

The Game

It was a big game—bigger even than the smallest boy. And it was growing bigger and bigger by the minute.

It was tea time: chips, sausage and beans. Yum. Jason was stuffing a chip into his mouth, when the father came into the room and stole a sausage from his plate.

"Hey! That's mine!" Jason complained.

"Don't be such a greedy rat!" the father said.

The father never ate at home. He always chewed his food in the canteen at work—where the meals were subsidised. The mother always ate alone in the kitchen, picking away half-heartedly, like a prisoner in solitary confinement.

Jason was sitting on the carpet, where he always sat to eat, resting his plate on a coffee table with fold away legs. *Blue Peter* was just starting on television, with that catchy sailor's hornpipe theme music and the picture of that fancy tall ship that never went anywhere, but seemed like it could.

Jason swallowed the last swallow just as the music stopped. Today, Val would make a toy island out of a cornflakes box, with pipe-cleaner palm trees; Peter would talk to a boy who was good at painting pictures; and John would go hiking and learn how to use a compass. Jason liked them all. He liked the way they liked doing kids' stuff, even though they were all grown-up. There was something strange and wonderful about it.

The father paid no attention to Val or Peter or John. He was sitting on the couch, captivated now with his pools coupon, trying to guess the results of next week's football matches, marking his little crosses here there and every where, thinking between each little cross of the thousands and thousands of pounds he could win.

When *Blue Peter* came to an end, the mother appeared and sat in her usual chair beside the gas fire. She opened up the glossy *Graten's Catalogue* and flicked slowly through the glossy pages. Everything in the house came from the catalogue: every stick of furniture and every rag of clothes. For the mother and the father as well, buying on the never-never was a never ending game, though they were trapped in weekly payments and could never get out. And as the mother perused those glossy pages, she felt like a published author, seeing all her possessions in print.

"I went in a tank today," the father said. He worked at the *Bow and Arrow* munitions factory, up the road.

"Yeah? Did you go over the bumps?" Jason asked. The bumps were concrete and made for testing tanks.

"We've got a big new order for tanks."

"Did you go over the bumps?"

"They're having some war games, next—I don't know when. You need *tons* of tanks for war games."

"How many's tons, dad?" Jason asked.

"We went over the bumps."

"Ace," Jason said.

It was winter, and darkness came early. Jason scuttled

along the street, passing lamplight and lamplight, his breath turning to mist in the cold air. He stopped beneath a particular lamppost, distinguished from the rest by a short tattered length of rope that dangled from the cross-bar. After a few minutes, a kid called Curly scampered up.

"We've got mice!" Curly boasted.

"Where?" Jason asked.

"At home. They squeak all night long."

"Ace."

"My dad put down *millions* of traps."

"My dad says people buy too many mouse traps. He says one's enough. It's the *bait* that counts. It has to be something *irresistible*, he says."

"Ha! What does *your* dad know about mouse traps?"

"Plenty."

"Yeah, what?"

"Everything. He knows everything about 'em."

"Like what?"

"*Everything!* He used to work in a mouse trap factory."

"Ha, that's a good one," Curly laughed.

"It's true."

Slowly, one by one and one by two, the other mist-breathing children appeared. Finally, everyone had arrived.

"I was thinking about playing Release-io," Jason said. It was a game bigger than the smallest boy, and just saying it out loud and hearing it out loud, made the kids feel small.

"Yeah, we haven't played that for *ages*," one boy said. It was not the kind of game to play too often. It was too big for that.

"What about *us*?" one girl said. Girls never played Release-io.

"You can go play something else," Jason said.

So the girls, one, two, three of them, went off grumbling, to play another game bigger than the smallest girl.

And now the boys formed a circle and held out their clenched fists and bashed one potato two potato three potato four, until there were potatoes no more. The two choosers were chosen. The two choosers, Jason and Curly, took turns in choosing the other kids.

"I'll 'ave Wolly," Curly said. Wolly was always first choice. He had amazing stamina and could run like most kids could play.

"I'll 'ave Gaz," Jason answered. Gaz was always second choice. He tired more easily, but could usually spring and scoot from danger with amazing speed.

"Spot."

"Walker."

"Pincher."

"Tubby."

Stamping and stomping against the cold, they formed two groups, separated by the lamppost with the short tattered length of rope that dangled from the cross-bar. Curly, Wolly, Spot and Pincher on one side, Jason, Gaz, Walker and Tubby on the other.

"We don't stand a chance," Curly moaned, glancing at his group.

"What you talkin' about? *You* had first choice," Jason answered.

"We *still* don't stand a chance."

"Any way, let's see who goes first," Jason said. "Dip dip—"

"You always do it," Curly butted in.

"*I'll* do it," Tubby said. No one ever argued with Tubby. If anyone *did* argue with him, he would push them against a wall, or a tree, or somebody else if there was no wall or tree, and squash them into sausage meat.

"Dip dip dip

My blue ship

Sai-ling on the wa-ter

Like a cup and sau-cer

You do not have it." With each syllable, his fat pointing finger pointed from one group to the other, until it finally came to rest on the other.

"See," Curly jumped in, "we're losin' already."

"Let's set the boundaries," Jason decided.

Wolly said, "The front of the church, that way."

Gaz said, "The *Gilded Cat* pub."

Spot said, "The parade of shops."

Walker said, "The back of the school."

There was never any arguing. The boundaries were the boundaries no matter where they were, and the playing field they formed was always impossibly big. To the small boys it seemed, from North to South to East to West, like

an entire world.

"Ten minutes, then we're coming," Curly said.

All at once, Jason, Gaz, Walker and Tubby scampered away. Up the darkened street they fled, passing lamplight and lamplight, never looking back. When they reached the top of the quiet street, the road forked, and Jason turned left as the other three turned right.

"Where you off?" Walker called in mid-stride.

"I don't know. I'll see you all later," Jason called back. There were no rules in Realise-io and only one understanding: no hiding. He ran for a few minutes more, turning this way and that, then jumped through a scrawny privet hedge into a garden. Jason sneaked up to the house.

Inside, four men were playing cards, a naked bulb hanging above their heads. They circled a table, with a big pile of money in the middle. They were drinking beer and smoking cigarettes and sweating. The men were entranced by the card game and never noticed Jason, peeping in through the window. After a few moments, Jason scratched lightly on the glass. The sudden sound made the men jump up with surprise. All the sweating faces turned and saw Jason laughing and wagging his tongue at them. And then Jason scurried away into the night, jumping through gaps in hedges from one garden to another. Back out into the streets, those quiet carless streets of the council estate, with misty breath and pumping heart, passing lamplight and lamplight, entirely lost in the bigness of the game.

Jason came to the Northern boundary, marked by the church. In its silent locked up gloom, it looked more like a shadow than a real building. But next door, the church hall was a mass of wall-dangling blinding lights and shining windows; and deep muffled rumblings of restrained grown-up voices, trapped and echoing inside; and clinking-clanking beer glasses. It was Bingo Night.

Jason walked up to the church hall, and saw Tubby standing by the door with a mouth full of crisps and the half empty bag in his hand. Jason stopped in his tracks.

"Are you caught?" he growled.

"Course not," Tubby smiled, walking towards him.

"Stop where you are," Jason warned. Being caught in Release-io was like being free in other games. The only thing that changed was allegiance. Good tricks could be played by kids who were caught without the rest of their gang knowing.

"I told you, I'm not caught," Tubby said, coming to a stop and grabbing more crisps and stuffing them into his mouth. Jason walked closer to him, cautiously stepping every cautious step, ready at any moment to bound away.

"Want a crisp?"

"What're you doin' here? Not *hiding* are you."

"No. I was running—well, I was walking really, and I saw my mum going into the club, so I askid 'er to get me some crisps. Want one?"

"Where's Walker and Gaz?"

"They went up towards the woods. They were going too fast for me." Tubby stuffed more crisps into his mouth.

Inside the hall the voices suddenly grew thin and then faded away.

"So you're *not* caught."

"I told you."

"Give us a crisp then."

"Too late," Tubby said, crumpling up the bag. "They're all finished."

"You greedy rat!" Jason said.

"Let's go find the others."

They walked along the wall beside the church hall and then jumped down to the path. Behind them, the amplified voice of the bingo caller now broke the bewitched silence.

"Two fat ladies, eighty-eight . . . Legs eleven . . . Clickety-click, sixty-six . . . Key to the door, twenty-one . . . "

"How come your mum's not playing at the *Majestic*?" Tubby's mother usually played bingo at the *Majestic*, in town, where the prizes were bigger.

"Maybe she's got not enough money."

And then, as if several kids had hopped on a land mine, an explosion of grasping hands, blocking bodies and tripping legs suddenly fell upon Jason and Tubby.

"Two four six eight, calling caught," Curly cried. As it happened, between the "calling" and the "caught," Tubby, with all his greedy rat strength, caused the grasping hands, blocking bodies and tripping legs to fall away for a brief moment, leaving enough space for Jason to wriggle free, but not quite enough for his own

oversized shape. Jason escaped and Tubby fell to the ground. Almost at once a tangle of bodies piled on top of him, and four separate voices cried, "Two four six eight, calling caught."

Jason was already scooting away, never looking back, down the street and into the darkness. He ran and ran, feet and heart pounding in wild syncopation, turning every corner, leaving the other kids lost in the maze of distance. Streets began to fly beneath his feet like so much wind: down beside the block of flats that blocked out the stars, passed the *Gilded Cat* pub and the Western boundary, over the ring road and through the building site, finally to the parade of shops and the Southern boundary.

Jason crossed the grass with shops on both sides. With their barred windows and wire caged doors, it was like being in a zoo after closing time. But two of the cages still exhibited wakefulness: the Turf Accountant on one side, its sign in beaming red neon, with its one way window and one way door, hiding from view the punters inside; the Off Licence opposite, with a flood light on the side wall showing empty parking space, selling cider to teenagers, who would use the empty bottle to play a spinning, dizzy game with all kinds of rules.

Jason scurried into a narrow unlighted passage, formed by two high walls of privet that cut between houses. And there he stopped, turning sideways, leaning into the hedge, catching his breath, closing his eyes, listening. The only sound was the sound of his heart, beating thud

after thud like a frenzied drum drumming to the spirits of wild beasts.

Jason opened his eyes, turned and found two black shapes suddenly blocking the end of the passage.

Curly's voice: "There he is!"

Wolly's voice "Get him!"

Jason turned the other way, but found three more black shapes blocking the other end.

Pincher's voice: "There he is!"

Spot's voice: "Get him!"

Tubby's voice: "Grab him!"

With both exits blocked, Jason dived up onto the top of the hedge and fell through to the garden on the other side, landing with a thump on the frosty grass. On his feet in a moment, he staggered a few steps and then ran away.

He ran until there was no running left in him, turned into the small woods beside the school and the Eastern boundary and collapsed onto the crispy ground, where frost and frozen leaves crackled like fire. Jason lay back in the darkness, panting wildly, heart beating wildly, staring up at the trees and their bare fingery branches, at the moonless sky and the faint flickering of starlight. Feeling the fresh cold of the floor seep through his anorak, Jason sat up and crawled over to rest his back on a tree. Was this hiding? Was this sitting in the woods resting his back hiding? Was Jason breaking the only *understanding* of Release-io?

Jason's interest was abruptly taken. Just to one side,

a strange sparkling had caught his attention. Hanging by a gold chord from the branch of a bush, a strange gold bag, the size of a adult's open hand. The gold chord was wound around the neck of the gold bag and held it shut. Upon the gold bag, sparkling also that strange sparkle that needed no light to set it off, gold letters. "**GOLD**," the gold letters sparkled. Jason stared, mesmerised—and the gold sparkling sparkled in his eyes.

"Gold," he whispered to the darkness. The gold bag was within easy grasp. No effort. Just reach out and take it. Jason's arm twitched as he reached out for the gold bag and then at once stopped. There was something not right about that gold bag.

Maybe it was empty.

Maybe it was stolen gold. Maybe, if he took it, the grown-up thieves would come after him and force him to join their gang.

Maybe it was fools gold.

Maybe it was just a joke.

Maybe it was *real* gold and he would be rich.

And so Jason's hand still twitched. He felt like a tiny mouse, face to face with that *irresistible* bait.

Jason glanced around, quick nervous movements.

Jason reached out for the sparkling gold bag.

Foot steps. He froze. Voices.

"Hey, Jason." It was Gaz, running down the trail with Walker along side. "You're not caught are you? We saw you running this way."

"No, I'm not caught, but there's a—" Jason began.

"Hurry up! Get up! Curly and the others are just behind." Gaz and Walker ran passed.

"Quick!" Walker called.

Jason glanced at the gold bag, glanced at Gaz and Walker, glanced up the trail where Curly and Tubby appeared, glanced back at the gold bag.

"Quick!" Gaz called.

Jason clambered to his feet, turned away from the gold bag and scampered back into the middle of the game.