

The Fifth Child, by Doris Lessing - 1998

Ben is now about fifteen years old. He doesn't go to school but prefers hanging around with "his gang", a group of drop-outs who are often involved in robberies, street violence, maybe rapes... They often come to his house to eat, drink, watch TV. Sometimes they don't turn up for a few days and Harriet doesn't know where Ben is.

The four other children now live away from home, and Harriet must cope alone with all this. David isn't often at home either...

Lisez ce passage, situé vers la fin du roman, puis dites, en Français, ce que vous avez compris, autour de **4 grands axes** :

- Qui sont les personnages présents dans ce passage, où sont-ils, et que font-ils ?
- Que se passe-t-il dans ce passage ? Résumez rapidement l'enchaînement des faits.
- De quoi les 2 personnages principaux parlent-ils ? Quelles sont leurs positions respectives sur ces sujets ?
- Analysez les sentiments des personnages, et la relation entre les différents groupes de personnages.

David came back from work late, these days, and sometimes did not come at all. He stayed with one of the people he worked with. It happened that he arrived early one night and found the gang, nine or ten of them, watching television, with beer cans, cartons of take-away Chinese, papers that had held fish and chips, all over the floor.

He said, 'Clear that mess up.'

They slowly got to their feet and cleared it up. He was a man: the man of the house. Ben cleared up with them.

'That's enough,' said David. 'And now go home, all of you.'

They trailed off, and Ben went with them. Neither Harriet nor David said anything to stop him.

They had not been alone together for some time. Weeks, she thought. He wanted to say something, but

was afraid to – afraid of arousing that dangerous anger of his?

'Can't you see what is going to happen?' he finally asked, sitting down with a plate of whatever he could find in the refrigerator.

'You mean, they are going to be here more often?'

'Yes, that's what I mean. Can't you see we should sell this place?'

'Yes, I know we should,' she said quietly, but he mistook her tone.

'For God's sake, Harriet, what can you be waiting for? It's crazy . . .'

'The only thing I can think of now is that the children might be pleased we kept it.'

'We have no children, Harriet. Or, rather, I have no children. *You* have one child.'

She felt that he would not be saying this if he were here more often. She said, 'There is something you aren't seeing, David.'

'And what's that?'

'Ben will leave. They'll all be off, and Ben will go with them.'

He considered this; considered her, his jaws moving slowly as he ate. He looked very tired. He was also looking much older than he was, could easily be taken as sixty, rather than fifty. He was a grey, rather stooped, shadowy man, with a strained look, and a wary glance that expected trouble. This was what he was directing at her now.

'Why? They can come here any time they like, do what they like, help themselves to food.'

'It's not exciting enough for them, that's why. I think

they'll just drift off one day to London, or some big town. They went off for five days last week.'

'And Ben will go with them?'

'Ben will go with them.'

'And you won't go after him and bring him back?'

She did not reply. This was unfair, and he must know it; after a moment or two, he said, 'Sorry. I'm so tired I don't know whether I'm coming or going.'

'When he's gone, perhaps we could go and have a holiday together somewhere.'

'Well, perhaps we could.' This sounded as if he might even believe it, hope for it.

Later they lay side by side, not touching, and talked practically about arrangements for visiting Jane at her school. And there was Paul, at his, with a Parents' Visiting Day.

They were alone in the big room where all the children but Ben had been born. Above them the emptiness of the upper floors, and the attic. Downstairs, the empty living-room and kitchen. They had locked the doors. If Ben decided to come home that night, he would have to ring.

She said, 'With Ben gone, we could sell this and buy some sensible house somewhere. Perhaps the children would enjoy coming to visit if he wasn't there.'

No reply: David was asleep.