

## Stan Barstow - Joby

*Joby is eleven. He has finished Tinsley Road Council School and has got his County Minor Scholarship which will enable him to go to the grammar school in Cressley after the holidays. His mother has to go into hospital and Joby will be staying with his Aunt Daisy whose daughter Mona will come to look after Joby's father now and then. In the three weeks that his mother is in hospital Joby comes to realize that his childhood world is different from the world of grown-ups.*

It was tea-time and he would be expected at his Auntie Daisy's. But he didn't want to go there. After all the complications and misunderstandings of the afternoon he wanted the warmth of home. He wanted to have a tea made by his mother and eat it in her company. He was missing her now, more acutely than at any time earlier in the week, and he wished he was allowed to go and see her. He went home anyway and found his father about to have his own tea. He had laid the table with the bare necessities: a plate and a fork and his mug, the sugar-bowl and some butter still in its wrapping, and a partly used loaf and the breadknife. The tablecloth had stains on it and looked as if it had been in use all week. While the kettle came to the boil on the gas-ring Weston was opening a tin of salmon. He was in his shirtsleeves and a pullover and flannel trousers. He glanced over his shoulder as Joby went in.

'Hello, Joby. How you doing?'

'Oh, not bad.'

Joby leaned against a chair and watched his father wrestle with the tin. The opener he was using was a gadget that had never been much good and Weston had threatened many a time to chuck it out and get a simple old-fashioned one.

'Is your stomach better?' Joby asked.

'What? Oh, aye. Yes, it's all right now.'

'Have you been to see me mam?'

'Aye, yes. She's sitting up and taking notice a bit now. She said to tell you to be a good lad and she won't be long as she's home.'

'I wish I could go and see her.'

'Aye, but it's against the rules, lad.'

Weston got the tin open and pushed the contents out on to a plate with a knife. Then he poured boiling water into the teapot.

'Have you had your tea, then?'

'No.'

'Your Auntie Daisy'll have it ready for you, won't she?'

'I expect so.'

'You don't want to keep her waiting, y'know.'

'Can't I stop and have me tea with you?'

His father looked at him directly for the first time since he had come in.

'What about your auntie?'

'She won't have cooked anything to spoil.'

'No, I suppose not. Still, you don't want to put her about, y'know. It's very kind of her to have you while your mam's away. We don't want to offend her.'

'I'd rather stop here for me tea,' Joby said.

His father hesitated.

'Oh, well, I reckon it'll be all right for once. D'you fancy some salmon? There's enough here for two and it'll help finish the tin afore it goes off. Get yerself some tackle out, then. It's ready otherwise.'

There was a small diversion before they could start, for Weston had forgotten to put tea into the pot, which meant boiling some more water. He got up, muttering about absent-mindedness, and cut some bread while they waited. Then they sat down on opposite sides of the table and began to eat in a long silence that was eventually broken by Joby saying: 'I got thrown out of the pictures this aft, Dad.'

'Oh aye?'

Joby wondered if his father could have heard what he'd said.

'It wasn't my fault, though. I wasn't doing owt. It was Gus Wilson, y'see. He was firing pellets with a rubber band and the attendant thought it was me and made me go out. He wouldn't take any notice of what I said.'

'You'll have to behave yourself, y'know,' Weston said, 'else they'll be stopping you going.'

'They've told me I can't go anymore now. And it wasn't me at all. It was Gus Wilson.'

'Gus?'

'His real name is John, only everybody calls him Gus. I don't know why.'

'I think I know his father. He comes down to t'club.'

Joby's father reached for the plate of salmon. He was about to push what was left on to his own plate when he stopped. 'D'you fancy a bit more?'

'No. I've had enough.' Weston emptied the plate. 'Very tasty now and again, a bit o' salmon. Been a pity to open that big tin just for me, though.'

Joby watched his father eating. He was puzzled. He had expected him to be angry about the pictures episode until it was made clear that he, Joby, was innocent. But now his dad seemed to think he'd caused the trouble anyway, yet he didn't apparently mind.

'Are you worried about summat, Dad?' he asked, and Weston glanced at him.

'Well, I have summat on me mind a bit.'

A spasm of fear stabbed Joby's heart. The world which had swallowed his mother was unknown and terrifying, full of dark secrets. He distrusted it just as he distrusted the evasions of grown-ups when they mentioned it. Suppose he were to be told one day that his mother was never coming back? Oh, it was fantastic, but it could happen. Look at Mary Brotherton. Her mother had gone into hospital and Mary had never seen her again. That was only last year and now Mary lived with an auntie all the time and her younger sister and baby brother lived somewhere else. He swallowed hard and forced the question.

'Is it about me mam?'

'No.....no, she's all right. No, it's about a little job at work, that's all.'

Joby didn't know whether to believe him or not. He hadn't really heard anything Joby had said since coming in. They sat in silence for some time, Weston smoking and looking into the low fire which burned in the open grate.

'Is there a cricket match down in the field tonight?' Joby asked presently.

'Happen so. Why?'

'I thought you might be going to watch it.'

'I can't tonight,' Weston said. 'I've to go and pay me sick-club dues.'

Joby relapsed into silence. The late afternoon sun poured into the room through the smaller window and he looked out at the blue sky over the roof-tops of the houses opposite.

'Don't you think it's time you were letting your Auntie Daisy know where you've got to?'

'Yeh, I suppose so.'

'Aye,' Weston said absently, 'I should get off an' tell her where you've been.'

Joby got up and wandered to the door: 'Dad.'

'Eh?'

'About the pictures. I was wondering. If you went to see the attendant and told him it wasn't me what caused the trouble they'd happen let me in next week.'

'Oh, I shouldn't worry about that,' Weston said. 'It'll all come out in the wash.....'

Off you go to your Auntie Daisy's. She'll be wondering.'

'I'll be seeing you, then.'

'Aye, so long, Joby. Be a good lad and do as your auntie tells you.'

What did he want? Joby asked himself as he walked away from the house. What was it he was looking for? Did he really believe his mother was in danger, that she wasn't coming back to make life as before? He didn't know what he did believe. Somehow the events of the afternoon had contracted themselves into a sharp point of loneliness and uncertainty which ripped a small tear in the protective fabric of his world. So that now he looked through the tear at his world and though it seemed in almost every way the same it was in fact different. The streets, the houses, the shops of the town where he had been born and lived all his life, that he knew better than any streets or houses or shops anywhere - they were all the same as before, yet different because he was looking at them through the tear. He wanted, he needed now, a grown-up whom he could trust and who would, if only for a few minutes, talk to him directly, really talk to him, person to person, without evasions or mention of rules or fobbing him off because he wouldn't understand. He could understand if only he had the chance. But it seemed there was only one person who would even make the attempt to talk to him like that, and she wasn't here and he couldn't get to her.

## Assignment

In the story you have read about Joby and his father. What are they like? Find words that describe their characters.

*This exercise is not about right or wrong. Motivating your answers is sufficient.*

### Weston is or is not:

sharp-tongued  
talkative  
punctual  
sympathetic  
protective  
kind  
proud  
sociable  
attentive  
strong-willed  
sarcastic  
indifferent  
absent-minded  
educated  
self-centred  
soft-spoken  
scatter-brained  
level-headed  
intelligent  
caring

### Joby is or is not:

clumsy  
polite  
naughty  
intelligent  
inquisitive  
stubborn  
eager to please  
sensitive  
childish  
smart  
insecure  
modest  
lonely  
cheeky  
likeable  
ambitious  
vulnerable  
diligent  
diffident  
obsequious