 'He must have taken it out of that when he was tempted by it. But we can't accuse him of screwing up an envelope and hiding it in his pocket.'

'No, no, 'I was saying, urging her to get on with things and tell me.

'So where was it?'

'In with the "Monopoly" money. He couldn't put it back on the television, so he must have kept it in his "Monopoly" money and put it back in the box.'

'Oh.'

Mum found it. In all the commotion after you went, she knocked the box off the chair, and when she picked bits up, there was the Postal Order.'

'It's certainly a good job you said nothing about it,' my dad said. And a good job I didn't telephone the police. We should have looked very small.'

All I could think was how small I had just felt, standing as Lenny's slammed the door and hearing what his mother had said to him. And what about him getting beaten for having a friend call at his house?

My dad tried to be cheerful. 'Anyway, who won he asked?'

'Lenny won the "Monopoly",' I said.

In bed that night, I lay awake for a long time, thinking about it all. Lenny had taken some hard punishment from his mother. Some Red-Letter Day it had turned out to be! He would bear some hard thoughts about Prakash Patel.

He didn't come to school for a long time after that. But when he did, my heart sank into my boots. He came straight across the playground, the same flappy sleeves and dragging trouser bottoms, the same long, tangled hair - and he came straight for me. What would he do? Hit me? Spit in my face?

As he got close, I saw what was on his shirt, pinned there like a medal. It was his birthday badge.

'It's a good game, that "Monopoly",' he said out of the corner of his mouth. It was as if he was trying to tell me something.

'Yes,' I said. It's a good game all right.'

I hadn't got the guts to tell him that I'd gone straight home that night and thrown it in the dustbin. Dealings with houses didn't appeal to me anymore.





## THE HITCHHIKER

**ROALD DAHL**

I had a new car. It was an exciting toy, a big BMW 3.3 Li, which means 3.3 litre, long wheelbase, fuel injection. It had a top speed of 129 mph and terrific acceleration. The body was pale blue. The seats inside were darker blue, and they were made of leather, genuine soft leather of the finest quality. The windows were electrically operated and so was the sunroof. The radio aerial popped up when I switched on the radio and disappeared when I switched it off. The powerful engine growled and grunted impatiently at slow speeds, but at sixty miles an hour the growling stopped, and the motor began to purr with pleasure.

I was driving up to London by myself. It was a lovely June day. They were haymaking in the fields and there were buttercups along both sides of the road. I was whispering along at 70 mph, leaning back comfortably in my seat, with no more than a couple of fingers resting lightly on the wheel to keep her steady. Ahead of me, I saw a man thumbing a lift. I touched the brake and brought the car to a stop beside him. I always stopped for hitchhikers. I knew just how it used to feel to be standing on the side of a country road watching the cars go by, I hated the drivers for pretending they didn't see me, especially the ones in big cars with three empty seats. The large expensive cars seldom stopped. It was always the smaller ones that offered you a lift, or the old rusty ones or the ones that were already crammed full of children and the driver would say, "I think we can squeeze in one more."

The hitchhiker poked his head through the open window and said, "Going to London, guv'nor?"

"Yes," I said. "Jump in."

He got in and I drove on.

He was a small ratty-faced man with grey teeth. His eyes were dark and quick and clever, like rat's eyes, and his ears were slightly

pointed at the top. He had a cloth cap on his head, and he was wearing a greyish-coloured jacket with enormous pockets. The grey jacket, together with the quick eyes and the pointed ears, made him look more than anything like some sort of a huge human rat.

"What part of London are you headed for?" I asked him.

"I'm goin' right through London and out the other side" he said. "I'm goin' to Epsom, for the races. It's Derby Day today."

"So it is," I said. "I wish I were going with you. I love betting on horses."

"I never bet on horses," he said. "I don't even watch 'em run. That's a stupid silly business."

"Then why do you go?" I asked.

He didn't seem to like that question. His little ratty face went absolutely blank, and he sat there staring straight ahead at the road, saying nothing.

"I expect you to help to work the betting machines or something like that," I said.

"That's even sillier," he answered. "There's no fun working them lousy machines and selling tickets to mugs. Any fool could do that."

There was a long silence. I decided not to question him any more. I remembered how irritated I used to get in my hitchhiking years when drivers kept asking me questions. Where are you going? Why are you going there? What's your job? Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend? What's her name? How old are you? And so forth and so forth. I used to hate it.

"I'm sorry," I said "It's none of my business what you do. The trouble is I'm a writer, and most writers are terribly nosy."

"You write books?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Writing books is okay," he said. "It's what I call a skilled trade. I'm in a skilled trade too. The folks I despise is them that spend all their lives doin' crummy old routine jobs with no skill in 'em at all. You see what I mean?"

"Yes."

"The secret of life," he said "is to become very very good at somethin' that's very very 'hard to do."

"Like you," I said.

"Exactly. You and me both".

"What makes you think that I'm any good at my job?" I asked.

"There's an awful lot of bad writers around."

"You wouldn't be drivin' about in a car like this if you weren't no good at it," he answered "It must've cost a tidy packet, this little job."

"It wasn't cheap."

"What can she do flat out?" he asked.

"One hundred and twenty-nine miles an hour," I told him.

"I'll bet she won't do it."

"I'll bet she will."

"All car makers is liars," he said. "You can buy any car you like and it'll never do what the makers say it will in the ads."

"This one will."

"Open 'er up then and prove it," he said. "Go on, guv'nor, open 'er right up, and let's see what she'll do."

There is a traffic circle at Chalfont St. Peter and immediately beyond it there's a long straight section of divided highway. We came out of the circle onto the highway, and I pressed my foot hard down on the accelerator. The big car leaped forward as though she'd been stung. In ten seconds or so, we were doing ninety.

"Lovely!" he cried. "Beautiful! Keep goin'!"

I had the accelerator jammed right down against the floor and I held it there.

"One hundred!" he shouted. "A hundred and five!

A hundred and ten! A hundred and fifteen! Go on! Don't slack off!"

I was in the outside lane and we flashed past several cars as though they were standing still -a green Mini, a big cream-coloured Citroen, a white Land Rover, a huge truck with a container on the back, an orange-coloured Volkswagen Minibus. . . .

"A hundred and twenty!" my passenger shouted, jumping up and

down. "Go on! Go on! Get 'er up to one-two-nine!"

At that moment, I heard the scream of a police siren. It was so loud it seemed to be right inside the car, and then a cop on a motorcycle loomed up alongside us on the inside lane went past us, and raised a hand for us to stop.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" I said. "That's torn it!"

The cop must have been doing about a hundred and thirty when he passed us, and he took plenty of time slowing down. Finally, he pulled to the side of the road, and I pulled in behind him. "I didn't know police motorcycles could go as fast as that," I said rather lamely.

"That one can," my passenger said. "It's the same make as yours. It's a BMW R90S. Fastest bike on the road. That's what they're usin' nowadays."

The cop got off his motorcycle and leaned the machine sideways onto its prop stand. Then he took off his gloves and placed them carefully on the seat. He was in no hurry now. He had us where he wanted us, and he knew it.

"This is real trouble," I said. "I don't like it one little bit."

"Don't talk to 'im more than is necessary, you understand," my companion said. "Just sit tight and keep mum."

Like an executioner approaching his victim, the cop came strolling slowly toward us. He was a big meaty man with a belly, and his blue breeches were skin-tight around his enormous thighs. His goggles were pulled up onto the helmet showing a smouldering red face with wide cheeks.

We sat there like guilty schoolboys, waiting for him to arrive.

"Watch out for this man," my passenger whispered, 'Ee looks mean as the devil."

The cop came around to my open window and placed one meaty hand on the sill. "What's the hurry?" he said.

"No hurry, officer," I answered.

"Perhaps there's a woman in the back having a baby and you're rushing her to hospital? Is that it?"

"No, officer."

"Or perhaps your house is on fire and you're dashing home to rescue the family from upstairs?" His voice was dangerously soft and mocking.

"My house isn't on fire, officer."

"In that case," he said, "you've got yourself into a nasty mess, haven't you? Do you know what the speed limit is in this country?"

"Seventy," I said.

"And do you mind telling me exactly what speed you were doing just now?"

I shrugged and didn't say anything.

When he spoke next, he raised his voice so loud that I jumped. "*One hundred and twenty miles per hour!*" he barked. "That's fifty miles an hour over the limit!"

He turned his head and spat out a big gob of spit. It landed on the wing of my car and started sliding down over my beautiful blue paint. Then he turned back again and stared hard at my passenger. "And who are you?" he asked sharply.

"He's a hitchhiker," I said. "I'm giving him a lift."

"I didn't ask you," he said. "I asked him."

"'Ave I done somethin' wrong?" my passenger asked. His voice was soft and oily as haircream.

"That's more than likely," the cop answered. "Anyway, you're a witness. I'll deal with you in a minute. Driver's license," he snapped, holding out his hand.

I gave him my driver's license.

He unbuttoned the left-hand breast pocket of his tunic and brought out the dreaded book of tickets. Carefully, he copied the name and address from my license. Then he gave it back to me. He strolled around to the front of the car and read the number from the license plate and wrote that down as well. He filled in the date, the time and the details of my offence. Then he tore out the top copy of the ticket. But before handing it to me, he checked that all the information had

come through clearly on his own carbon copy. Finally, he replaced the book in his breast pocket and fastened the button.

"Now you," he said to my passenger, and he walked around to the other side of the car. From the other breast pocket, he produced a small black notebook. "Name?" he snapped.

"Michael Fish," my passenger said.

"Address?"

"Fourteen, Windsor Lane, Luton."

"Show me something to prove this is your real name and address," the policeman said.

My passenger fished in his pockets and came out with a driver's license of his own. The policeman checked the name and address and handed it back to him. "What's your job?" he asked sharply.

"I'm an 'od carrier."

"A what?"

"An 'od carrier."

"Spell it."

"H-O-D C-A-"

"That'll do. And what's a hod carrier, may I ask?"

"An 'od carrier, officer, is a person who carries the cement up the ladder to the bricklayer. And the 'od is what 'ee carries it in. It's got a long handle, and on the top you've got bits of wood set at an angle .."

"All right, all right. Who's your employer?"

"Don't 'ave one. I'm unemployed."

The cop wrote all this down in the black notebook. Then he returned the book to its pocket and did up the button.

"When I get back to the station, I'm going to do a little checking up on you," he said to my passenger.

"Me? What've I done wrong?" the rat-faced man asked.

"I don't like your face. that's all," the cop said. "And we just might have a picture of it somewhere in our files." He strolled round the car and returned to my window.

"I suppose you know you're in serious trouble." he said to me.

"Yes, officer."

"You won't be driving this fancy car of yours again for a very long time, not after we've finished with you. You won't be driving any car again, come to that, for several years. And a good thing, too. I hope they lock you up for a spell into the bargain."

"You mean prison?" I asked alarmed.

"Absolutely," he said, smacking his lips. "In the clink. Behind the bars. Along with all the other criminals who break the law. And a hefty fine into the bargain. Nobody will be more pleased about that than me. I'll see you in court, both of you. You'll be getting a summons to appear."

He turned away and walked over to his motorcycle. He flipped the prop stand back into position with his boot and swung his leg over the saddle. Then he kicked the starter and roared off up the road out of sight.

"Phew!". I gasped. "That's done it..."

"We was caught," my passenger said. "We was caught good and proper..."

"I was caught you mean..."

"That's right," he said. "What you goin' to do now, guv'nor?"

"I'm going straight up to London to talk to my solicitor," I said. I started the car and drove on.

"You mustn't believe what 'ee said to you about goin' to prison," my passenger said. "They don't put nobody in the clink just for speedin'."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked.

"I'm positive," he answered. "They can take your license away and they can give you a whoppin' big fine, but that'll be the end of it."

I felt tremendously relieved.

"By the way," I said, "why did you lie to him?"

"Who, me?" he said. "What makes you think I lied?"

"You told him you were an unemployed hod carrier. But you told me you were in a highly skilled trade."

"So I am," he said. "But it don't pay to tell everythin' to a copper."

"So, what do you do?" I asked him.

"Ah," he said slyly. "That'll be tellin', wouldn't it?"

"Is it something you're ashamed of?"

"Ashamed?" he cried. "Me, ashamed of my job? I'm about as proud of it as anybody could be in the entire world!"

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"You writers really is nosy parkers, aren't you?" he said. "And you ain't goin' to be 'appy, I don't think, until you've found out exactly what the answer is?"

"I don't really care one way or the other," I told him, lying.

He gave me a crafty little ratty look out of the sides of his eyes. "I think you do care," he said. "I can see it on your face that you think I'm in some kind of a very peculiar trade and you're just achin' to know what it is.

I didn't like the way he read my thoughts. I kept quiet and stared at the road ahead.

"You'd be right, too," he went on. "I am in a very peculiar trade. I'm in the queerest peculiar trade of 'em all.

I waited for him to go on.

"That's why I 'as to be extra careful oo' I'm talkin' to, you see. 'Ow am I to know, for instance, you're not another copper in plain clothes?"

"Do I look like a copper?"

"No," he said. "you don't. And you ain't. Any fool could tell that."

He took from his pocket a tin of tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers and started to roll a cigarette. I was watching him out of the corner of one eye, and the speed with which he performed this rather difficult operation was incredible. The cigarette was rolled and ready in about five seconds. He ran his tongue along the edge of the paper, stuck it down and popped the cigarette between his lips. Then, as if from nowhere, a lighter appeared in his hand. The lighter flamed. The cigarette was lit. The lighter disappeared. It was altogether a remarkable performance.

"I've never seen anyone roll a cigarette as fast as that," I said.

"Ah," he said, taking a deep suck of smoke. "So, you noticed."

"Of course, I noticed. It was quite fantastic."

He sat back and smiled. It pleased him very much that I had noticed how quickly he could roll a cigarette. "You want to know what makes me able to do it?" he asked.

"Go on then."

"It's because I've got fantastic fingers. These fingers of mine," he said, holding up both hands high in front of him, "are quicker and cleverer than the fingers of the best piano player in the world!"

"Are you a piano player?"

"Don't be daft." he said. "Do I look like a piano player?"

I glanced at his fingers. They were so beautifully shaped, so slim and long and elegant, they didn't seem to belong to the rest of him at all. They looked more like the fingers of a brain surgeon or a watchmaker.

"My job," he went on, "is a hundred times more difficult than playin' the piano. Any twerp can learn to do that.

There's titchy little kids learnin' to play the piano in almost any 'ouse you go into these days. That's right, ain't it?"

"More or less," I said.

"Of course, it's right. But there's not one person in ten million who can learn to do what I do. Not one in ten million! 'Ow about that?"

"Amazing," I said.

"You're damn right it's amazin'," he said.

"I think I know what you do;" I said. "You do conjuring tricks. You're a conjuror."

"Me?" he snorted. "A conjuror? Can you picture me goin' round crummy kids' parties makin' rabbits come out of top 'ats?"

"Then you're a card player. You get people into card games, and you deal yourself marvellous hands."

"Me! A rotten cardsharper!" he cried. "That's a miserable racket if ever there was one."

"All right. I give up."

I was taking the car along slowly now, at no more than forty miles an hour, to make quite sure I wasn't stopped again. We had come onto the main London-Oxford road and were running down the hill toward Denham.

Suddenly, my passenger was holding up a black leather belt in his hand. "Ever seen this before?" he asked. The belt had a brass buckle of unusual design.

"Hey!" I said. "That's mine, isn't it? It is mine! Where did you get it?" He grinned and waved the belt gently from side to side. "Where d'you think I got it?" he said. "Off the top of your trousers, of course."

I reached down and felt for my belt. It was gone.

"You mean you took it off me while we've been driving along?" I asked flabbergasted.

He nodded, watching me all the time with those little black ratty eyes. "That's impossible," I said. "You'd have had to undo the buckle and slide the whole thing out through the loops all the way round. I'd have seen you doing it. And even if I hadn't seen you, I'd have felt it."

"Ah, but you didn't, did you?" he said, triumphant. He dropped the belt on his lap, and now all at once there was a brown shoelace dangling from his fingers. "And what about this, then?" he exclaimed, waving the shoelace.

"What about it?" I said.

"Anyone around 'ere missin' a shoelace?" he asked, grinning.

I glanced down at my shoes. The lace of one of them was missing. "Good grief!" I said. "How did you do that? I never saw you bending down."

"You never saw nothin'," he said proudly. "You never even saw me move an inch. And you know why?"

"Yes," I said. "Because you've got fantastic fingers."

"Exactly right!" he cried. "You catch on pretty quick, don't you?" He sat back and sucked away at his home-made cigarette, blowing the smoke out in a thin stream against the windshield. He knew he had impressed me greatly with those two tricks, and this made him very

happy. "I don't want to be late," he said. "What time is it?"

"There's a clock in front of you," I told him.

"I don't trust car clocks," he said. "What does your watch say?"

I hitched up my sleeve to look at the watch on my wrist. It wasn't there. I looked at the man. He looked back at me, grinning.

"You've taken that, too," I said.

He held out his hand and there was my watch lying in his palm. "Nice bit of stuff, this," he said. "Superior quality. Eighteen-carat gold. Easy to sell, too. It's never any trouble gettin' rid of quality goods."

"I'd like it back, if you don't mind," I said rather huffily.

He placed the watch carefully on the leather tray in front of him. "I wouldn't nick anything from you, guv'nor," he said. "You're my pal. You're givin' me a lift."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"All I'm doin' is answerin' your question," he went on. "You asked me what I did for a livin' and I'm showin' you." "What else have you got of mine?"

He smiled again, and now he started to take from the pocket of his jacket one thing after another that belonged to me, my driver's license, a key ring with four keys on it, some pound notes, a few coins, a letter from my publishers, my diary, a stubby old pencil, a cigarette lighter, and last of all, a beautiful old sapphire ring with pearls around it belonging to my wife. I was taking the ring up to a jeweller in London because one of the pearls was missing.

"Now there's another lovely piece of goods," he said, turning the ring over in his fingers. "That's eighteenth century, if I'm not mistaken, from the reign of King George the Third."

"You're right," I said, impressed. "You're absolutely right."

He put the ring on the leather tray with the other items.

"So, you're a pickpocket," I said.

"I don't like that word," he answered. "It's a coarse, and vulgar word. Pickpockets is coarse and vulgar people who only do easy little amateur jobs. They lift money from blind old ladies."

"Nobody's checkin' up on me," he said.

"What do you call yourself, then?" "Me?"

I'm a fingersmith. I'm a professional fingersmith." He spoke the words solemnly and proudly, as though he were telling me he was the President of the Royal College of Surgeons or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"I've never heard that word before," I said. "Did you invent it?"

"Of course, I didn't invent it," he replied. "It's the name given to them who's risen to the very top of the profession. You've 'eard of a goldsmith and a silversmith, for instance. They're experts with gold and silver. I'm an expert with my fingers, so I'm a fingersmith."

"It must be an interesting job."

"It's a marvellous job," he answered. "It's lovely."

"And that's why you go to the races?"

"Race meetings is easy meat," he said. "You just stand around after the race, watchin' for the lucky ones to queue up and draw their money. And when you see someone collectin' a big bundle of notes, you simply follows after 'im and 'elps yourself. But don't get me wrong, guv'nor. I never takes nothin' from a loser. Nor from poor people neither. I only go after them as can afford it, the winners and the rich."

"That's very thoughtful of you," I said. "How often do you get caught?"

"Caught?" he cried, disgusted. "Me get caught! It's only pickpockets get caught. Fingersmiths never. Listen, I could take the false teeth out of your mouth if I wanted to and you wouldn't even catch me!"

"I don't have false teeth," I said.

"I know you don't," he answered. "Otherwise, I'd 'ave 'ad 'em out long ago!"

I believed him. Those long slim fingers of his seemed able to do anything.

We drove on for a while without talking.

"That policeman's going to check up on you pretty thoroughly," I said.

"Doesn't that worry you a bit?"

"Of course, they are. He's got your name and address written down most carefully in his black book."

The man gave me another of his sly ratty little smiles. "Ah," he said. "So 'ee 'as. But I'll bet 'ee ain't got it all written down in 'is memory as well. I've never known a copper yet with a decent memory. Some of 'em can't even remember their own names."

"What's memory got to do with it?" I asked. "It's written down in his book, isn't it?"

"Yes, gov'nor, it is. But the trouble is, 'ee's lost the book.

'He's lost both books, the one with my name in it and the one with yours."

In the long delicate fingers of his right hand, the man was holding up in triumph the two books he had taken from the policeman's pockets. "Easiest job I ever done," he announced proudly.

I nearly swerved the car into a milk truck, I was so excited.

"That copper's got nothin' on either of us now," he said.

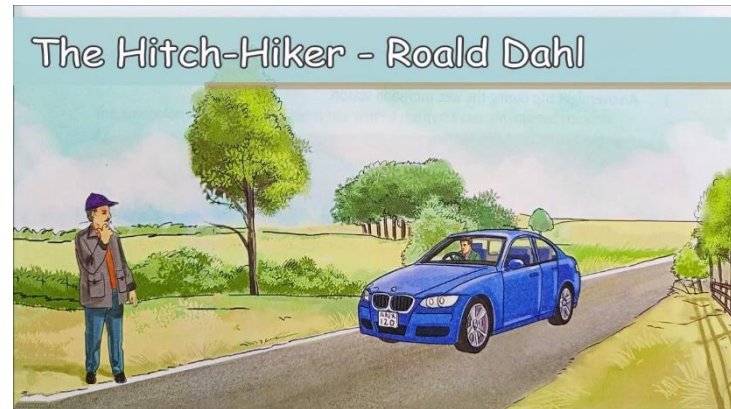
"You're a genius!" I cried.

"'Ee's got no names, no addresses, no car number, no nothin'," he said. "You're brilliant!"

"I think you'd better pull off this main road as soon as possible," he said. "Then we'd better build a little bonfire and burn these books."

"You're a fantastic fellow!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, gov'nor," he said. "It's always nice to be appreciated."



## THE CHOICE IS YOURS

### JAN MARK

The Music Room was on one side of the quadrangle and the Changing Room faced it on the other. They were linked by a corridor that made up the third side, and the fourth was the view across the playing-fields. In the Music Room Miss Helen Francis sat at the piano, head bent over the keyboard as her fingers tittuped from note to note and swaying back and forth like a snake charming itself. At the top of the Changing Room steps Miss Marion Taylor stood, sportively poised with one hand on the doorknob and a whistle dangling on a string from the other; quivering with eagerness to be out on the field and inhaling fresh air. They could see each other. Brenda, standing in the doorway of the Music Room, could see them both.

"Well, come in, child," said Miss Francis. "Don't haver. If you must haver, don't do it in the doorway. Other people are trying to come in."

Brenda moved to one side to make way for the other people, members of the choir who would normally have shoved her out of the way and pushed past. Here they shed their school manners in the corridor and queued in attitudes of excruciated patience. Miss Helen Francis favoured the noiseless approach. Across the quadrangle the Under Thirteen Hockey XI roistered, and Miss Marion Taylor failed to intervene. Miss Francis observed all this with misty disapproval and looked away again.

"Brenda dear, are you coming in, or going out, or putting down roots?"

The rest of the choir was by now seated; first sopranos on the right, second sopranos on the left, thirds across one end and Miss Humphry, who was billed as an alto but sang tenor, at the other. They all sat up straight, as trained by Miss Francis, and looked curiously at Brenda who should have been seated 100, among the first sopranos. Her empty chair was in the front row, with the music. It's a match against the High School, Miss Francis. Miss Taylor called a special practice," said Brenda, hoping that her mention of the High

stacked on it, all ready. Miss Francis cocked her head to one side like a budgerigar that sees a millet spray in the offing.

"Have you a message for us, dear? From above?" She meant the headmistress, but by her tone it could have been God and his angels.

"No, Miss Francis."

"From beyond?"

"Miss Francis, can I ask -?"

You may ask, Brenda. Whether or not you can is beyond my powers of divination."

Brenda saw that the time for havoring was at an end.

"Please, Miss Francis, may I be excused from choir?"

The budgie instantly turned into a marabou stork.

"Excused, Brenda? Do you have pain?"

There's a hockey practice, Miss Francis."

"I am aware of that." Miss Francis cast a look, over her shoulder and across the quadrangle, that should have turned Miss Taylor to stone, and the Under-Thirteen XI with her.

"How does it concern you, Brenda? How does it concern me?"

"I am in the Team, Miss Francis, and there's a match on Saturday," said Brenda.

"But, my dear," Miss Francis smiled at her surpassing sweetness. "I think my mind must be going." She lifted limp fingers from the keyboard and touched them to her forehead, as if to arrest the absconding mind. "Hockey practices are on Tuesdays and Fridays. Choir practices are on Mondays and Thursdays. It was ever thus. Today is Thursday. Everyone else thinks it's Thursday, otherwise they wouldn't be here." She swept out a spare arm that encompassed the waiting choir, and asked helplessly, "It is Thursday, isn't it? You all think it's Thursday? It's not just me having a little brainstorm?"

The choir tittered, *sollo voce*, to assure Miss Francis that it was indeed Thursday, and to express its mass contempt for anyone who was fool enough to get caught in the cross-fire between Miss Francis and Miss Taylor.



School might save her, for if Miss Francis loathed anyone more than she loathed Miss Taylor it was the music mistress at the High School. If the match had been against the High School choir, it might have been a different matter, and Miss Francis might have been out on the side-lines chanting with the rest of them: 'Two – four - six - eight, who - do - we - hate?'

Miss Francis, however, was not to be deflected. You know that I do not allow any absence from choir without a very good reason. Now, will you sit down, please?' She turned gaily to face the room. 'I think we'll begin with the Schubert.'

'Please. May I go and tell Miss Taylor that I can't come?'

Miss Francis sighed a sigh that turned a page on the music stand.

'Two minutes, Brenda. We'll wait,' she said venomously, and set the metronome ticking on the piano so that they might all count the two minutes, second by second.

Miss Taylor still stood upon the steps of the Changing Room. While they were all counting, they could turn round, and watch Brenda tell Miss Taylor that she was not allowed to attend hockey practice.

Tock.

Tock.

Tock.

Brenda closed the door on the ticking and began to run.

She would have so run to be there and back in two minutes, and running in the corridors was forbidden.

Miss Taylor had legs like bath loofahs stuffed into long, hairy grey socks, that were held up by tourniquets of narrow elastic. When she put on her stockings after school and mounted her bicycle to pedal strenuously home up East Hill, you could still see the twin red marks, like the rubber seals on Kilner jars. The loofahs were the first things that Brenda saw as she mounted the steps, and the grey socks bristled with impatience.

'Practice begins at twelve fifty,' said Miss Taylor. 'I suppose you were thinking of joining us?'

Brenda began to cringe all over again.

'Please, Miss Taylor, Miss Francis says I can't come.'

'Does she? And what's it got to do with Miss Francis? Are you in detention?'

No, Miss Taylor. I'm in choir.'

"You may only be the goalkeeper, Brenda, but we still expect you to turn out for practices. You'll have to explain to Miss Francis that she must manage without you for once. I don't imagine that the choir will collapse if you're missing.'

'No, Miss Taylor.' 'Go on, then.

At the double. We'll wait.'

Brenda ran down the steps, aware of the Music Room windows but not looking at them, and back into the corridor.

Halfway along it she was halted by a shout from behind.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Brenda turned and saw the Head Girl, Gill Rogers, who was also the school hockey captain and had the sense not to try and sing as well.

'Running, Gill. Sorry, Gill.'

'Running's forbidden. You know that. Go back and walk.'

Miss Taylor told me to run.'

'It's no good trying to blame Miss Taylor; I'm sure she didn't tell you to run.'

'She said at the double,' said Brenda.

'That's not the same thing at all. Go back and walk.'

Brenda went back and walked.

"Two minutes and fifteen seconds,' said Miss Francis, reaching for the metronome, when Brenda finally got back to the Music Room. 'Sit down quickly, Brenda. Now then - I said sit down, Brenda.'

"Please, Miss Francis –"

A look of dire agony appeared on Miss Francis's face-it could have been wind so soon after lunch- and she held the metronome in a

strangler's grip. I think you've delayed us long enough, Brenda.

'Miss Taylor said couldn't you please excuse me from choir just this once as it's such an important match,' said Brenda, improvising rapidly, since Miss Taylor had said nothing of the sort. Miss Francis raised a claw.

I believe I made myself perfectly clear the first time. Now, sit down, please.'

But they're all waiting for me.'

"So are we, Brenda. I must remind you that it is not common practice in this school to postpone activities for the sake of Second Year girls. What position do you occupy in the team? First bat?' Miss Francis knew quite well that there are no bats required in a hockey game, but her ignorance suggested that she was above such things.

'Goalkeeper, Miss Francis.'

'Goalkeeper? From the fuss certain persons are making, I imagined that you must be at least a fast bowler. Is there no one else in the lower school to rival your undoubted excellence at keeping goal?'

'I did get chosen for the team, Miss Francis.'

'Clearly you have no equal, Brenda. That being the case, you hardly need to practise, do you?'

Miss Taylor thinks I do,' said Brenda.

"Well, I'm afraid I don't. I would never, for one moment, keep you from a match, my dear, but a practice on a Thursday is an entirely different matter. Sit down.'

Brenda, panicking, pointed to the window. 'But she won't start without me.'

'Neither will I. You may return very quickly and tell Miss Taylor so. Al once.'

Brenda set off along the corridor, expecting to hear the first notes of 'Andie Musik' break out behind her. There was only silence. They were still waiting.

'Now run and get changed,' said Miss Taylor, swinging her whistle, as Brenda came up the steps again. We've waited long enough for you,

my girl.

Miss Francis says I can't come,' Brenda said, baldly.

'Does she, now?'

I've got to go back.' A scarcely suppressed jeer rose from the rest of the team, assembled in the Changing Room.

'Brenda, this is the Under Thirteen Eleven, not the Under-Thirteen Ten. There must be at least sixty of you in that choir. Are you really telling me that your absence will be noticed?'

Miss Francis' ll notice it,' said Brenda.

'Then she'll just have to notice it,' said Miss Taylor under her breath, but loudly enough for Brenda to hear and appreciate. 'Go and tell Miss Francis that I insist you attend this practice.'

'Couldn't you give me a note, please?' said Brenda. Miss Taylor must know that any message sent via Brenda would be heavily edited before it reached its destination. She could be as insulting as she pleased in a note.

A note?' Brenda might have suggested a dozen red roses thrown in 'with it. 'I don't see any reason to send a note. Simply tell Miss Francis that on this occasion she must let you go.'

Brenda knew that it was impossible to tell Miss Francis that she must do anything, and Miss Taylor knew it too. Brenda put in a final plea for mercy.

Couldn't you tell her?'

We've already wasted ten minutes, Brenda, while you make up your mind.' You needn't wait -'

'When I field a team, I field a team, not ten-elevenths of a team.' She turned and addressed the said team. 'It seems we'll have to stay here a little longer,' her eyes strayed to the Music Room windows, 'while Brenda arrives at her momentous decision.'

Brenda turned and went down the steps again.

'Hurry UP, girl.'

Miss Taylor's huge voice echoed dreadfully round the confining walls. She should have been in the choir herself. singing bass to Miss

Humphry's tenor. Brenda began to run, and like a cuckoo from a clock, Gill Rogers sprang out of the cloakroom as she cantered past. 'Is that you again?'

Brenda side-stepped briskly and fled towards the Music Room, where she was met by the same ominous silence that had seen her off. The choir, cowed and bowed, crouched over the open music sheets and before them, wearing for some reason her indomitable expression, sat Miss Francis, tense as an overwound clockwork mouse and ready for action.

'At last. Really, Brenda, the suspense may prove too much for me. I thought you were never coming back.' She lifted her hands and brought them down sharply on the keys. The choir jerked to attention. An over-eager soprano chimed in and then subsided as Miss Francis raised her hands again and looked round. Brenda was still standing in the doorway.

"Please sit down, Brenda."

Brenda clung to the door-post and looked hopelessly at Miss Francis. She would have gone down on her knees if there had been the slightest chance that Miss Francis would be moved.

"Well?"

'Please, Miss Francis, Miss Taylor says I must go to the practice. She wished devoutly that she were at home where, should rage break out on this scale, someone would have thrown something. If only Miss Francis would throw something; the metronome, perhaps, through the window.

Tock... tock... tock... CRASH! Tinkle tinkle.

But Miss Francis was a lady. With right restraint she closed the lid of the piano.

'It seems,' she said, in a bitter little voice, 'that we are to have no music today. A hockey game is to take precedence over a choir practice.'

'It's not a game,' said Brenda. 'It's a practice, for a match. Just this once ...' she said, and was disgusted to find a tear boiling up under

her eyelid. Please, Miss Francis.'

"No, Brenda. I do not know why we are enduring this ridiculous debare (Neither do I, Miss Francis) but I thought I had made myself quite clear the first time you asked. You will not miss a scheduled choir practice for an unscheduled hockey practice. Did you not explain to Miss Taylor?'

'Yes, I did!' Brenda cried. 'And she said you wouldn't miss me.'

Miss Francis turned all reasonable. Miss you? But my dear child, of course we wouldn't miss you. No one would miss you. You are not altogether indispensable, are you?'

'No, Miss Francis.' 'It's a matter of principle. I would not dream of abstracting a girl from a hockey team, or a netball team or even, heaven preserve us, from a shove-ha'penny team, and by the same token I will not allow other members of staff to disrupt my choir practices. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Miss Francis.'

"Go and tell Miss Taylor. I'm sure she'll see my point."

"Yes, Miss Francis." Brenda turned to leave, praying that the practice would at last begin without her, but the lid of the piano remained shut.

This time the Head Girl was waiting for her and had her head round the cloakroom door before Brenda was fairly on her way down the corridor.

'Why didn't you come back when I called you, just now?' Brenda leaned against the wall and let the tear escape, followed by two or three others.

'Are you crying because you've broken rules,' Gill demanded, for because you got caught? I'll see you outside the Sixth-Form Room at four o'clock.'

'It's not my fault.'

'Of course, it's your fault. No one forced you to run.'

"They're making me," said Brenda, pointing two-handed in either direction, towards the Music Room and the Changing Room.

'I daresay you asked for it,' said Gill. 'Four o'clock, please,' and she went back into the Senior cloakroom in the hope of catching some malefactor fiddling with the locks on the lavatory doors.

This last injustice gave Brenda a jolt that she might otherwise have missed, and the tears of self-pity turned hot with anger. She trudged along to the Changing Room.

You don't exactly hurry yourself, do you?' said Miss Taylor. 'Well?'

'Miss Francis says I can't come to hockey, Miss Taylor.' Miss Taylor looked round at the restive members of the Under-Thirteen XI and knew that for the good of the game it was time to make a stand.

Very well, Brenda, I must leave it to you to make up your mind. Either you turn out now for the practice or you forfeit your place in the team. Which is it to be?'

Brenda looked at Miss Taylor, at the Music Room windows, and back to Miss Taylor.

'If I leave now, can I join again later?'

'Good Lord. Is there no end to this girl's cheek? Certainly not. This is your last chance, Brenda.'

It would have to be the choir. She could not bear to hear the singing and never again be part of it, Thursday after Monday, term after term. If you missed a choir practice without permission, you were ejected from the choir. There was no appeal. There would be no permission.

'I'll leave the team, Miss Taylor.'

She saw at once that Miss Taylor had not been expecting this. Her healthy face turned an alarming colour, like Lifebuoy kitchen soap.

'Then there's nothing more to say, is there? This will go on your report, you understand. I cannot be bothered with people who don't take things seriously.'

She turned her back on Brenda and blew the whistle at last, releasing the pent-up team from the Changing Room. They were followed, Brenda noticed, by Pat Stevens, the reserve, who had prudently put on the shin-pads in advance.

Brenda returned to the Music Room. The lid of the piano was still down, and Miss Francis's brittle elbow pinned it.

"The prodigal returns,' she announced to the choir as Brenda entered, having seen her approach down the corridor. It is now one fifteen. May we begin dear?'

'Yes, Miss Francis.'

'You finally persuaded Miss Taylor to see reason?'

'I told her what you said.'

'And?'

'She said I could choose between missing the choir practice and leaving the team.'

Miss Francis was transformed into an angular little effigy of triumph. I see you choose wisely Brenda.'

Miss Francis?'

'By coming back to the choir.'

'No, Miss Francis . . .', Brenda began to move towards the door, not trusting herself to come any closer to the piano.

I'm going to miss choir practice. I came back to tell you.'

Then you will leave the choir, Brenda. I hope you understand that.'

"Yes, Miss Francis.'

She stepped out of the room for the last time and closed the door. After a long while she heard the first notes of the piano, and the choir finally began to sing. Above the muted voices a whistle shrilled, out on the playing-field. Brenda went and sat in the Junior cloakroom, which was forbidden in lunch hour, and cried. There was no rule against that.

