

DAVID TENTERDEN

THE RICHES OF EMBARRASSMENT

An examination of an awkward emotion
in fourteen stories

SCRIPTUS BOOKS

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A DEFINITION OF EMBARRASSMENT

'Perplexed, confused; having or expressing a feeling of awkwardness or self-consciousness'

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993)

THE RICHES OF EMBARRASSMENT

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A Handshake Recollected (1965)

A HANDSHAKE RECOLLECTED (1965)

A Handshake Recollected (1965)

The Turners had arrived at the dark little house they took each August in Middleton, a small Victorian seaside resort in Sussex.

The familiar pattern had been followed. Mr. Baker the driver, red nose larger and more pitted than ever, had collected them in the bulbous black car. They'd eaten a picnic lunch – cold sausages, hard-boiled eggs, sparsely buttered pneumatic white bread– in a lay-by just outside Dorking. The whole journey, door-to-door, had lasted a sticky five hours.

Their luggage sat in a pile in the shaded front garden of Rookery Nook, a low, shingled structure, jerry-built in the 1890's and miraculously still standing seven decades later.

They needed to collect the key. Leaving his brother and father resting on a wooden bench in the garden, James accompanied his shabby genteel mother to the landlady's house – a substantial Edwardian building full of cool shadow and stained glass. Miss Carter, the landlady's companion, opened the door. James shook her hand, just as his mother had taught him – firm, without squeezing, confident, looking into the other person's eyes. He was vaguely pleased that he'd done the right thing but his pleasure was balanced by an acute sense of the intrinsic foolishness of it all, and he wondered, as he often did, whether his mother's expectations were normal. And yet Miss Carter's approving smile suggested that they were. She let go of his hand and James sensed the dampness left by her plump fingers.

In an agony of controlled impatience, he made conversation with the old ladies and uttered politely appreciative noises about the cakes and sandwiches that Miss Carter pressed upon him. Conscious of his mother's eye, he placed each successive sandwich and cake on his plate, leaving it there for a second or two, before taking modest bites and chewing with his mouth scrupulously closed. He was desperate for the beach, the sea and freedom.

After an endless thirty minutes or so they said their goodbyes and headed back to Rookery Nook. As they walked, Mrs. Turner complimented James on his manners.

Once inside, James inhaled Rookery Nook's dimly recollected smell, a combination of furniture polish, dusty chintz and poorly ventilated kitchen.

He grabbed his rusted green spade and red bucket as the luggage was brought in. Mrs. Turner smiled at him, seeing the ten-year-old boy oblivious to the discomfort of his thick green pullover, intent only on the beach. "All right James. Daddy and Robert can sort things out here. Let's go and get the keys for the beach hut. Then you can have two hours on the beach. Supper's at six so be ready to leave the beach by ten to. Understand?"

They had to collect the hut key from Colonel Penfold who ran the mini-golf and tennis courts from a small wooden structure next to Gizzi's, the beach café. Colonel Penfold was a large, fussy man with a lisp, and a thin scar that snaked across his high forehead. James knew that his mother disapproved of the man in some obscure way. After a few forced civilities – perhaps Colonel Penfold returned Mrs. Turner's dislike – they obtained the key. The hut – number 113, their

usual one – was close by and a few minutes later James joyfully found himself on the beach with bucket and spade for company.

For a moment, his spirits sagged and he wished that Peter Orgill, his best friend from school, was with him instead of on some Greek island. He looked around and saw few other children on the beach. Feeling momentarily lost, he knew that he must start digging because you never felt alone, or at any rate lonely, when you were building a sandcastle.

He drew a circle in the sand with the point of his spade and began, throwing heavy wedges of damp sand into the circle with a frenetic sense of purpose. Initially, he didn't look at the product of his labour because he didn't want to be conscious of the slow rate of progress. After about ten minutes, it was pleasant to pause and discover that an impressive pile had arisen. He straightened and removed his pullover, placing it on the inverted bucket to prevent it from getting damp. A boy of about his own age approached him shyly.

“Can I help? We've just arrived. It's our first time here.” The boy hesitated. “I'm Henry Montague,” he said. James examined the freckled face and reddish brown hair. He liked the boy's smile.

“We've just got here, too. We always spend August here. I'm digging a castle but I don't think I've got time to do much before the tide's in. And I'm James Turner.”

James extended his hand, introducing himself as his mother had taught him and feeling characteristically foolish. Henry was just the sort of boy he'd have liked at school – only nicer, really, than most of his classmates. There was something so engaging about the curly

red-brown hair, the open smile and the freckled skin. James didn't understand 'good looking' but he knew that he liked the way Henry looked. They began to dig together in a companionable silence, saying little beyond "keep the sand within the circle" or "watch out with your spade.

As the exertion made them hot, they paused and, in the space created by the absence of activity, they began to talk about their families. James mentioned Robert, his much older brother, with distaste. "He's only interested in girls. Silly."

Henry disparaged his little sister, Melanie, who was six, had sappy long blond hair and was always fibbing about Henry pulling it. "Daddy always believes her because she's got big blue eyes." Henry kicked a wedge of sand prompting James to air a standing grievance against Robert. "He smacks me then pretends he didn't and says I'm lying."

"That's nothing," Henry warmed to his subject, "Melanie ..."

"What a stupid name" James sympathised. It was stupid, being called after a fruit, though James wondered whether he should risk criticising another boy's sister.

"Well, Melanie..." Henry paused, looked into the distance and waved. "I've got to go now. Shall we meet tomorrow?"

James nodded. "How about nine fifteen, in front of our beach hut, number 113?"

Henry agreed and bent down to pick up his spade. He straightened and paused, his features becoming solemn. “I’ve really enjoyed this afternoon,” he said.

James felt unsure how to respond. He wanted to meet enthusiasm with enthusiasm, to sound positive but not over eager. If only he knew how to strike the right note.

“So have I. See you tomorrow,” he said, raising his hand as an afterthought.

Henry half-turned to go and waved his hand in a departing gesture before running off towards a man clad in white shirt, cravat and grey trousers, who was standing in front of Gizzi’s. As he observed Henry’s retreating figure, James felt a rush of pleasure in the discovery of a new friend. The previous August he’d been close to feeling lonely in Middleton but he wouldn’t be this year, not with Henry.

The following morning, James woke to a cacophony of birdsong. Hearing the scream of the kettle from the kitchen, he got out of the sagging bed and, throwing the blue brushed cotton pyjamas on the floor, donned the previous day’s underwear. He compensated for this with clean khaki shorts and a yellow aertex shirt. His eyes were full of sleep and he rubbed them to wake himself up fully before going to the bathroom where he washed his face and hands. Feeling vividly awake, he peered into the smeared mirror and wished his cheeks were thinner, his face narrower and the chin more pronounced – like Henry’s, in fact. He didn’t like looking at himself and wondered whether Henry felt the same way. He dried his face on a scratchy towel.

The back door of Rookery Nook was open and the dining room felt cold and unwelcoming; James's mother was in the kitchen. James consumed his bowl of cornflakes, occasionally glancing at Robert who was eating boiled eggs sullenly and appeared intent on ignoring his younger brother. James thought about the blue sky outside and the prospect of the beach.

Pushing aside his bowl, James asked to leave the table and went into the garden to see whether the day was as fine as it appeared. The dew on the uncut grass made his sandaled feet cold and wet. The air was chilly but the sky was startlingly blue and James couldn't spot even one wispy cloud. He re-entered the house to find Mr. Turner sitting at the table, reading a newspaper, clad in a short-sleeved shirt, shorts and worn open-toed sandals. He wished that his elderly and balding father wouldn't dress like that.

"Daddy, can I go to the beach?" Mr. Turner didn't look up from his newspaper. "Now, James?" He spoke absent-mindedly. "It's only half-past eight." But James's mind was on the beach, not the time. He was in the grip of a surge of optimism prompted by the bright sun outside and the prospect of seeing Henry. "It's a beautiful day, Daddy. I don't want to waste it."

"Oh, all right then. But listen to me." He put down his newspaper and rummaged in the pockets of his shorts. "Here's the key to the hut. Look after it carefully and take care at the crossing by the petrol station. We'll be down at about ten and you're not to go swimming till we get there".

In blissful anticipation, James left the house without cleaning his teeth, his walk soon breaking into a run. Past the landlady's house

(waving to Miss Carter as he spotted her in the parlour window), past the big summer rental houses, carefully crossing the main road by the petrol station and then along Cliveden Villas, with its reek of privet and tomcat. Finally, slowing, he passed the deserted mini-golf and Colonel Penfold's still boarded shed. Short of breath, he walked by Gizzi's where, amid the aroma of coffee and malted milk, Mr. Gizzi was putting out the stand-up ice cream signs.

James turned right and walked along the lumpy grass, dodging the desiccated and not-so-desiccated dog excrement, until he came to beach hut number 113. Unlocking it, he retrieved bucket and spade and ran onto the beach. The tide had been ebbing for nearly three hours so he was able to choose a spot past the end of a short breakwater, where he knew the sand was deep. He paused, looked back at the huts and checked his watch. It was just before nine and Henry couldn't be expected for ages. He turned to look at the sea.

The prospect of the blue sky and the beach suddenly palled. James looked down and began jabbing his spade into the sand. He contemplated the gouged sand in a disconsolate reverie.

"You got here first. I thought I'd beat you," Henry called to James as he ran down the shingle, swinging his spade. James looked up. Henry's face was pink.

"I didn't think you were coming," James said, not knowing why.

"I said I would, didn't I?" James realised that his doubt was absurd – that Henry was exactly the sort of boy you could rely upon, knew that he could be relied upon and wouldn't understand why anyone

else would doubt him. “Anyway,” Henry added, “I’ve run all the way from the house. The grass is sopping. What shall we build?”

“What would you like to build?” James said.

Henry didn’t mind. “Let’s agree: it’s your turn to choose today. I don’t care what we build so long as it’s really enormous. We’ve got hours and hours before the tide’s in.”

James pondered. He preferred dams but the tide might have ebbed too far for a satisfactory dam so James suggested a really big castle. Together, they marked out an absurdly large circle in the sand.

“It’s going to be the biggest castle on the beach,” said Henry.

James, bristling with ambition, trumped this with, “the biggest this year.” And then, noting Henry’s heavy pullover, he added, “you’ll boil in that when we start digging.”

“I know, but when I left the house my mother said it was cold and she made me wear it. I’ll just take it off.”

Slowly, on opposite sides of the circle, they began to dig. The sand accumulated at the centre of the circle and soon, despite a light morning breeze, they were sweating. Pausing, and looking at the low shapeless mound, they each felt discouraged.

James said, “We’ve got ages before the tide. We’ve only just got started.”

Falling into an easy harmony, they continued digging in silence. As the sun rose higher, kites drifted gallantly above the beach huts.

Some of the huts were open now, and colourfully striped deck chairs and windbreakers began to appear in front of them. The boys got hotter and took off their shirts, heaping them over James's bucket, where they joined Henry's discarded pullover.

James noticed three distant and familiar figures – his parents and Robert arriving at their hut. After a few minutes, Robert ambled down onto the beach, book in hand. "You've got a long way to go," he remarked, conversationally rather than with his customary elder brother loftiness. "Why don't you get some help?"

James looked at him doubtfully. "You could ask that boy over there." Robert pointed to a boy of their age thirty yards away, who was digging a rather pointless hole in the sand.

Individually, diffidence would have inhibited them but, together, they were a potent, dynamic entity and, when asked, the solitary boy joined them eagerly. Another volunteered although he was nearly rejected when he insisted on bringing his younger sister. In ones and twos, perhaps conscious that something large was happening, others asked to join in. The disparate group of children formed a conspicuous knot of activity on the beach.

James and Henry found themselves distracted from the purposeful activity of digging, instead spending their energies supervising and instructing. Each welcomed the excuse to avoid some of the physical labour though neither was comfortable lording it over the others.

By noon, the castle was over eight feet in diameter and nearly four feet tall; it was difficult for the children to make it any higher, or to pat down the sand on the top. No one wanted to break for lunch.

Mrs. Turner came down to the beach and James introduced Henry to her. “Mummy, this is Henry Montague.” Mrs. Turner looked at Henry approvingly and supplied them with sandwiches and lemonade. They sat on the beach and ate them companionably, too tired and hungry to talk. The other children continued to dig until they began to go off for lunch, in ones and twos, at the insistence of an assortment of parents or siblings.

During the lull in activity, James told Henry that the castle already exceeded his ambitions. Henry agreed though, like James, he seemed disappointed at an ambition achieved. Then he brightened. “Let’s build a huge wall. When the tide comes in, we can stay behind the wall and defend the castle.”

They’d been getting a little bored as the mound of sand had continued to grow imperceptibly. Now, with re-kindled enthusiasm, they discussed the positioning of the wall and James suggested building ramparts between the castle and the wall. “When the tide breaches the wall, it’ll only be able to get at part of the castle. That should make it last longer.”

With confident authority, James explained the plan to the others. He and Henry marked out the perimeter wall as well as the lines of the internal ramparts, and divided the others into four teams of three, setting each team the task of digging one rampart and one section of wall.

The castle was stirring interest along the sea front and various grown-ups and children drifted along to look at it. By standing apart from the crowd, occasionally issuing instructions, James and Henry let the onlookers know that it was all their idea, that they were in

charge. As they talked among themselves, they began, quite consciously, to pretend that they were unaware of the curious glances directed at them. It was less embarrassing that way.

Each boy had become aware of the strange intimacy of their situation and this prompted a need for personal revelation. Having earlier discussed siblings, they moved onto homes and families. They discovered that they lived within five miles of each other – Henry in Wimbledon and James in Kingston. The sudden prospect of seeing his new friend after the holidays easily outweighed James’s reluctant admission that he lived in a “beastly little flat up three flights of stairs.” James liked Henry and so felt no jealousy of his friend’s five bedroomed detached house.

“What’s your dad do?” James enquired.

“An accountant,” said Henry. “He works for BP. He’s quite high up there. What’s yours?”

James always hated answering that question. He responded, hesitantly, “He’s a sort of businessman.”

Henry looked interested. “I bet he makes pots of money.” James knew that he didn’t, or at any rate, he knew that his parents quarreled about money a good deal.

“No. I don’t think he’s much good at it. But my mother’s father was a lord.” That was James’s trump card and he instantly wished he hadn’t played it. He didn’t want to trump Henry, because he liked him so much – he didn’t need anything to make himself feel better.

They discussed grandparents. Henry's were dead and James had only one. "She's Lady

Colchester and she never washes. My brother says the chair smells of her for hours after she's been to tea."

Henry was impressed. "Is she really smelly then?"

"Just a bit." James, the only member of his family who liked his grandmother, felt ashamed at the admission itself rather than at its truth. It seemed disloyal.

James's mother strode across the shingle carrying a paper bag in one hand and a bottle in the other. She admired the scale of the castle and the wall and, when James lamented that the seaward wall was higher than the one at the rear, Mrs. Turner shook her head. "No darling. That's as it should be because of the rake of the beach." James was relieved, even if unsure what she meant. "Wouldn't you and Henry like some fruit cake?" She gave them large slices of homemade fruitcake.

"Scrumptious fruit cake. Thank you," Henry said and Mrs. Turner smiled at him. "James, it's getting late but you can stay till the tide's in."

It had never occurred to James that he might not be able to stay long enough to witness the triumph of the tide. He hesitated for a moment before shooting a "thank you, Mummy" at his mother's retreating back. Turning round, he noticed a fragment of raisin stuck in the corner of Henry's mouth. He reached out and took it between two fingers, his hand resting, for a fraction of a second on Henry's chin.

“Are there crumbs on my face?” Henry responded.

“Yes, but mostly it was this,” and James showed him the piece of raisin sitting in the palm of his hand.

Henry laughed. “I wonder how long it would have stuck there without falling off?”

“Hours and hours,” James replied, tentatively putting his arm round Henry’s shoulders, a gesture that he felt impelled to make even though he couldn’t have explained why.

Henry’s arm slid round James’s waist. “Let’s do a four-legged run to the sea.” They fell over after ten yards and lay on the warm, hard sand, laughing. When they got on their feet, they looked back at the castle. Two or three of the other children had drifted off and a grown-up was purposefully striding over to collect another. James and Henry prepared for some last minute work before the approach of the sea.

James suggested creating a flat slope at the base of the outer wall.

“But that means filling in the ditch we’ve just dug,” said one of the helpers.

“I know that, but it’ll slow down the destruction of the walls,” James said, proud of the phrase. The others accepted the proposition and soon the seven boys and one small, ineffectual girl were digging about ten feet from the base of the walls, flinging spadefuls of sand near the base of the section that faced the sea.

Another parent came by -an anxious fat woman in a flowered frock. She addressed a sullen pair of boys, “Do come along, now, you two. Your dad wants his tea.”

James looked at the woman - red, perspiring, uncertain. His mother never did anything just because his father wanted it. Maybe that was why his parents were always quarreling. He said goodbye to the departing children, who appeared to take the farewell as permission to leave, to the visible relief of their mother. One by one the remaining children were collected, most reacting passively, though one was furious at losing the chance of involvement in the imminent drama promised by the flowing tide. By a quarter to six – when Henry looked at his watch – they were alone and the sea was just feet away.

They stopped digging and retreated to lie inside the walls against the massive solidity of the castle. Looking away from the sea, James spotted groups of people, profiled against the white doors of beach huts, as they prepared to lock them for the night and return to their rented houses or boarding establishments. Mr. Gizzi was taking in the ice cream signs at the café.

A few grown-ups, returning from walks along the beach, stopped to wonder at the castle’s height and scale.

“Look,” said Henry, “there’s only one kite in the sky now.” An elderly lady approached them, clad in black swimsuit, white swimming cap, and faded yellow towel dressing gown. James looked up at her.

“What a terrific castle – or fort, is it – James?” she said. “I saw your mother earlier. You must all come to tea with me, soon.” James introduced Henry. “Oh, yes, yes. Your parents have taken the house next to my flat? Well, I’ll see you soon boys. I’m off for my evening constitutional.” She shed her dressing gown and strode into the water.

“That,” said Henry, “is what daddy calls a ‘strange bird.’ Who is she?”

James explained that her name was Mrs. Morden and she was rather nice, but a bit odd. “She swims every day, morning and evening.” Henry seemed unimpressed so James added, “every day of the year including Christmas Day.”

“Is she mad?”

James pondered. “My brother says so but he’s always being horrible about nice people.”

As the last kite was being wound in, they turned to look at the sea, which had just touched their outer wall. They waited, tense with expectation, for the first real wave. Then there seemed to be a lull as the tide’s progress became imperceptible. They began to talk about schools. James’s brother had been at Hanbury House, Henry’s school, which provided an unexpected bond.

“We beat you at soccer last term,” James asserted lamely, knowing that it was the sort of thing you said and feeling powerless to defy boyish convention.

“And we beat you at rugger the term before,” Henry responded. Then, in a moment of candour, both admitted that they hated games and laughed, and the shadow of schoolboy rancour vanished. They knew that it had no part in their blissful shared effort or the prospect of the impending battle with the sea.

In the companionable silence, a fresh wave swept up to the wall. “We’re under siege,” shouted James, “How long will we last?” At last, the climax of the day – the end point of all their efforts. James thought it odd that however massive the castle, it was always destined to disappear. Nothing could resist the power of the sea. And then he wondered whether that was really so: wasn’t it at least possible to construct sand works so massive that some part of them would still be standing when the tide ebbed.

Henry splashed some water at him and banished James’s musings. Which left him with the one pressing question: how long would it take before the sea had swept every trace of their labours away? Another wave washed against the wall and a little sand fell away for the first time. James asked Henry, “Where are your parents?”

He hadn’t registered the absence of Henry’s parents as the castle and walls had taken shape. The previous afternoon they’d been a shadowy presence. The man in grey slacks had called Henry away at supper time but James hadn’t seen him properly.

“They’ve got the big hut next to the nuns,” Henry explained. This was some way from James’s, past the café and at the expensive end of the beach. “They’ll have gone back by now – we’ve got the house behind Gizzi’s.”

Another wave touched the wall. “Look. Look,” Henry yelled, “We’ll be surrounded soon. How long can we hold out?” The water was beginning to lap at the lower reaches of the wall though without any significant effect.

James reflected on Henry’s question and looked out to sea. “It’s coming in slowly – about twenty minutes?” Henry looked at his watch. “My dad’ll be coming to get me soon but I won’t go till the castle’s gone.” A determined expression crossed his face.

With the tide reaching some yards behind, the outer wall was just beginning to crumble, large slivers of sand periodically sliding into the water.

In James’s experience, the crushing power of the sea made short work of any sandcastle and it was odd that this one was taking so long to collapse. He wished there was a big audience to witness their continuing triumph. Finally, and quite suddenly, in the face of a freak wave, a large breach was made and the tide rushed in. The boys had stepped behind one of the interior ramparts and watched in silence, re-engaged in the castle’s epic and doomed struggle, and willing the progress of the sea to slow. The ramparts stood, briefly, until rapidly submerged by the ebb and flow of the water. The boys leant against the castle and watched the advancing tide, now seldom less than a foot deep. Great shards of sand began to fall.

“We’ve got to retreat” shouted James.

“All right, I’m coming,” said Henry and, with shorts soaked by the water, they splashed onto dry sand and sat on the shingle. From there, they watched the castle being steadily reduced to a broad

tower of sand. Finally, the tower narrowed and was engulfed. James smiled at Henry, who sighed contentedly.

“I wonder whether we could build a bigger one,” Henry said. “Two outer walls, that’s what we need. How long did we last?”

James looked at his watch and thought for a moment. “Thirty two minutes from the first wave touching the wall. Beats my record, easily.” They lapsed into a fulfilled silence.

A man, who must have been watching from near Gizzi’s strode onto the shingle towards them. He was slim, muscular, of medium height and noticeably younger than James’s father. James observed a correct, narrow face and wavy brown hair. Henry waved.

“Who’s your friend, Henry?” the man enquired.

“This is James, Daddy.”

James stood up, and looked up into the man’s face, noticing the smart casual clothes, dark hair and a smile that began and ended in the mouth. James extended his hand, feigning a confidence he didn’t feel – never felt, in fact. “How do you do, sir,” James said, hoping that he’d struck the firm, manly note that his mother had told him should be his aim when introduced to grown-ups. He looked the man in the eye in the approved manner.

A fleeting look of surprise appeared to cross the man’s face. He took James’s hand limply, almost as an afterthought, and let go of it absent-mindedly. As he did so, he seemed to smirk slightly. James flushed, experiencing a crushing sense of humiliation. For a moment, he felt paralysed. He couldn’t understand the intensity of the feeling.

Unanswerable questions occurred to him; why had he introduced himself? Why had he offered his hand, so easily inviting a rebuff? Why was the man laughing at him? James was certain that he'd seen derision in that detached expression. All the harmony and joy of the day vanished and, as it did so, an abyss opened under him which, he recognised obscurely, might threaten his new friendship with Henry.

“I expect we'll see you tomorrow,” the man said indifferently. In response, James blurted out a curt, “I've got to go home.” He began to run up the shingle, grazing his bare feet on his spade. Collecting his sandals, he ran past Gizzi's and the tennis courts until, out of breath, he reached the corner by the petrol station. He paused to put on the sandals hoping that the agony of his humiliation would soon begin to ebb. But it was still there. Crossing the road, he ran all the way home and, as he reached the garden gate, he stood still.

Breathlessness temporarily obliterated the recollection but, as he recovered himself, James realised with dismay that it was still there in all its starkness. He trembled when he thought of the moment he'd proffered his hand. Again, he wondered why had he done it, whether he would ever be able to forget that smirk and the humiliation. Back in the house, he went straight to the bedroom and flung himself on the bed. He smothered his face in the pillow. Incomprehensible tears began to flow.

James's sullenness at supper was ascribed to anti-climax and an exhausting day. When he put himself to bed at half-past eight, he caught his mother's comment, as he closed his bedroom door, “No, I've no idea what's bitten him. One can never tell with that child. A fevered imagination.” James wanted to shout out, to tell them all that it wasn't his imagination. He knew.

Next morning, James was reluctant to go to the beach and returned to his bedroom after breakfast, to read. Finally, as his parents were leaving the house carrying the picnic things, he followed them unwillingly. By the time they'd opened the beach hut and put rugs and deck chairs out, it was time for lunch. James ate his sandwiches slowly, keeping a wary eye out. His mother asked him whether he was going to dig on the beach.

"I'm bored with the beach," he said, ignoring his mother's raised eyebrows and the glance exchanged between his parents.

Then, there he was: the sharp features that had borne the smirk, and Henry was following him. James got to his feet and bolted to the rear of the beach hut, along the narrow stony gully that separated number 113 from its neighbour.

Mrs. Turner called, "James, where are you?" followed by a more subdued "No. I'm sorry – he's just disappeared. Do you want to wait? All right, I'll tell him."

James ran along the back of the beach huts, past the café, along the edge of the car park, and then along the shingle bank by the rocky beaches that no one ever visited. He rested by a large nondescript bush smelling faintly of dog excrement. There he remained, either staring at the rocky beach or disconsolately picking up stones and throwing them at nothing in particular. His eyes burnt with tears that never quite came as he thought of his shame and the dawning loss of Henry.

Finally, overcome by hunger, he walked back warily to his parents' beach hut and fended off his mother's interrogation, sullenly

declaring that he was ‘fed-up’ with Henry. For the rest of the day and the following morning James did his best to be absent and invisible, going on long, solitary walks and avoiding the beach. He managed to evade Henry till just before lunch. He was looking up at a red and yellow box kite when he realised that it was being flown from just beside the café. There, just by the ice cream sign, was Henry. Henry gave a smothered glance in James’s direction and turned away. At that moment, James knew he was safe: there would be no need for explanation, no discussion or debate about his shame. It was as if the possibility of friendship with Henry had never been. Henry now wanted to avoid him too.

During the ensuing three weeks James saw Henry on various occasions. Each time they made a pretense of not seeing each other. The sight of Henry was a bitter reminder. Each time, his chest tightened and an electric shock of that humiliation ran up his spine.