

LADYBIRD, LADYBIRD

by Pam Gems

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CAST

FRANKIE, a young girl

MOTHER

DAN, about seventeen

JENNY FLETCHER, a social worker

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LADYBIRD, LADYBIRD

A LIVING ROOM, WHICH GOES THROUGH TO A KITCHEN. IN THE LIVING ROOM A WOMAN SITS OVER AN ELECTRIC BAR FIRE, WHICH IS NOT ON.

A YOUNG GIRL, ABOUT FIFTEEN, ENTERS IN SCHOOL UNIFORM, THROWING DOWN HER SHOULDER BAG OF BOOKS.

FRANKIE Anything to eat?

She forages in the kitchen. The MOTHER does not answer, and only by a vague movement of the head acknowledges awareness of the girl's presence.

FRANKIE makes herself a cup of tea and opens cupboards, looking for something to eat. She finds a Cream Cracker at the bottom of a packet and sits down at the living room table. She fishes the teabag out of her cup and drops it on the oilcloth.

Without a word the MOTHER gets up, picks up the teabag, drops it in a mug in the kitchen, pours hot water over it from the kitchen tap and returns with her cup to her seat by the fire.

FRANKIE There's some milk in the bottle.

There is no response. The MOTHER sits, hunched, turned away from her daughter, sipping the hot liquid noisily. FRANKIE drinks up, but it does not go down well. She chokes slightly, and coughs. When the spasm subsides she pushes the cup aside, flips open her school books and begins to scribble rapidly.

Her MOTHER turns on a small, battered radio. FRANKIE shifts slightly. She looks briefly across at her MOTHER, then goes on writing. Finishing with a wild scrawl she slaps her books shut, rises, scraping the

chair horribly, and throws on her coat.

MOTHER Where you going?

FRANKIE Out.

MOTHER Where?

FRANKIE Round to Jean's.

They lock stares.

I'll be back by nine.

MOTHER I don't care what you do.

She turns away, looking up at the mantelpiece.

FRANKIE follows her gaze. There is a letter there.

FRANKIE Hey - is that a letter from the kids?

Her MOTHER looks away.

How are they? Are they all right? (She waits for an answer. There is none)

Can I have a look?

She approaches the letter tentatively.

Can I see?

She gives her MOTHER a swift look, takes silence for a yes, puts her hand up for the letter. There is no remonstrance so she takes it down and reads it. She smiles happily at the news.

FRANKIE They seem to be all right ... yeah .. doesn't say they feel homesick. It looks as though they're having a good time.

Her MOTHER turns away. It is hard to say whether deliberately or not.

FRANKIE We-ell .. it gives you a bit of a break.

She props the letter back carefully.

Right. Anything you want? There's no bread. Shall I get some bread?

Her MOTHER turns and looks up at her with a petrified face.

(Gently) I'll get some bread, Mum.

There is no response.

See you later.

She goes. The MOTHER sits. She appears to be listening to the radio. Then she gets up and tears the letter violently into small pieces. She turns off the radio and crosses to a cupboard. She pokes about and finds a pot of jam. She brings it back to the centre of the living room and stands there, eating the jam out of the pot with her fingers. Finishing the pot she wipes her hands on her dress and then stands on a chair. She fetches down a piece of greaseproof paper from the top of the fitment, takes from it a solitary slice of sliced ham, puts it on a plate. She lays a knife and fork, and a bottle of sauce as her son DAN enters. He is about seventeen, like his sister young and comely and full of life and energy.

DAN Hullo, our Mum!

He throws off his knapsack, takes off his outer jacket, washes his hands under the kitchen tap and has a deep drink of water. His MOTHER makes him a cup of tea.

DAN Thanks.

He clicks approvingly out of the side of his mouth at her as she stands over him in her old kimono. Her gaze is mild in response.

How've you been?

MOTHER Not too good.

DAN Did you get to work?

She shakes her head.,

Look I said - go down the surgery! Tell him you want to see a specialist .. get on to him!

(She makes a sneering sound) I would.

MOTHER Do you want some ham?

He seems surprised at the offer, turns and sees the thin, unadorned slice on the plate. And pulls a funny face, unseen by his MOTHER.

DAN Thanks.

He sits at the table. His MOTHER undoes his knapsack, takes out the squashed remains of his midday sandwiches and puts them next to his plate. She pours the remains of the milk in his tea carefully, to the last drop. He eats. She watches him.

DAN Where's Frankie?

MOTHER How should I know? I see you've bruised your knuckles.

DAN Did she do her homework?

MOTHER She was scribbling something. (He nods, his SISTER is home safe)

DAN She must have done then.

A pause while he eats.

Heard anything from the kids? (She does not reply)

We'll hear soon. As soon as they're settled. What about going down to see them, do you fancy that?

MOTHER Where's the money coming from?

But again she gives him a mild look.

If I still had the bike I could run you down there.

She gives him a mocking look that is almost a grin.

You think they'd have let us know. A postcard or something. Still, they must be all right. You're getting a rest, that's the main thing.

He looks round vaguely, hoping to light upon something else to eat. He is reaching for his crumpled daily paper as FRANKIE enters with a plastic carrier. She dumps down onto the table a loaf of bread, butter, cheese, milk, biscuits and a four-pack of beer.

DAN (Pleased) Hey! ..

MOTHER What's all this?

FRANKIE He needs milk for his tea.

MOTHER Where did this come from?

FRANKIE The shop, where do you think? At least you can have

FRANKIE a decent cup of tea.

MOTHER (Quick) He's had his tea, he's had some ham.

FRANKIE Oh? Where from? (To DAN) Did you bring it back with you?

He shakes his head at her behind his MOTHER'S back.

MOTHER I bought it for him.

FRANKIE Oh. Thanks. I'm supposed to live on fresh air, I suppose.

MOTHER You get a school dinner. Danny's earning.

FRANKIE (To her MOTHER) Do you want some bread and cheese?

MOTHER I don't want anything.

FRANKIE mutters in fury and leaves the room, banging the door loudly. DAN falls swiftly on the food.

DAN You've upset her.

MOTHER Expects to come in here of a Monday night to a three-course meal, she's got another think coming.

DAN Leave it.

MOTHER Where did she get the money? Coming in here showing off like that - did you give her any money?

DAN I gave her a sub this morning.

MOTHER How much?

DAN Couple of quid.

MOTHER What! What for? I won't have her cadging off you -

DAN Your library fines for one thing, take the bloody books back on time! (Slight pause) She's got to keep up with the other girls, Mum. She needed some tights.

MOTHER Oh yes, to gad about in .. when she's not sitting with her nose in a book.

DAN What about you? All I ever see is the top of your two heads.

 A voice outside the door calls.

VOICE (Sing-song tone, bright) Anybody in? Hullo?

DAN Somebody at the door.

MOTHER Sssh!

DAN Who is it?

MOTHER (Urgent) Sssh ..

 She gestures for him to stay still.

VOICE Can I come in?

DAN (Mouths) They can tell we're in, the light's on.

MOTHER (Mouths) Shut up.

 They wait. Silence.

DAN They've gone I think.

SOCIAL WORKER (Outside) Hullo ... Ok if I come in?

DAN, about to sit, jerks to his feet again, pulling a face. His MOTHER moves away, crosses to her corner and leans against the mantelpiece and the wall. a YOUNG WOMAN enters. She is untidily dressed, with a bulging shoulder bag. She is no great beauty and her hair is boring. DAN, nonetheless, brightens at the sight of a young female.

DAN Mum .. ah ...

JENNY Hullo, Mrs. Ashley, I just wanted to see how -

MOTHER What do you want?

JENNY How have you been? (To DAN) Hi .. I'm Jenny Fletcher ..

DAN Pleased to meet you.

JENNY I can't stop, but I just thought I'd pop in to make sure you were Ok. Sorry I'm late but there's been the odd crisis. (To DAN) Miss Mackintosh is away.

DAN (Slightly less warm) Oh. You're from the borough?

JENNEY (With a winning grimace) Right! Have you heard yet .. from the kids? How are they getting on?

DAN No idea, we haven't heard.

JENNY Oh? That's funny, it should have arrived by now, we - never mind, tomorrow I expect. (She turns fully to the MOTHER) How are you? I hear you've been under the weather -

MOTHER What?

JENNY Under the weather. A bit, you know .. well ...

The other two regard her without response.

JENNY Yes - well .. silly really. I mean, we're all under the weather if you think about it. Underneath the weather .. (she trails off)

DAN (After a silence) Do you want a cup of tea?

His MOTHER gives him a fearsome glare behind the girl's back.

JENNY Oh. Mmm, thank you. (Her bright smile indicates that she has been drinking tea in four households already.)

DAN gestures her to a seat. The MOTHER remains standing, propped up against the mantelpiece.

DAN Mum's not well.

JENNY Has she seen the - (to the MOTHER) have you seen the doctor?

MOTHER I'm on tablets.

DAN Do you take sugar?

JENNY Oh thanks, three please. (The MOTHER'S head turns) No, make that two. Two.

DAN Sure? (She nods, smiling matily) So - been solving all the problems eh?

JENNY Trying to.

DAN Pretty tough.

JENNY Well, no peace for the wicked.

MOTHER Who?

JENNY What? Oh .. sorry ... I seem to be getting into cliches. Are they doing anything?

MOTHER What?

JENNY The tablets .. for your .. (with the fastest glimpse at her open file) back?

DAN and his MOTHER look at each other, genuinely mystified.

DAN Back?

JENNY Wasn't it your -

DAN Mum gets stomach trouble.

Hiatus. A pause.

So, the kids have settled in OK?

JENNY Right as rain. (She catches the MOTHER'S remorseless eye) Ah. Done it again. I must watch that .. maddening. No, they were looking fine.

MOTHER (Slightly startled) You saw them?

JENNY Sorry?

MOTHER You've seen them? You've seen my kids?

JENNY Yes! We thought we'd take a break, pop down to the home, make sure everybody was OK. It was great. We watched them play football. Brian scored a goal!

MOTHER (Thick voice) What about Sean?

JENNY Oh, he was ... you know, settling in.

MOTHER Was he crying?

She stares at the girl, Medusa-faced. The girl is unable to deny it, or speak before her face.

MOTHER He was crying.

Slight pause.

JENNY They're bound to be a bit homesick at first.

THE MOTHER turns away.

Shows what a good home they come from if they miss it!

No response .

I gave him a cuddle.

Pause.

DAN How's his asthma?

JENNY Asthma?

This baffles her for a second, then she nods competently.

Right. (She makes a note, uncapping her fountain pen, and looks up with a reassuring grin) No, they're settling in really well, honest. It's a super place.

The MOTHER turns suddenly and gives her a terrible, brilliant smile. Again the Social Worker is defeated. She breaks the stillness by a foraging dive into her shoulder bag.

Brian sent you this.

She gives the MOTHER a shapeless, coiled brown object, about palm-sized. The MOTHER'S hand remains open.

MOTHER What is it?

JENNY (Giggles) Actually I'm not too sure! (To DAN)
 They've got a kiln down there, great facilities for arts and crafts .. they've got looms, silk-screens, printing press a lot of the local people give voluntary training in their spare time, people are very good. They get the little ones doing modelling - of course they're too young to throw pots but they let them put their little bits in the oven.

DAN and the MOTHER exchange a glance.

MOTHER It looks like a lump of shit to me.

The Social Worker decides that this is a joke and gives a little shriek of laughter. Dan, under no such illusion, moves abruptly and takes the object from his MOTHER'S hand.

JENNY We'll have to give him the benefit of the doubt.

DAN (Since she shows no sign of going) More tea?

And gets another glare from his MOTHER.

JENNY Ooh no - no thanks ... well OK, if there's a drop more.

The MOTHER rises as DAN turns to the pot, prowls behind the Social Worker, grabs the biscuits brought in by FRANKIE and shoves them under JENNY'S nose.

MOTHER Biscuit?

JENNY Ah, no thanks.

MOTHER (Tearing savagely at the wrapper) I'm sorry I can't offer you anything more substantial, I'm slimming at the moment.

JENNY Thanks, I've just eaten.

MOTHER You sure? They're .. (with a quick glance at the label) .. Rich Osborne!

DAN (Putting down the refilled mug of tea) Sorry it's a bit weak.

They watch as she sips from the huge mug. She manages yet another cheerful grin.

JENNY Perhaps I'll change my mind.

The MOTHER offers the biscuits promptly.

MOTHER (As the Social Worker takes one) Take two. You'll need two with a mug that size. Why didn't you offer her a decent cup, Dan?

He looks at her baffled. They have no cups.

Have you noticed, Danny? Miss Fletcher's got green eyes.

JENNY My name's Jenny - I mean, if you want. (She eats)

MOTHER Go on, take another.

JENNY Thanks, I'm OK.

MOTHER She was going on about it last time she came. I thought of you when I was in Woolworths.

DAN (Mutters warningly) Leave it.

MOTHER No .. they had some of those poppit beads .. I haven't seen them for ages, they used to be all the rage I thought, just the thing for that Miss Whatsername. Pondweed green, isn't that what you said?

She blunders to her feet, and seems for a moment to be unfocused.

JENNY Did I? To be honest I -

MOTHER No, I've got them somewhere if I can find them.

She moves about, knocking things over.

JENNY It doesn't matter. The next time I look in.

MOTHER (Turning for a split second) Next time? (She carries on searching, throwing out the contents of a sewing box) They're in a plastic bag -

JENNY Oh lovely. Perhaps Friday ..

MOTHER - a black, plastic bag ...

JENNY I just wanted you to know that the boys were OK ..

MOTHER - unless she's been at them ..

JENNY I must be off ...

MOTHER I remember. I hid them in the lavatory.

She dodges out of the room with a competent and reassuring smile.

JENNY (Quickly, to DAN) How has she been?

DAN About the same.

JENNY Has she seen her doctor?

DAN No - look I think you better -

He jerks his head for her to go but it is too late.
The MOTHER returns with the beads.

MOTHER Here we are. Look - there, do you see, Dan? It's a lovely match. Stand still.

She puts the beads round the girl's neck, turns her round for inspection.

No, I think they'll go round again.

She unpopps them and doubles up.

JENNY Ooh, that's too tight! I think they're too tight - could you - ?

DAN They're too tight, Mum! Take them off, you bloody fool, you'll throttle her -

MOTHER Rubbish, they're only poppets. Just unpop them and they fall to bits.

JENNY Oh please

She cannot get her fingers inside the beads.

DAN Here, stand still, I'll do it - stand still, I'll just get my finger in -

MOTHER (Giggles) Oh not your great fingers, Danny .. here .. ooh dear .. (as the girl gives a short, gasping scream) .. uncomfy, is it? No, you're right, they are a bit tight .. I'll get a knife.

And she has a large carving knife in her hand.

JENNY (Slowly and carefully) Mrs. Ashley put the knife down.

DAN takes the knife and pushes his MOTHER away.
He undoes the beads and they fall to the floor.

MOTHER (Reasonably) I was only going to cut her free.

DAN and the girl pick up the beads and put them
on the table. The MOTHER leans against the mantelpiece.

MOTHER (Still reasonably) When are my kids coming back?

JENNY Sorry?

MOTHER Well you must know. When are you bringing my kids
back?

JENNY I thought you were pleased with the arrangements.
Miss Mackintosh said -

MOTHER How long are they going to be away?

JENNY We're making every effort to rehouse you. The idea
is for you to have a rest. A sort of holiday.

MOTHER Holiday.

The Social Worker bends to pick up her notebooks.

How far is it?

JENNY I beg your pardon?

MOTHER To the home? The place where you've got my kids.

JENNY I'm not absolutely sure.

MOTHER But you've been there. You've seen them.

JENNY It's part of my job.

MOTHER Oh well, in that case. (But she sits suddenly, as if losing energy and interest)

The Social Worker puts her things together, takes her shoulder bag from the chair, preparing to go. The MOTHER grins to herself .. laughs slightly.

MOTHER Did I ever tell you I always remember
(she laughs)

DAN What?

MOTHER When you were born. Did I ever tell you? About the time you were born?

DAN No you never. Did I make it?

MOTHER Matter of opinion.

JENNY Could I just -

She reaches for the rest of her things on the table.

MOTHER It was in U.C.H. - Unviversity College Hospital. We were living near King's Cross at the time, before they pulled it all down. Your father was with a carpet firm. Can I offer you a glass of beer - Danny, get a glass. Don't worry .. (as he looks among the debris in the kitchen) .. I'll have mine in a cup. (She throws her tea-dregs across the room, narrowly missing the Social Worker)

My daughter popped back with some shopping for me, she's just gone round to see a schoolfriend biscuit?

The Social Worker is forced to sit again. She shakes

her head at the biscuit, but takes a large glass of beer from DAN.

MOTHER Anyway, what was I saying?

DAN When you were in hospital -

MOTHER Oh yes. Oh Lord, yes. First view you ever got of the world was those overhead lights. Screeching bright lights, tiled walls and green masks - it's no wonder kids like science fiction.

No. An interesting day.

I wanted a boy.

I don't know why. I wonder why that is.

DAN What?

MOTHER Mothers and sons.

She looks at him. He grins genially, and then at the Social Worker.

MOTHER Anyway ... they were going to induce me, get you going .. you were overdue. I was frightened, I was only a kid, I thought they meant you were dead, and they don't tell you. However. Anyway, as luck would have it you decided to arrive at one am .. they'd just bedded me down .. I was popular, I can tell you. What's more, as it turned out, you were born dead - they'd given me too much pethidine, not realising you were almost there, and it stopped your heart. They lifted me up to watch you being born - for some reason you're on your back, it's like trying to shit a brick with the lav on the wall - of course, out you came with a swoosh all grey and dead, not that I realised .. they whipped you off somewhere, I

MOTHER could hear them muttering and scurrying around cursing to themselves. A nice young Chinese student did the delivery, it was his first. He kept looking up my way to ask if I was oorr light, then he couldn't find the vein to inject the stuff to get the afterbirth away so they gave me a whacking great punch in the stomach. Anyway ... after they'd mucked about with you for a bit I heard this sort of little gasp .. this little sort of a choke ...

DAN And that was me?

MOTHER I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it.

I got a good look at you while they were talking ... they put you on a trolley quite close. You had a tube up your nose .. oxygen ... they'd wrapped you in this bit of old blanket .. blue ... anyway, it was close enough for me to see you. Weird really. Your ears were all bent down, you had no chin, I don't know where your chin was, there were red marks all over your head and you were yellow - you were jaundiced they told me after. I couldn't get it straight - I was dopy with the gas and air ... first the Chinese student, then this Chinese baby .. your eyes were all slitted up with the drug, the pethidine. (Factually) Of course I knew you were mine because you were still me. Then all of a sudden they whisked me off to the pre-theatre room where they put the Caesars, they were short of beds. I sat up and waited for you - I was as wide awake as a toad and ever so hungry, but of course there was nothing doing at that time of night, and when they didn't bring you I thought, hullo, what's up, what's wrong? I sat up listening to the hot water pipes and watching the clock on the wall you can imagine what I thought, I'd given you up altogether except I didn't want to ask, I wanted to put off knowing, you can see why they kill messengers with bad news anyway,

MOTHER I was too frightened to ring the bell .. I did in the end and oh dear, did I get told off ... "you'll have to wait, we've got forty babies to see to ... " I couldn't help thinking, well, I'll take one off your hands, just bring me mine, of course I still thought you were dead and they weren't telling me, by this time my nipples were dribbling all down the front of my gown, I was so embarrassed and I was getting these terrible contractions, where I wanted you. In the end I got up, I had to, I didn't care, I couldn't help it I could hear you crying somewhere. I got a short answer for that, I thought they were going to lock me in.

JENNY They were probably short-staffed.

MOTHERS Oh I've no complaints about their efficiency. They were very efficient. I'm efficient myself. (She looks round the chaotic room)

DAN So ... did you ever get me?

MOTHER Well, I suppose it was you. You were still swaddled up in the bit of blue blanket .. your head looked like a black bean. It was wringing wet. The blanket. Where you'd been crying. What's this, I said? "Oh, he's been naughty .. he's been a noisy boy, haven't you? He's had a whole bottle of water already." I was sitting there soaking and they'd stuck a piece of rubber in your mouth.

The Social Worker rises quietly.

JENNY (Gently) I must be going.

MOTHER Like your father's last day. I didn't know, you know. I had no warning. Everything was going along ... normal all of a sudden .. stop.

MOTHER Nothing. Finish. Nothing at all. Like the blind man I saw being interviewed on TV once. They asked him what it was like, being blind. (She gives a scoffing, soundless laugh, lifting her head)
"I suppose it's all dark" says the interviewer. "No, no" says the blind man "it's not dark, no, no."
"Oh, what's it like then?" says the interviewer "What is there?"
"Nothing" says the blind man " there's nothing, nothing at all."

She drinks deeply from her cup of beer.

Have you got a boyfriend?

JENNY No, not at the moment.

MOTHER Pretty girl like you, I should think they'd be queueing up.

JENNY I don't have much time.

MOTHER No life of your own?

JENNY I get pretty tired.

MOTHER Now that's something Geoff never was. He worked very long hours, on the go all day. And the worry, well there was never enough. Still, just the same .. all our children were conceived in rapture. No - planning.

Oh no.

We-ell, never the right time is it? Look at the price of a pram, never mind a roof over your head .. not to mention the inconvenience. I mean - you've just finished growing up, got it together with a bit of knowhow and elegance, all of a sudden, straight

MOTHER back to everything smelling of widdle. I remember changing Brian's nappy once .. we were out in the car and I was using a disposable. I went to throw it out of Geoff's window, which was open, and gave him a shit moustache.

DAN snorts into his beer.

I can't think why we went in for you all really. Geoff used to say it was his contribution to society, providing energy units. People look at you really funny if you go in for children nowadays. They think you're Catholic or daft. Or that he's gay and wants to keep you quiet. You get some funny looks. And told off, if they think you can't afford it and it's going to come out of their taxes. I often wonder why we did it, I mean, it wasn't just to have you, Geoff hated the idea of owning things, he said it was just another word for maintenance and you know how good he was at that. He wouldn't even say my son, my daughter ... 'they're not mine' he used to say 'they're their own. They belong to themselves.' He just wanted people to be with. It's natural.
(She drinks) We were as bad as each other. I'd have had a dozen, just to see what came out. I like babies.
(Turns to the Social Worker) Do you know what I really like? Naming them. Choosing names. I really love that - not that we didn't always settle for something safe in the end. I've always been fond of the name Violet, but it's not fashionable nowadays. People don't go in for violets much. Are you going to have any?

JENNY I haven't really thought about it.

MOTHER How old are you?

JENNY Twenty-six.

MOTHER And you haven't thought about it?

JENNY There are so many people in the world already.

MOTHER Yes. I keep hearing that. Well, don't leave it too long. You haven't got forever.

JENNY To be honest I've never had the urge.

MOTHER Oh you don't get that till you've had the first. Of course in the old days people got started willy-nilly, now, with being able to choose ... Geoff used to say that with the Pill and being able to get out of it, in the end only motherly and fatherly people would end up having kids. So eventually they'd be the only sort left. The other thieving buggers would go extinct.

DAN gives a short bark of laughter.

JENNY It's such an awful responsibility.

MOTHER You're looking after children aren't you?

JENNY Yes but they're not my own.

MOTHER No. You can get off the boat and throw away the paddle any time you want.

JENNY I beg your pardon?

MOTHER What about his asthma?

JENNY Sorry .. what ... ?

MOTHER Standing around on a bloody football pitch in this weather.

JENNY Oh. Well .. look, I'm sorry, this is really Miss Mackintosh's case.

MOTHER Case. Do you hear that, Dan? Case.

JENNY We do our best.

The MOTHER turns in her chair violently, leaning over and craning towards DAN.

MOTHER Do you know what she said to me ... the other one .. the old one when I wouldn't sign the bit of paper she stood there and said ... of course, from our point of view it really would be easier if the boys were in care. (She heaves a theatrical sigh) With a little sigh. I was being a nuisance, not wanting to get rid of you all so's they could do their jobs I felt like saying, am I affecting your livelihood, sorry - shall I cut me ear off, give you something to be going on with?

She tips the edge of the Social Worker's files, almost toppling them. The Social Worker makes a saving grab.

Then there was the one before that .. with the twitch. And the one before her ... the one who never stopped grumbling about the price of everything, and not being able to get a decent flat. Poor thing .. she felt it affected her work, she had to go back to Sunderland in the end and do electronics - Shut the Bloody Door!

This last is bawled at FRANKIE. FRANKIE turns, slams the door and takes off her coat.

FRANKIE Who's this?

JENNY Jenny Fletcher.

FRANKIE Oh?

JENNY I'm a Social Worker.

FRANKIE Oh. One of them. How are the kids?

JENNY Fine, they're looking very well.

FRANKIE Oh you've seen them?

JENNY I saw them yesterday, they're settling in nicely.

FRANKIE Yeah, we got the letter.

There are looks all round. DAN fills the breach after an open-mouthed scowl at his MOTHER.

DAN Brian made this.

He proffers the brown object.

FRANKIE What's it supposed to be?

The MOTHER suddenly grasps her midriff and doubles over in violent pain. She makes repetitive, loud animal grunts, going into a howl. The sounds are awful, too loud, inhuman and frightening.

FRANKIE Christ Almighty!

She wrests the slopping cup of beer from her MOTHER'S hand.

DAN What's up, Mum?

JENNY Are you all right, Mrs. Ashley?

The MOTHER howls and writhes, clutching her abdomen.

What is it?!

DAN She said she'd had stomach ache Mum?

The MOTHER begin to groan. The sounds are now softer, not so terrifying. They stand round her.

FRANKIE (Apart) Oh, leave her alone.

DAN What is it?

FRANKIE approaches her MOTHER.

FRANKIE Come on, you better lie down.

JENNY She seems quite ill. Shouldn't you call a doctor?

FRANKIE (Helping her MOTHER out of the room) You got some funny ideas.

We can hear the MOTHER being sick outside.
FRANKIE returns.

DAN What do you think, Fran?

The Social Worker moves anxiously. FRANKIE stops her from going to the MOTHER.

FRANKIE She's better on her own.

JENNY (To DAN) I do think, the doctor -

DAN (To FRANKIE) What do you think?

FRANKIE Leave her alone, for God's sake.

JENNY I'm sorry but I think we must do something. She sounds very distressed.

DAN She did say she'd been feeling bad.

FRANKIE Look for Christ's sake leave her alone! Leave it!

She sits down heavily in the broken armchair, at a distance from them.

She'll be all right in a minute.

JENNY Perhaps I'd better wait. Just in case.

The girl gives her a look of contempt, turns away and opens a paperback, cracking back the spine.

JENNY (To DAN) We'll see how she is in a minute.

DAN (Nods) I suppose you .. ah ... you see quite a lot, eh? Different problems.

JENNY We haven't got the facilities we'd like.

DAN No, well, same all over.

JENNY Most of the time it's just a question of holding the fort, clearing the decks.

FRANKIE Why, you in the navy?

Slight Pause.

DAN What made you go in for it?

JENNY Sorry?

DAN This sort of work.

JENNY I wanted to help people.

Slight pause.

FRANKIE (Shouts at her MOTHER) You OK out there?

There is the sound of a muffled reply. The sounds of someone being sick subside. The MOTHER appears at the door, the worse for wear. She looks smaller and is trembling slightly from the bout of sickness.

FRANKIE rises.

FRANKIE Get a towel, Dan.

She crosses to the sink, runs water in the washing-up bowl, gets soap and a raggy flannel. The Social Worker finds a towel, gives it to DAN.

DAN Thanks.

FRANKIE begins to clean her MOTHER down and sponge the sick off her.

FRANKIE I shouldn't have brought that beer in. I knew I was making a mistake.

MOTHER (Mumbles) It went down the wrong way. Mind!

She flinches as FRANKIE washes her face.

FRANKIE You'll have to take this off, it stinks.

DAN Have a lie down, Mum.

The girl empties the bowl, rinses it out and hands it back to the MOTHER.

FRANKIE Here, you better take this in case you're sick again. Where's your book?

DAN reaches over and picks up a book.

DAN Here.

MOTHER No not that one, the other one .. the one about

MOTHER Margot Fonteyn.

The Social Worker finds it, gives it to DAN, who gives it to FRANKIE, who gives it to her MOTHER.

DAN Here, I'll take her. Do you want a cup of tea?

FRANKIE I'll bring you some aspirin later on. Let her stomach settle first.

MOTHER Can I have the fire?

DAN unplugs the electric fire. He takes his MOTHER out.

FRANKIE crosses and sits in her MOTHER'S chair. She picks up her book.

JENNY Has she had spasms like this before?

The girl ignores her. The Social Worker makes a note in her case history.

Let me know how she goes on. (FRANKIE does not answer) Perhaps you'd give me a ring. I'll write my number down for you.

She proffers the piece of paper with the telephone number but the girl carries on reading. The Social Worker puts the piece of paper on the table, tucking it under the bottle of tomato sauce.

I've left it on the table.

The girl continues to read.

Is there anything I can do for you?

FRANKIE turns a page.

JENNY

You're sure there's nothing you need?

There is no response.

Good-night then. I'll be going.

Still no response from FRANKIE.

Good-night.

She turns at the door.

I hope your mother feels better soon. If not,
do telephone.

She pauses for a moment but the girl continues to
read without acknowledgment.

The Social Worker leaves. FRANKIE moves her head
briefly, noting the departure, and carries on
reading.