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*Enoch's Two Letters*

ENOCH's parents parted in a singular way. He was eight years of age at the time.

It happened one morning after he had gone to school, so that he didn't know anything about it till coming home in the evening.

Jack Boden got up as usual at seven o'clock, and his wife, who was Enoch's mother, set a breakfast of bacon and egg before him. They never said much, and spoke even less on this particular morning, because both were solidly locked in their separate thoughts which, unknown to each other, they were at last intending to act on.

Instead of getting a bus to his foundry, Jack boarded one for the city centre. He sought out a public lavatory where, for the price of a penny, he was able to draw off his overalls, and emerge with them under his arm. They were wrapped in the brown paper which he had put into his pocket before leaving the house, a sly and unobtrusive movement as he called from the scullery: 'So long, love. See you this afternoon.'

Now wearing a reasonable suit, he walked to the railway station. There he met René, who had in her two suitcases a few of his possessions that he had fed to her during clandestine meetings over the past fortnight. Having worked in the same factory, they had, as many others who were employed there saw, 'fallen for each other'. René wasn't married, so there seemed nothing to stop her going away with him. And Jack's dull toothache of a conscience had, in the six months since knowing her, cured itself at last.

Yet they got on the train to London feeling somewhat alarmed at the step they had taken, though neither liked to say anything in case the other should think they wanted to back out. Hardly a word was spoken the whole way. René wondered what her parents would say when they saw she'd gone. Jack thought mostly about Enoch, but he knew he'd be safe enough with his mother, and that she'd bring him up right. He

would send her a letter from London to explain that he had gone—in case she hadn't noticed it.

No sooner had Jack left for his normal daylight stint at the foundry than his wife, Edna, attended to Enoch. She watched him eat, standing by the mantelshelf for a good view of him during her stare. He looked up, half out of his sleep, and didn't smile back at her.

She kissed him, pushed sixpence into his pocket, and sent him up the street to school, then went upstairs to decide what things to take with her. It wasn't a hard choice, for though they had plenty of possessions, little of it was movable. So it turned out that two suitcases and a handbag held all she wanted.

There was ample time, and she went downstairs to more tea and a proper breakfast. They'd been married ten years, and for seven at least she'd had enough. The trouble with Jack was that he'd let nothing worry him. He was so trustworthy and easy-going he got on her nerves. He didn't even seem interested in other women, and the worse thing about such a man was that he hardly ever noticed when you were upset. When he did, he accused you of upsetting him.

There were so many things wrong, that now she was about to leave she couldn't bring them to mind, and this irritated her, and made her think that it had been even worse than it was, rather than the other way round. As a couple they had given up tackling any differences between them by the human method of talking. It was as if the sight of each other struck them dumb. On first meeting, a dozen years ago, they had been unable to say much—which, in their mutual attraction, they had confined with love at first sight. And nowadays they didn't try to talk to each other about the way they felt any more because neither of them thought it would do any good. Having come this far, the only thing left was to act. It wasn't that life was dull exactly, but they had nothing in common. If they had, maybe she could have put up with him, no matter how bad he was.

For a week she'd been trying to write a letter, to be posted from where she was going, but she couldn't get beyond: 'I'm leaving you for good, so stop bothering about me any more. Just look after Enoch, because I've had my bellyful and I'm off.' After re-reading it she put it back and clipped her handbag shut.

Having decided to act after years of thinking about it, she was now uncertain as to what she would do. A sister lived in Hull, so her first plan



was to stay there till she found a job and a room. This was something to hang on to, and beyond it she didn't think. She'd just have to act again, and that was that. Once you started there was probably no stopping, she thought, not feeling too good about it now that the time had come.

An hour later she turned the clock to the wall, and walked out of the house for good, safe in knowing that shortly after Enoch came in from school his father would be home to feed him. They had lavished a lot of love on Enoch—she knew that—maybe too much, some of which they should have given to each other but had grown too mean and shy to.

She left the door unlocked so that he could just walk in. He was an intelligent lad, who'd be able to turn on the gas fire if he felt cold. When Mrs Mackley called from her back door to ask if she was going on her holidays, Edna laughed and said she was only off to see Jack's mother at Netherfield, to take some old rags that she needed to cut up and use for rug-clippings.

'Mam,' Enoch cried, going in by the back door. 'Mam, where's my tea?'

He'd come running down the road with a pocketful of marbles. His head in fact looked like one of the more psychedelic ones, with a pale round face, a lick of brilliant ginger hair down over his forehead, and a streak of red toffee-stain across his mouth.

Gossiping again, he thought scornfully, seeing the kitchen empty. He threw his coat, still with the sleeves twisted, over to the settee. The house did have more quiet than usual, he didn't know why. He turned the clock to face the right way, then went into the scullery and put the kettle on.

The tea wasn't like his mother made it. It was too weak. But it was hot, so he put a lot of sugar in to make up for it, then sat at the table to read a comic.

It was early spring, and as soon as it began to get dark he switched the light on and went to draw the curtains. One half came over easily, but the other only part of the way, leaving a foot-wide gap of dusk, like a long, open mouth going up instead of across. This bothered him for a while, until it got dark, when he decided to ignore it and switch the television on.

From hoping to see his mother, he began to wonder where his father was. If his mother had gone to Aunt Jenny's and missed the bus home, maybe his father at the foundry had had an accident and fallen into one of the moulds—from which it was impossible to get out alive, except as a skeleton.

Jam pot, butter dish, knife, and crumbs were spread over the kitchen table when he got himself something to eat. Not that it bothered him, that his father might have been killed, because when they had left him for an hour on his own a few months ago he had wondered what he would do if they never came back. Before he'd had time to decide, though, they had opened the door to tell him to get a sandwich and be off to bed sharp, otherwise he'd be too tired to get up for school in the morning. So he knew they'd be back sooner than he expected. When Johnny Bootle's father had been killed in a lorry last year he'd envied him, but Johnny Bootle himself hadn't liked it very much.

Whether they came back or not, it was nice being in the house on his own. He was boss of it, could mash another pot of tea if he felt like it, and keep the gas fire burning as long as he liked. The telly was flickering but he didn't want to switch it off, even though heads kept rolling up and up, so that when he looked at it continually for half a minute it seemed as if they were going round in a circle. He turned to scoop a spoonful of raspberry jam from the pot, and swallow some more cold tea.

He sat in his father's chair by the fire, legs stretched across the rug, but ready to jump at the click of the outdoor latch, and be back at the table before they could get into the room. His father wouldn't like him being in his chair, unless he were sitting on his knee. All he needed was a cigarette, and though he looked on the sideboard and along the shelf there were none in sight. He had to content himself with trying to whistle in a thick manly style. Johnny Bootle had been lucky in his loss, because he'd had a sister.

If they didn't come back tonight he wouldn't go to school in the morning. They'd shout at him when they found out, but that didn't matter if they were dead. It was eight o'clock, and he wondered where they were. They ought to be back by now, and he began to regret that he'd hoped they never would be, as if God's punishment for thinking this might be that He'd never let them.

He yawned, and picked up the clock to wind it. That was what you did when you yawned after eight in the evening. If they didn't come soon he would have to go upstairs to bed, but he thought he would get some coats and sleep on the sofa down here, with the gas fire shining bright, rather than venture to his bedroom alone. They'd really gone for a night out, and that was a fact. Maybe they were late coming back because they'd gone for a divorce. When the same thing had happened



to Tom Brunt it was because his mam had gone to fetch a baby, though he was taken into a neighbour's house next door before he'd been alone as long as this.

He looked along the shelf to see if he had missed a cigarette that he could put into his mouth and play at smoking with. He had good eyes and no need of glasses, that was true, because he'd been right first time. In spite of the bread and jam he still felt hungry, and went into the scullery for some cheese.

When the light went, taking the flickering telly with it, he found a torch at the back of the dresser drawer, then looked for a shilling to put in the meter. Fortunately the gas fire gave off enough pink glow for him to see the borders of the room, especially when he shone the torch beam continually around the walls as if it were a searchlight looking for enemy planes.

'It was a long wait to Tipperary'—as he had sometimes heard his father sing while drunk, but his eyes closed, with the piece of cheese still in his hands, and he hoped he would drop off before they came in so that they'd be sorry for staying out so late, and wouldn't be able to be mad at him for not having gone to bed.

He walked across the room to the coat hooks in the recess, but his mother's and father's coats had gone, as he should have known they would be, since neither of them was in. There was nothing to put over himself when he went to sleep, but he still wouldn't go upstairs for a blanket. It would be as bad as going into a wood at night. He had run across the road when a bus was coming, and seen Frankenstein once on the telly, but he wouldn't go into a wood at night, even though lying Jimmy Kemp claimed to have done so.

Pushing one corner at a time, he got the table back against the sideboard. There was an oval mirror above the mantelshelf, and he leaned both elbows on it to get as good a look at himself as he could in the wavering pink light—his round face and small ears, chin in shadow, and eyes popping forward. He distorted his mouth with two fingers, and curled a tongue hideously up to his nose to try and frighten himself away from the bigger fear of the house that was threatening him with tears.

It was hard to remember what they'd done at school today, and when he tried to imagine his father walking into the house and switching on the light it was difficult to make out his face very clearly. He hated him for that, and hoped one day to kill him with an axe. Even his mother's face wasn't easy to bring back, but he didn't want to kill her. He felt his

knee caps burning, being too close to the gas bars, so he stood away to let them go cool.

When he was busy rolling up the carpet in front of the fire, and being away from the mirror, his parents suddenly appeared to him properly, their faces side by side with absolute clarity, and he wished they'd come back. If they did, and asked what the bloody hell he thought he was doing rolling up the carpet, he'd say well what else do you expect me to do? I've got to use something for a blanket when I go to sleep on the settee, haven't I?

If there was one skill he was glad of, it was that he could tell the time. He'd only learned it properly six months ago, so it had come just right. You didn't have to put a shilling in the clock, so that was still ticking at least, except that it made him feel tired.

He heaved at the settee, to swivel it round in front of the fire, a feat which convinced him that one day he'd be as strong as his father—wherever he was. There was certainly no hope of the gas keeping on till the morning, so he turned it down to number two. Then he lay on the settee and pulled the carpet over him. It smelled of stone and pumice, and of soap that had gone bad.

He sniffed the cold air, and sensed there was daylight in it, though he couldn't open his eyes. Weaving his hand as far as it would go, he felt that the gas fire had gone out, meaning that the cooking stove wouldn't work. He wondered why his eyelids were stuck together, then thought of chopping up a chair to make a blaze, but the grate was blocked by the gas fire. This disappointed him, because it would have been nice to lean over it, warming himself as the bottom of the kettle got blacker and blacker till it boiled at the top.

When his eyes mysteriously opened, old Tinface the clock said it was half past seven. In any case there were no matches left to light anything. He went into the scullery to wash his face.

He had to be content with a cup of milk, and a spoon of sugar in it, with more bread and cheese. People were walking along the backyards on their way to work. If they've gone for good, he thought, I shall go to my grandma's, and I'll have to change schools because she lives at Netherfield, miles away.

His mother had given him sixpence for sweets the morning before, and he already had twopence, so he knew that this was enough to get him half fare to Netherfield.



That's all I can do, he thought, turning the clock to the wall, and wondering whether he ought to put the furniture right in case his parents came in and got mad that it was all over the place, though he hoped they wouldn't care, since they'd left him all night on his own.

Apart from not wanting to spend the sixpence his mother had given him till she came back, he was sorry at having to go to his grandma's because now he wouldn't be able to go to school and tell his mates that he'd been all night in a house on his own.

He pushed a way to the upper deck of the bus, from which height he could look down on the roofs of cars, and see level into the top seats of other buses passing them through the town. You never know, he thought, I might see 'em—going home to put a shilling each in the light and gas for me. He gave his money to the conductor.

It took a long time to get clear of traffic at Canning Circus, and he wished he'd packed up some bread and cheese before leaving the house. Men were smoking foul fags all around, and a gang of boys going to Peoples' College made a big noise until the conductor told them to stop it or he'd put them off.

He knew the name of his grandmother's street, but not how to get there from the bus stop. A postman pointed the direction for him. Netherfield was on the edge of Nottingham, and huge black cauliflower clouds with the sun locked inside came over on the wind from Colwick Woods.

When his grandmother opened the back door he was turning the handle of the old mangle outside. She told him to stop it, and then asked in a tone of surprise what had brought him there at that time of the morning.

'Dad and mam have gone,' he said.

'Gone?' she cried, pulling him into the scullery. 'What do you mean?' He saw the big coal fire, and smelled the remains of bacon that she must have done for Tom's breakfast—the last of her son living there. His face was distorted with pain. 'No,' she said, 'nay, you mustn't cry. Whatever's the matter for you to cry like that?'

The tea she poured was hot, strong, and sweet, and he was sorry at having cried in front of her. 'All right, now?' she said, drawing back to watch him and see if it was.

He nodded. 'I slept on the couch.'

'The whole night! And where can they be?'

He saw she was worried. 'They had an accident,' he told her, pouring his tea into the saucer to cool it. She fried him an egg, and gave him some bread and butter.

'Our Jack's never had an accident,' she said grimly.

'If they're dead, grandma, can I live with you?'

'Aye, you can. But they're not, so you needn't worry your little eyes.'

'They must be,' he told her, feeling certain about it.

'We'll see,' she said. 'When I've cleaned up a bit, we'll go and find out what got into 'em.' He watched her sweeping the room, then stood in the doorway as she knelt down to scrub the scullery floor, a smell of cold water and pumice when she reached the doorstep. 'I've got to keep the place spotless,' she said with a laugh, standing up, 'or your Uncle Tom would leave home. He's bound to get married one day though, and that's a fact. His three brothers did, one of 'em being your daft father.'

She held his hand back to the bus stop. If Uncle Tom does clear off it looks like she'll have me to look after. It seemed years already since he'd last seen his mother and father, and he was growing to like the adventure of it, provided they didn't stay away too long. It was rare going twice across town in one day.

It started to rain, so they stood in a shop doorway to wait for the bus. There wasn't so many people on it this time, and they sat on the bottom deck because his grandma didn't feel like climbing all them steps. 'Did you lock the door behind you?'

'I forgot.'

'Let's hope nobody goes in.'

'There was no light left,' he said. 'Nor any gas, I was cold when I woke up.'

'I'm sure you was,' she said. 'But you're a big lad now. You should have gone to a neighbour's house. They'd have given you some tea. Mrs Upton would, I'm sure. Or Mrs Mackley.'

'I kept thinking they'd be back any minute.'

'You always have to go to the neighbours,' she told him, when they got off the bus and walked across Ilkeston Road. Her hand had warmed up now from the pumice and cold water. 'Don't kick your feet like that.'

If it happened again, he would take her advice. He hoped it wouldn't, though next time he'd sleep in his bed and not be frightened.

They walked down the yard, and in by the back door. Nothing was missing, he could have told anybody that, though he didn't speak. The

empty house seemed dead, and he didn't like that. He couldn't stay on his own, so followed his grandmother upstairs and into every room, half expecting her to find them in some secret place he'd never known of.

The beds were made, and wardrobe doors closed. One of the windows was open a few inches, so she slammed it shut and locked it. 'Come on down. There's nowt up here.'

She put a shilling in the gas meter, and set a kettle on the stove. 'Might as well have a cup of tea while I think this one out. A bloody big one it is, as well.'

It was the first time he'd heard her swear, but then, he'd never seen her worried, either. It made him feel better. She thought about the front room, and he followed her.

'They kept the house clean, any road up,' she said, touching the curtains and chair covers. 'That's summat to be said for 'em. But it ain't everything.'

'It ain't,' he agreed, and saw two letters lying on the mat just inside the front door. He watched her broad back as she bent to pick them up, thinking now that they were both dead for sure.