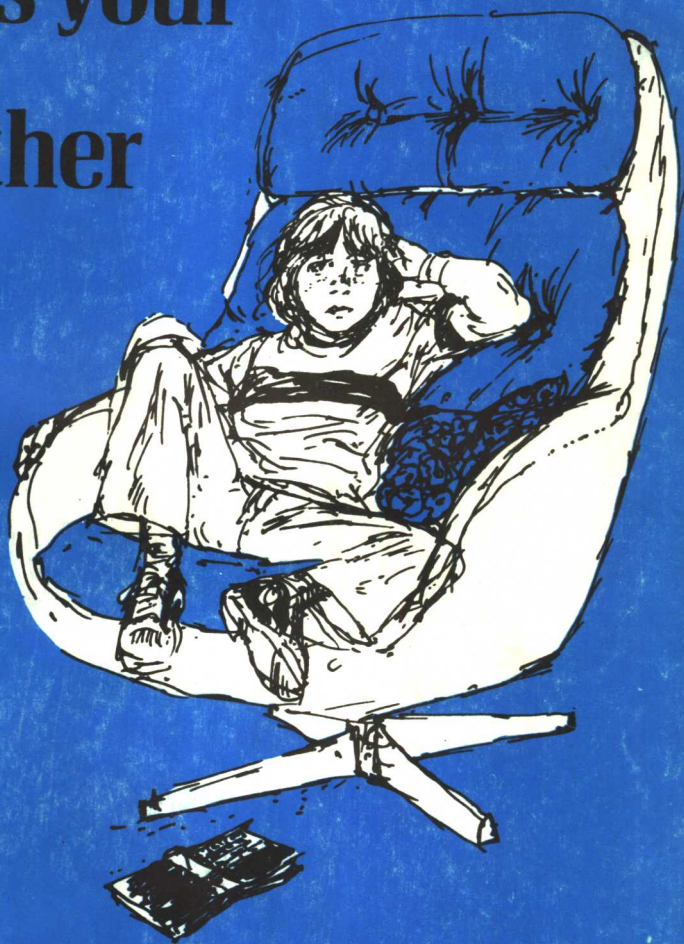


He is your brother



RICHARD PARKER

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON SYDNEY AUCKLAND TORONTO

By the same author

LION AT LARGE
NEW HOME SOUTH
THE HOUSE THAT GUILDA DREW
ONE WHITE MOUSE
PAUL AND ETTA
SECOND-HAND FAMILY
THE BOY WHO WASN'T LONELY

ISBN 0-340-17589 3

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(now Hodder and Stoughton Children's Books)

First published 1974

Second impression 1983

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*Published by Hodder and Stoughton Children's Books,
a division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, Mill Road,
Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 2YJ*

*Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, Aylesbury, Bucks*

One

Mike spent the entire morning in his room rearranging his railway collection. When he told his mother she said:

'That's a good idea. Do you think, while you're about it, you could put some of it *away*?'

'What exactly do you mean by away?' Mike asked suspiciously.

'Away? Out of sight, that's what I mean. Your room's like a jumble sale.'

'The whole point about a collection is that it has to be displayed,' Mike said patiently.

'Yes, dear. Of course.' Mrs Lewis gave up straight away. 'Have you seen Orry?'

'Not since breakfast.'

'Perhaps he's in his room.'

She and Mike went upstairs together and she opened the first door on the landing.

'Oh dear,' she said. 'Someone's upset him.'

Orry's room was absolutely bare except for a bed and a mattress.

'He's posted his blankets again,' said Mike.

'It looks like it.'

They looked out of the window and saw pillow, sheets and blankets below on the lawn.

'I'll fetch them for you,' said Mike.

'No, that's all right. You get on with your tidying.'

'I didn't say anything about tidying,' Mike objected. 'I said I was going to rearrange.'

He was half-way up the second flight of stairs towards his

attic room when he remembered something and leaned over the banisters.

'I think I heard mutterings coming from the cupboard under the stairs,' he called down.

'Right. Thanks.'

Mike paused where he was, thinking of his young brother. Then he remembered what he'd planned to do with his things. 'Poor old Orry!' he said aloud and went on up to his room.

Mike's room was rather splendid for one person to have all to himself. It was about twice the size of any normal bedroom. It had a window each end – one to let the morning sun come in to wake him and the other to let the evening sun warm the room up before bedtime. And between the two windows there was a glory of space.

One wall was taken up with a long, wide shelf that could be used as a work-surface and above that were two narrower shelves that were excellent for display purposes. Mike regarded these two shelves with great satisfaction; they were at present quite filled with the items of his collection – the smaller items. There were name plates and number plates, carriage door handles, leather straps for raising and lowering windows, brass ash-trays, nuts and bolts, railway tickets, way-bills, cap badges, uniform buttons, odd-shaped pieces of metal that defied anyone but the expert to identify. On the wider shelf were larger items; not so many of these but an impressive number. Two lanterns, a machine for putting the date on tickets, a bundle of signal flags, three caps, a lever from a signal box, a station name plate which read COLYTON and a large enamelled plate advertising Iron Jelloids.

There were some even larger trophies on the floor, propped up against the wall all round the room. Some of these could be recognized – a complete signal arm for instance, the top of an ancient penny-in-the-slot chocolate machine, a coal shovel – but the rest were large pieces of iron without obvious purpose. Mike of course knew what each piece was, where it came from,

what it had been used for. He could go on for hours about railway history. Unfortunately no one else in the family was interested so he had to save it for his fellow enthusiasts.

Mike pondered for a moment over the size of the task now before him. Then he locked the door of his room. He picked up one of the caps and put it on. He turned slowly and looked with pride and affection at the finest piece of his whole collection. This was the name plate of the old Thanet Belle which was fixed to the wall above his bed.

'You, old friend,' he said aloud, 'can stay there. Later on, if I've got time, I might give you a rub over with an oily rag.'

He gave a tug to the peak of his cap. Then he turned his attention to the shelves and began to take down all the things one by one, humming to himself as he did so.

He had been occupied for about half an hour when the sound of pop music came to him from the room beneath. It was turned on so loud that the floorboards seemed to hum. Mike leapt to his feet and began to operate the morse key screwed to a small table near his bed. He had to give the call sign three or four times before he got any reply.

'She's making too much noise to hear it, that's the trouble,' he muttered. But at that moment an answer came.

'Di-da, di-da, di-da - ready to receive message.'

He thought a moment and then tapped out, 'Please reduce noise level.'

There was a pause. Then, 'Di-da-dit - repeat message.'

Mike clicked his tongue with impatience and repeated it.

'Di-da-dit.'

'Oh really!' he exploded. 'She's not jolly well trying.'

He was in the middle of sending his message for the third time when someone rattled the handle of his door.

'Hang on a minute,' he called.

'It's no use your going on,' came Jane's voice through the door. 'I'm not down there to hear it.'

Mike unlocked the door, flung it open and glared fearfully at his sister. 'What's the use of installing station to station tele-



graph if you don't bother to read the message?' he demanded.

'I've got the record-player on,' Jane explained. 'I couldn't hear.'

'Heaven give me strength!' exclaimed Mike, looking upwards at the ceiling in a dramatic way. 'That was the point of the whole operation. I was asking you to turn the row down.'

'It's not a row,' said Jane, unmoved by her brother's apparent fury. 'It's the Soft Machine. But I'll turn it down a bit if that's what you want.'

'Thank you *very* much.'

'Sarcasm is wasted on children,' said Jane. She looked past him into the room. 'What a frantic mess you've got in there.'

Mike closed the door on her and turned the key. A few moments later the sounds from below went much quieter. He smiled to himself. But before he could get back to his task the morse sounder started chattering. He went over to receive.

'P - I - G,' came over in clear, emphatic dots and dashes.

'Message received and understood,' he signalled back.

Within the next hour or so most of the disorder in Mike's room had disappeared and the bits and pieces of his collection were back on the shelves, though of course in a new order. When Jane thumped on the door again he was standing on his bed lovingly rubbing the Thanet Belle with an oily rag.

'Hang on!' He gave a last rub then stepped off the bed and pulled the covers straight. He gave the name plate a last admiring look.

Jane thumped again, harder.

'What an impatient child you are,' Mike said, unlocking the door.

'I'm no more of a child than you are,' she said pushing past him.

'Two years more. Nine is a very childish age.'

Jane snorted but did not take up the challenge. 'Why do you wear that porter's hat?'

Mike removed it and put it with the others in his collection.

'It is *not* a porter's hat,' he said in a voice that was supposed to

express withering scorn. 'If you must know, it's a footplate-man's cap, generally known as a greasetop.'

'Well, anyway, it's lunch time,' she said. 'And Mum says you're not to come down with dirty, oily hands.'

'I can't very well come down without them.'

'You know what she means.'

Mike carefully locked his door when they were both outside and hung the key on a nail that was out of Orry's reach. When they were halfway down the stairs Mrs Lewis's voice called out:

'Jane! Bring Orry with you.'

Jane didn't need to ask where her younger brother was; she opened the door of the cupboard under the stairs and bent down to call him. At first there was no response but when Jane insisted Orry crawled out. Jane held her hand out to him.

'There's a good boy.'

Orry shrank back from the hand as if it was something dangerous, dodged round both the children and ran through to where Mrs Lewis was serving up. He climbed onto his chair and sat with his head bent, his eyes on the edge of the table.

'What's that in your mouth, Orry?' she said, glancing at him while putting out the potatoes on each plate. 'It's not that dirty old bootlace again, is it?'

Two or three inches of what looked like wet string hung from Orry's lips.

'Yuk,' said Jane.

'Give it to me, Orry.' Mrs Lewis held out her hand.

Orry pushed the bottom half of his face forward so that she could reach the bootlace and take it.

'No. I said give it to me.'

Orry raised one arm to show that his hand was covered by the sleeve of his jersey. Mike laughed and Orry raised his eyes for a fraction of a second to glance at him and then looked down again. He dribbled the bootlace out so that it hung over his wrist. Mrs Lewis didn't insist any further; she picked the lace off his sleeve and dropped it into the pocket of her apron.

'Thank you,' she said.

Orry made a noise that sounded like 'Ang-oo', and put his arms down in his lap again.

'Are you coming, Ian?' said Mrs Lewis.

There was a grunt from the far end of the room and Mr Lewis got up slowly from his armchair. With his book still open before him he found his way down the room and sat in his place. On the table in front of him was a sort of wire rack made out of a coat hanger. Mr Lewis propped his book up in this rack and began to eat his meal, his eyes glued to the page.

Mike and Jane exchanged glances. Mike pulled a copy of the *Railway Magazine* out of his pocket. Jane frowned and shook her head. Mike grinned wickedly and, propping the magazine up against the salt cellar, began to eat and read imitating his father.

'Michael! Put that away!'

Instead of doing so Mike looked at his father. 'Books away, Dad!' He reached over to take his father's book off its stand but Mr Lewis struck at his hand.

'What on earth do you think you're about?'

'But Mum said . . .'

At that point Orry, who had been feeding himself with his fingers and ignoring the spoon put for him, pushed his plate off the table. It broke on the floor and potatoes, meat, cauliflower and gravy shot in all directions. Mr Lewis jumped to his feet.

'Oh my God!' he exclaimed. He seized his book and his plate and took them to the far end of the room.

'Orry 'orry,' said Orry, his bottom lip quivering.

'Never mind, dear. It was an accident,' said Mrs Lewis picking up the pieces of plate. Orry got down and shot out of the room. They heard the door of the cupboard under the stairs open and shut. The other two children continued to eat in an uncomfortable silence.

'That wasn't exactly helpful,' said Mrs Lewis mildly to Mike.

'Well, I don't see why there should be one rule for Dad and another rule for us.'

'You know your father's got a concert tomorrow and he'll be

travelling all night. He's got to read through his scores some time.'

Mike grunted. He'd heard it all before and he wasn't convinced. The meal was finished soon after and Jane helped her mother clear away. Mr Lewis went upstairs and from the things he kept calling down to his wife it was clear he was packing. Mike's friend Jock came and he and Mike disappeared upstairs. Jock was another railway fanatic.

Jane wandered about at a loose end for some time and then took a ball outside and played by herself, bouncing the ball against the wall of the house. Then she remembered her library books needed changing and went in to find them.

A taxi drew up outside the house and honked. Mr Lewis called from the upstairs window for the driver to come and help with his things. The cello in its heavy travelling case went first followed by Mr and Mrs Lewis carrying cases. Jane watched from the garden. Just as the taxi was about to leave Mrs Lewis said something to her husband. He looked back towards the house and raised his hand.

'Good-bye, Jane,' he called.

Jane gave a sort of half-wave and then turned and went indoors. When her mother came in Jane was busily getting her books together.

'I'm going down to the library,' she said.

'You weren't very friendly to your father.'

'He wouldn't have even said good-bye if you hadn't reminded him,' said Jane.

'He's got such a lot on his mind,' said Mrs Lewis. 'He'll be in Edinburgh for the whole of next month you know. It's a great deal of work.'

Jane looked at her mother's worried face and felt sorry but she couldn't think what to say. 'I'm off, then,' she said.

Two

'I suppose,' said Mike, 'you'd rather draw the line at a level-crossing gate?'

'A level-crossing gate!' Mrs Lewis repeated faintly.

'Well, half a one, actually.' He saw that his mother was not taking this very well so he prattled on to give her time to recover from the shock. 'It's an old level crossing on the Canterbury-Whitstable line, and Jock says the land's been sold as a factory site and they've just thrown the gates away. There'd be no question of paying for them . . .'

Mrs Lewis still stood as one turned to stone.

'I say, Mum. Look out! The milk's boiling over.'

Mrs Lewis snatched the saucepan off the stove and blew on the white foam. In silence she poured the milk into two mugs, added coffee, put both mugs on the kitchen table and lowered herself onto a stool.

'Now let's get this straight,' she said. 'Where were you thinking of keeping it?'

'I've worked it out that it would just go against the wall in my room . . .'

'A huge great gate! In your room!'

'Oh,' said Mike. 'I thought you might feel like that.'

'Well, really!'

'The other place,' Mike went on hurriedly, 'is really better. It could go across the entrance to the garage.'

'We've already got two gates there.'

'It would mean a bit of alteration,' Mike admitted. 'But it would look rather splendid, wouldn't it? I'd paint it up, of course.'

'What do you think your father could say?'

'I don't suppose he'd even notice.'

Mrs Lewis laughed. 'No, he probably wouldn't. All the same I think we'd have to ask him first.'

'But he's away.'

'He'll be back on Thursday.'

'Thursday!' Mike groaned. 'It might be too late by then. They might break it up or burn it or something dreadful.'

Mrs Lewis looked sympathetic but said nothing.

'I think I'll go over this afternoon and have a look at it,' Mike said.

'This afternoon?' said Mrs Lewis. 'Oh, I was going to ask you to look after Orry this afternoon. I've got a dental appointment and I can't very well take him with me.'

'Can't Jane look after him?'

'Jane's got a riding lesson and you know Orry's terrified of horses.'

Mike scowled. 'Oh well,' he said at last. 'I suppose I could take him with me.'

'He's not much trouble, poor love.'

'Not much,' said Mike.

'He is your brother.'

Mike drank the rest of his coffee. 'And blood's thicker than water.'

'Thank you, dear.'

At about two o'clock Mike was ready to leave for the station. Mrs Lewis handed him a carrier bag.

'What's this? A picnic?'

Mrs Lewis smiled. 'Not exactly. It's two clean pairs of pants.'

Mike didn't understand at once but when his mother looked significantly in Orry's direction he said, 'Oh no! Have I got to cope with that as well?'

'Accidents do happen,' said Mrs Lewis.

Mike sighed. 'Come on then, Orry, my old china,' he said in as hearty a voice as he could manage. He held out his hand.

Orry avoided the hand and edged round him and out of the door.

'Try and get him to hold your hand,' said Mrs Lewis.

'He never wants to.'

'I know. But the contact is good for him. And talk to him. Don't let him curl up inside himself all the time.'

Outside Mike made a determined grab at Orry's arm, peeled the jersey sleeve back and held his brother's limp hand determinedly in his own. Orry's arm, at first stiff and resistant, went quite limp too.

'It's a bit like towing a dinghy,' said Mike conversationally. 'Your arm's like a piece of old rope. Look, all wriggly!' He shook Orry's arm to demonstrate. Orry stared off into the distance up the street as if his arm was no concern of his.

'Oh well,' said Mike. They walked on hand in hand, Orry a pace behind his brother, his eyes blank. Mike was keeping a look-out for Jock who had said he would be at the station. They went for some distance in silence.

'There's the station,' said Mike as they turned the last corner. 'We're going on a train. Do you think you'll like that?'

At the word 'train' Orry turned and looked straight into Mike's face and for a fraction of a second his large brown eyes lost their blank look.

'Hey, so you know about trains, do you? Well, my lad, you're talking to an expert. Anything you want to know about trains, just ask. Of course, the one we're going on today is a diesel-electric but they're quite interesting in their way . . .'

Mike went on to tell Orry a great many interesting facts about trains but he had no way of knowing whether Orry was listening or not for after that one bright glance he had dropped his eyes to the ground and was trailing along in the same absent fashion as before.

Jock was waiting in the entrance hall studying a large timetable. He came over to join Mike at the booking office.

'I didn't know you were going to bring him,' he commented, obviously not too pleased at seeing Orry.

'Orry's interested in trains,' said Mike. 'I've just been telling him about diesel-electrics.'

'I thought he couldn't talk,' said Jock.

Mike made faces over Orry's head. 'Well, he doesn't talk a lot, but he understands what you say. Don't you, Orry?'

Orry was staring into space somewhere around the area of Jock's knees.

'Say hullo to Jock,' said Mike, giving his brother's hand a shake.

'O 'Ock,' muttered Orry, raising his eyes as far as Jock's chest but dropping them again immediately.

'Hullo, Orry,' said Jock.

They made their way through onto the platform. They were, of course, familiar with every detail, but nevertheless they walked the length giving every detail their closest scrutiny.

'Why Orry for goodness sake?' asked Jock suddenly. 'It's not a real name.'

'Short for Lawrence. It's the nearest he can manage.'

'I thought perhaps it was short for 'orrible,' said Jock with a laugh.

Orry gave a sudden howl, as if he were in pain, shook off Mike's hand and ran away down the platform. When he reached one of the seats he crouched down on the ground beyond it, hidden, curled up into himself.

'You don't understand anything, do you!' Mike said in an angry voice. 'He's not stupid or anything.'

'Well, how was I to know?'

'Just use your common sense, that's all. He's what the doctors call withdrawn - keeps hiding away inside himself. He's perfectly happy sitting in the dark in the cupboard under the stairs doing nothing.'

'Well, why not let him, if he's happy?'

'It's a sort of illness. We're trying to help him get better.'

Although Mike had resented having to bring Orry with him, he now, in the face of Jock's behaviour, felt fiercely defensive about his brother. He went down to where Orry was hiding and