

## WAR OF THE BUTTONS

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by  
Jonathan Dorf

freely adapted from  
La Guerre Des Boutons  
by Louis Pergaud

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## List of Characters

### The Townies

CHARLIE, the leader, around 15 years old

GENE, Charlie's age

HUGO, a year younger but in the same grade, smart but no klutz

SIGGY, Hugo's age, a refugee from Bosnia living with his aunt and uncle (note: Siggy's nationality is written ambiguously so that he could be, in consultation with the author, from a different but similarly resonant country)

TICKER, 12 years old, an imp

TRACE, Gene's twin sister

EMMA, a little younger than Trace

### The Preps (all are Charlie's age)

J. ROBERT WALKER, Charlie's prep counterpart

PRESTON MORRIS, the bully of the group

SCOTT ANDREWS, Walker's roommate and a bit of a coward at times

TERRENCE NELSON, hyper and seeming as if he knows something we don't

BANK TELLER, GENE'S FATHER, HUGO'S FATHER, PREP SCHOOL HALL MASTER, MR. CROON, all played by one male adult actor (in the interest of allowing more actors to participate—for example, in a school production—these characters could be played by multiple actors)

The play uses multiple settings that should be more suggested than fully realized. The settings are a street (several different ones), a bank, Ticker's bedroom, the ice cream factory (inside and outside), a food market, the preps' dorm and the townies' school. Several other settings appear during the non-real time scenes (for example, Hugo's bedroom appears in the middle of the ice cream factory). It is crucial that the play move fluidly from setting to setting. A good idea would be to divide the stage into playing areas that remain constant.

The play should run without intermission.

*(Author's Note: It is crucial that the set and staging allow the play to run continuously. Elizabethan staging, with the stage separated into playing areas, is the most plausible solution. Somewhere in America not so long ago. A steamy mid-afternoon the week before Labor Day. CHARLIE, fourteen or fifteen years old, sits on a suitcase on a sidewalk and holds an ice cream cone. He's sturdy and has the spark of a natural leader. A pile of luggage surrounds him. He taps his foot and looks as if he's waiting for someone. Beat. Enter HUGO, a year younger and a little smaller than Charlie, brainy but not unathletic.)*

**CHARLIE**

Seen my parents?

(Hugo shakes his head and wipes his sweaty face on his shirt.)

My Dad says he's gotta' stop by the bank, and to get him an ice cream cone.

**HUGO**

How come he still likes ice cream?

**CHARLIE**

He says wait for him with our stuff. His cone's gonna' melt.

**HUGO**

I'll eat it.

(Hugo sits on a suitcase after making sure it'll support his weight.)

Your Dad get a job in the place you're moving to?

**CHARLIE**

I think. Maybe.

**HUGO**

Where you moving to?

**CHARLIE**

I don't know.

**HUGO**

Where's your Mom?

**CHARLIE**

She went with him. He said they needed to talk.

**HUGO**

That's what my Mom said right before she left.

(beat)

Ticker's gonna' have to stop making fun of the preps. Without you, who's gonna' bail him out?

**CHARLIE**

He's fast. He could call 'em rich fairies and run.

(Hugo opens a suitcase and inspects its contents.)

**HUGO**

How come you didn't tell me you were movin'?

**CHARLIE**

'Cause I didn't know 'til this morning. I woke up, and my Mom's packing.

**HUGO**

(holds up a T-shirt)

This is my shirt. Remember, you ripped yours sneaking into the drainpipe.

**CHARLIE**

It was your idea.

(beat)

Bank was gonna' take our house anyway. We missed the last couple payments.

**HUGO**

And you didn't say no, you weren't gonna' move?

**CHARLIE**

They didn't ask.

**HUGO**

Sucks. If my Dad said we're moving just like that—

**CHARLIE**

You'd move. Hold this cone

(holds out the cone)

a sec?

**HUGO**

It's melting. It'll get all over me. My Dad'll think I was eatin' ice cream before dinner.  
(beat)

Can I have a lick?

**CHARLIE**

I thought your Dad—

**HUGO**

As long as it's not all over me, he won't know.

(Hugo takes the cone. Charlie cleans his fingernails with a pocketknife he pulls from his pants. Hugo takes a lick, then another one, then a bite.)

It's breakin' all over the place.

(Hugo finishes off the cone.)

Sorry.

**CHARLIE**

You're eating the whole thing.

**HUGO**

Sorry.

(Hugo holds up an "All-American Ice Cream Company" T-shirt disapprovingly.)

**CHARLIE**

My Dad got it for free. He just wears it around the house.

**HUGO**

My Dad got fired, no way I'd wear their T-shirt. It'd be like bein' Jewish and wearin' a swastika. You wouldn't do *that*—would you?

**CHARLIE**

It's not the same.

**HUGO**

They fired him—right?

**CHARLIE**

Yeah, but—

**HUGO**

And now you gotta' move, so your Dad can find a new job.

**CHARLIE**

Yeah, but—

**HUGO**

I read that's what happened to the Jews in Germany. They all lost their jobs and had to move.

**CHARLIE**

We're not Jewish.

**HUGO**

I'm not sayin' you're Jewish. Only it's like that.

**CHARLIE**

They closed the whole plant down. Everybody lost their jobs. Not just my Dad.

**HUGO**

I'm not sayin' it's just against your Dad. It's like the whole town—

**CHARLIE**

The ice cream factory was the whole town—pretty much. You're lucky your Dad works at the Prep. Only thing 'round here that's gettin' richer.

**HUGO**

My Dad says the factory closed 'cause it wasn't makin' enough ice cream.

**CHARLIE**

They made plenty 'a ice cream.

(as if he can taste each one)

Vanilla. Chocolate. Strawberry. Fudge swirl. Marshmallow. Rocky Road.

**HUGO**

Yeah, but they're makin' more in newer factories. Bigger ones. Do you know what school you're goin' to?

**CHARLIE**

If I don't know where I'm movin' to, how am I gonna' know what school I'm goin' to? Wish he'd hurry up.

(Enter a BANK TELLER, played by an adult actor and perhaps rolling out a bank counter. He carries an ice cream cone. Charlie puts on his father's T-shirt and plays his father. He steps forward to greet the Bank Teller.)

**TELLER**

Next.

**CHARLIE**

I'd like to close out this account.

(beat)

I'm doing a terrible thing.

**TELLER**

I don't take it personally.

**CHARLIE**

Not the account. My son. My wife and I are leaving our son. He's sitting on the sidewalk keeping an eye on our luggage.

(beat)

We're not going back for him. We're leaving town.

**TELLER**

What about your luggage?

**CHARLIE**

I paid a week's salary for those suitcases. Now I feel even worse: our luggage and our son.

(beat)

I told him get me an ice cream cone. He's probably waiting there with that cone.

**TELLER**

Hopefully he won't take it personally.

**CHARLIE**

The town's gone kaput. I lost my job.

**TELLER**

Ice cream factory?

(Charlie nods.)

And you still eat the stuff?

**CHARLIE**

I feel guilty, but I like the taste. Nothing like Rocky Road.

(The Teller hands him a few bills and coins.)

Not much here.

**TELLER**

Good luck.

**CHARLIE**

If you see our son, would you tell him we love him?

**TELLER**

What's his name?

**CHARLIE**

Charlie.

**TELLER**

How 'bout "nothing personal, Charlie?"

**CHARLIE**

Would you?

(The Teller nods, hands Charlie the new ice cream cone.)

**TELLER**

We're out of lollipops.

**CHARLIE**

Thank you.

**TELLER**

Nothing personal, Charlie.

(The Teller exits, and Charlie, holding the ice cream cone, steps back into his conversation with Hugo.)

**HUGO**

I can't believe school starts next week.

**CHARLIE**

Preppies'll be showin' up any day.

**HUGO**

I saw a couple of Beamers and Benzes goin' up there this morning.

**CHARLIE**

Already?

**HUGO**

Fall sports practice.

(imitates a preppy)

Muffy, would you pass me the croquet mallet?

**CHARLIE**

Sorry, old chap, I'm smack dab in the middle of tea-time. See if Jeeves will play with you.

(Offstage YELLING. TICKER, a twelve year old imp, dashes on chased by SCOTT ANDREWS and PRESTON MORRIS, both much bigger and closer to Charlie's age, though neither is as big as Charlie. Not really afraid of the preps, Ticker isn't above using Charlie as cover. Andrews and Morris wear polo-style shirts, while Ticker's tank top and shorts scream poverty. Hugo steps closer to Charlie.)

**TICKER**

Your Mom's a big fat cow! She's a big fat cow, and your Dad's an ugly little midget.

**ANDREWS**

You're dead!

**MORRIS**

Least he knows who his Dad is.

**TICKER**

Shut up.

**CHARLIE**

That's low.

**MORRIS**

It's true.

**TICKER**

Is not.

**MORRIS**

Who's your Dad then?

**CHARLIE**

Leave him alone.

**MORRIS**

Fine.

(Morris makes a crashing sound, as if two cars collide.)

Andrews, what's that sound?

**ANDREWS**

I don't know.

**MORRIS**

Sounds like an *accident*.

**TICKER**

Shut up!

**CHARLIE**

That's enough!

(Beat. Andrews and Morris take a step back.)

**MORRIS**

What's with the suitcases?

**ANDREWS**

This a garage sale?

**CHARLIE**

I'm movin'.

**MORRIS**

(to Ticker)

What you gonna' do when he's gone?

**TICKER**

I'll *call* him.

**MORRIS**

Call him from your Daddy's if you ever find out who it is.

(Ticker leaps at Morris, who headlocks him.)

**TICKER**

Take it back.

**MORRIS**

Little psycho.

(Charlie hands Hugo his cone.)

**CHARLIE**

Don't eat it.

(Andrews sees someone coming from offstage.)

**ANDREWS** **CHARLIE**  
 (sotto voce) Get off him.  
 Walker!

(Morris lets go of Ticker.)

**TICKER**  
 (half under his breath)  
 Fairy!

(Ticker dashes offstage. Enter J. ROBERT WALKER, Charlie's prep school counterpart, wearing a loosened tie, a button-down shirt and a backward baseball cap. With him is MATT NELSON, dressed preppie and about the same age. Nelson looks as if he knows something we don't and seems hyper.)

**CHARLIE**  
 J. Robert Walker.

**WALKER**  
 Charlie.

**CHARLIE**  
 You're back early.

**WALKER**  
 Soccer practice. Don't need it to beat your team, but—

**CHARLIE**  
 I don't play soccer.

**WALKER**  
 Your *school's* team.

**TICKER** (off)  
 Come on! They've got Charlie surrounded! They tried to jump me, but I got away!

**WALKER**  
 I hear they're knockin' down the factory.

**CHARLIE**

Not 'til next summer. What do you want?

**TICKER** (off)

There's millions of 'em. Hurry! Mow the lawn later, Siggy!

**WALKER**

Tomorrow afternoon after soccer practice by the old ice cream factory. Unless you're chicken.

**CHARLIE**

Ask Hugo. Soon as my Dad gets back, I'm leavin'.

(Morris and Andrews make chicken noises. Enter Ticker with a group of town kids, all Charlie's age: GENE, very much a follower; TRACE, Gene's twin sister, beautiful with little flashes of tomboyishness; EMMA, much more shy, and SIGGY, who chooses not to speak.)

**TICKER**

(balls up a fist)

All right—who wants some?

(Ticker feints at Andrews, who flinches.)

**NELSON**

(to Emma)

How's it goin'?

**EMMA**

Hi.

**TICKER**

Who's next?

(Charlie grabs Ticker by the neck, holding him back before he can attack. Nelson drops to his hands and knees and barks at Ticker in mocking imitation.)

**ANDREWS**

Down boy.

**NELSON**

Probably got rabies.

(Charlie relaxes his grip but clearly is ready to grab Ticker again if Ticker tries to get loose.)

**TICKER**

*You probably got rabies.*

**NELSON**

*Or lice.*

(Nelson pretends to scratch as if he has lice.)

**ANDREWS**

*Little bugs crawling 'round your head.*

**NELSON**

*Better burn your clothes.*

(Ticker tries to break away from Charlie, who tightens his grip.)

**TICKER**

*Let me go!*

**ANDREWS**

*No loss.*

**NELSON**

*Mad dog!*

**ANDREWS**

*Come on, mad dog!*

(Nelson barks as he gets up. Andrews joins him in barking as they exit. Nelson interrupts his barking long enough to mouth goodbye to Emma. Morris exits with them.)

**WALKER**

*Tomorrow.*

(Walker exits. Charlie lets Ticker go.)

**TICKER**

(to the preps)

Jerks!

(to Charlie)

Jerk!

**CHARLIE**

Don't let 'em get to you.

**TICKER**

Jerk.

**TRACE**

Gene, Mom said come home for dinner.

**GENE**

What we eatin'?

**TRACE**

Burgers.

**GENE**

Charlie, you wanna—

**CHARLIE**

My Dad might come back, wonder where I went.

**GENE**

I'll see ya' later.

**TRACE**

Bye.

(Exit Gene and Trace. Emma and Siggy fade toward the corners.)

**HUGO**

(to Emma and Siggy)

Wait up.

(Hugo returns the ice cream cone to Charlie. To Charlie)

I'm supposed to be home before my Dad goes out. You know how he gets. I'll uh . . . see ya' at the factory.

(Emma, Siggy and Hugo exit.)

**TICKER**

I'll stay with ya'.

(beat)

You gonna' eat that cone? I was over at Gene's for lunch, and it's like just 'cause his Mom's my aunt she thinks she' gotta' feed me all these vegetables.

(Beat, then Charlie gives it to him. Ticker takes a bite, then continues to eat as he talks. As Ticker talks, the lights should dim almost imperceptibly as it grows later.)

My Mom said I could get these new pump sneakers. She found this mail order place that sells 'em for ten bucks less than K-Mart.

(Charlie nods distractedly.)

If I come up with twenty from my paper route, she'll gimme the other half.

(Ticker takes off one of his worn sneaks.)

Need 'em bad. See?

(He removes a piece of colored construction paper from inside the shoe; it covers a hole in the sole. He shows Charlie.)

Stole ten sheets of construction paper off the art teacher's desk. Good as new. Rubs somethin' bad though.

(beat)

I gotta' get home or I won't get dinner. She says if I miss again I'm not eatin'. Period. And when she says period . . . You wanna' come for dinner? There probably isn't any extra, but I'll give you some 'a mine.

**CHARLIE**

Maybe they'll change their mind. I better stay here.

**TICKER**

If they don't, and you want somethin' to eat, just throw stones at my window like on TV. I'll save some 'a my dinner for ya', just in case.

(Ticker drifts toward the exit.)

You'll be at the factory tomorrow—right? 'Cause they're gonna' beat the hell outta' me if you don't come.

(Ticker exits. Charlie sits, then uses a suitcase for a pillow and sleeps. The lights dim on Charlie and come up on Morris and Andrews, who, if they haven't had time to do so already, change into their soccer uniforms. Morris has a soccer ball.)

**MORRIS**

Borrow your math?

**ANDREWS**

We don't have any.

**MORRIS**

I know.

(Lights up simultaneously on Walker and Nelson, also getting dressed for soccer if they're not already.)

**NELSON**

What do you think of that girl?

**WALKER**

What girl?

**NELSON**

From town.

**ANDREWS**

Class isn't 'til next week.

**MORRIS**

(a threat)

But you'd let me borrow it if we did—right?

(Morris flicks Andrews behind the ear.)

Right?

**NELSON**

The one that said hi to me.

**WALKER**

I don't know. You like her?

**ANDREWS**

Get off.

(Morris flicks him again.)

**MORRIS**

Or what?

**ANDREWS**

(beat)

What time does practice start?

**MORRIS**

You'll let me borrow it—right?

(Morris flicks him again.)

Right?

(He feints tossing the ball at Andrews, then drops it and dribbles across the stage, passing off to Nelson before exiting. Enter Ticker wearing a T-shirt and boxer shorts—what he sleeps in. If his bedroom isn't preset, Ticker pushes a window frame and couch on, then lies on the couch as if he's been sleeping there all along. Beat. Nelson dribbles the ball in the opposite direction—back to Andrews, who dribbles back toward Walker. Andrews passes to Walker, then exits. Charlie, still sleeping among his suitcases, slowly wakes and stretches. Beat. Walker dribbles back across the stage and then exits. Charlie stands and walks over to Ticker. Charlie picks up an imaginary pebble and throws it at the window.)

**CHARLIE**

Ticker!

(Ticker doesn't move.)

Ticker!

(Still nothing. Charlie tries another pebble. Ticker turns over, covers his head as if somebody is hitting him.)

Ticker!

(Ticker uncovers his head, half-awake, and listens. Charlie throws another pebble. Ticker struggles off the couch and goes to the window.)

**TICKER**

What time is it?

**CHARLIE**

Don't know. Ten maybe.

**TICKER**

(half to himself)

I had to get up at five. Get the papers. Deliver the papers. Go home, back to bed. What time did you say it was?

**CHARLIE**

Ten?

(Ticker groans.)

You said come if I was hungry.

**TICKER**

I don't think you'd still want my dinner. It's kinda' scary lookin'.

(beat)

I could steal you some cereal.

**CHARLIE**

Steal it?

**TICKER**

Outta' the box.

**CHARLIE**

But it's yours.

**TICKER**

Yeah, but it sounds more exciting if you say steal it.

**CHARLIE**

What kind?

**TICKER**

Granola. My Mom won't let me have the sweet stuff. She says I'm too hyper already. Come on in.

(Charlie climbs through the window frame.)

**CHARLIE**

Your Mom at work?

**TICKER**

Double shift. The other orderly's visiting his cousins.

**CHARLIE**

People always gonna' get sick.

**TICKER**

She smelled so bad the other day from cleanin' up vomit, I had to go find a skunk just to drown her out.

(beat)

I'll get the cereal.

(Ticker exits. Off)

Your parents come back?

(beat)

What?

**CHARLIE**

No.

**TICKER** (off)

Do you know where they went?

**CHARLIE**

Huh-uh.

**TICKER** (off)

Then you can come to the factory later—right?

(Ticker returns with a paper plate of cereal.)

**CHARLIE**

I guess.

(takes the cereal)

Thanks.

**TICKER**

We're outta' milk.

(Charlie eats. Beat. Enter Hugo, who throws a pebble against Ticker's window.)

**CHARLIE**

You hear something?

**TICKER**

Yeah, you're the world's noisiest eater.

**CHARLIE**

Shhh!

(Hugo throws another pebble. Charlie starts toward the window, but Ticker squeezes him out of the way.)

**TICKER**

It's *my* window.

(Ticker looks out and sees Hugo.)

What do you want?

**HUGO**

Is Charlie there?

**TICKER**

(to Charlie)

It's for you.

(Charlie goes to the window.)

**HUGO**

Your parents come back?

**CHARLIE**

If they did, I'd be moved—right?

**HUGO**

I can't believe they both left.

(Enter Gene and Siggy.)

**GENE**

(to Siggy)

You see me mowin' my lawn every day? No.

**HUGO**

You should. Maybe you'd get it even for once.

**GENE**

You don't even have a lawn.

(to Siggy)

In America, it's *supposed* to look all scraggly.

(spots Charlie in the window)

Charlie?

**CHARLIE**

Hey.

**TICKER**

Ya'll might as well come in too.

(Gene, Hugo and Siggy climb through the window and crowd into Ticker's living room. Charlie continues to crunch on granola.)

**GENE**

Sorry 'bout your parents.

(Siggy nods agreement.)

**HUGO**

Where you gonna' live?

**GENE**

Can you go to school if your parents aren't here?

**TICKER**

You could live here 'til my Mom finds out. 'Course that'd be like ten seconds.

**HUGO**

(means Charlie can't live there)

I wish our apartment wasn't such a shoebox.

**GENE**

You could live at my house, but my parents would figure it out after a while.

**HUGO**

Siggy? Your aunt and uncle have a farm. Sort of.

(Siggy looks hesitant.)

**CHARLIE**

I'd get caught there too.

**GENE**

What if you stayed over at everybody's house? You know—switched around. On Monday I'd ask my Mom if you could stay over. Then on Tuesday you'd come here, (indicates Ticker's house) then Wednesday to Hugo, Thursday to Siggy—everybody could take a day.

**CHARLIE**

What about the other days?

**GENE**

People could double up. And maybe some other kids'd help.

**CHARLIE**

Your parents are gonna' figure out something's goin' on.

**TICKER**

Yeah, and—no offense—my Mom ain't gonna' go for you stayin' over every single week.

**GENE**

Your Mom's hardly ever home. And when she's home, what's she do? Sleep probably.

**TICKER**

Hello. I sleep in the living room.

**GENE**

I'm your cousin. I know where you sleep.

**TICKER**

So where's Charlie gonna' hide? In the middle of our living room?

(Beat. Lights up on another part of the stage where Trace and Emma watch the boys through the window.)

**TRACE**

I wish I could hear what they're sayin'.

**EMMA**

Charlie likes you.

**TRACE**

So?

**EMMA**

I'm just sayin'.

**CHARLIE**

What if we built a house?

**HUGO**

What?

**TICKER**

(accepts the idea)

Outta' what?

**CHARLIE**

We always wanted a clubhouse. If we built it, I could live in it and keep an eye on it.

**TICKER**

You mean like stand guard?

**GENE**

Where would we build it?

**TICKER**

Can't do it here—my Mom'd see it for sure.

**HUGO**

I don't have a backyard.

**CHARLIE**

It can't be at somebody's house.

**TICKER**

Then where's it gonna' be?

**EMMA**

I can't believe his parents left him. What if somebody finds out?

**TRACE**

Everybody knows already.

**EMMA**

Our *parents* know?

**TRACE**

(shakes her head)

If our parents find out, Charlie's cooked.

**CHARLIE**

How 'bout the factory?

**TICKER**

It's gettin' torn down.

**HUGO**

Demolished.

**TICKER**

Kaboom.

**GENE**

Not 'til next summer.

(beat)

I saw some guys lookin' at it last week. Guys in suits. Don't know what they wanted.

**HUGO**

Nothing good I bet.

**TICKER**

Probably nothin' at all.

**CHARLIE**

Factory'll do 'til we can think of somewhere really good. And secret. Don't want the enemy finding it.

**TICKER**

Sneak attack.

(Hugo pretends to jump Ticker from behind and slit his throat. Ticker falls to the ground, "dead." Siggy checks his pulse.)

**TRACE**

If our parents find out, they'll send him away for sure. Maybe that's what they're talking about.

**EMMA**

Away . . . ?

**TRACE**

To a boys home. Like they did with Joe Flannery. Sent him to Upward Springs.

**EMMA**

That's far.

**TRACE**

Closest one. And nobody ever saw him again. Heard he ran away and got a job in Chicago or New York or somewhere.

**TICKER**

Factory'd make an awesome fort.

It's big. **GENE**

Biggest building in town. **HUGO**

It *was* the town. Practically. **CHARLIE**  
 (remembering)  
 Giant steel 'frigerator doors.

Giant trucks rolling in and out all day long. **GENE**

Giant machine squeezin' out chocolate all day long. **TICKER**

They don't make the chocolate. They make the ice cream and put the chocolate in it. **HUGO**

They don't make anything anymore. **CHARLIE**

Hard to believe it's all just empty. **GENE**

We could have secret tunnels— **HUGO**

And passwords. Lots of passwords. **TICKER**

And places where you can see people without them seein' you. **CHARLIE**  
 (beat)  
 What if the preps are thinkin' the same thing?

Why would they wanna' turn the factory into a hideout? **GENE**

'Cause it's ours. **CHARLIE**

Maybe they already did, and that's why they said meet them there. **HUGO**

**CHARLIE**

We gotta' get there first.

**HUGO**

Before they finish soccer practice.

**TICKER**

Ambush!

**CHARLIE**

Come on!

(Charlie leaps through the window and starts to exit. Hugo and Gene follow. Siggy pauses to pull some salt out of his pants pocket and throw it over his left shoulder.)

**GENE**

Come on, salt boy!

(Siggy hurries after Gene, and they exit. Ticker starts to follow, then realizes he's in his underwear.)

**TICKER**

Hey, wait up. I gotta' get dressed.

(Ticker hesitates, then climbs back through his window, grabs a pair of shorts and sneakers and dashes off after the others. Beat.)

**TRACE**

We've gotta' save him.

**EMMA**

You like him.

**TRACE**

I wouldn't talk. Look who *you* like.

(exiting)

Come on. Let's follow 'em.

(They exit. Lights up on the ice cream factory door, upstage center, as Charlie, Gene, Hugo and Siggy watch Ticker try to open it. It's now afternoon.)

**TICKER**

It's locked.

**GENE**

(tries it)

Yeah. How we supposed to make it a hideout if we can't get in?

(Gene and Hugo examine the lock.)

It's a big lock.

**HUGO**

Deadbolt. Maybe there's a back door.

**CHARLIE**

There's lots of doors.

**TICKER**

Or a secret entrance.

**GENE**

(ignores Ticker)

Bet there's locks on all of 'em.

**TICKER**

Bet there's not.

**GENE**

What?

**TICKER**

Bet they missed one. They gotta' miss one.

**HUGO**

Why?

**TICKER**

This town? Somebody always screws up something.

**CHARLIE**

Go look then.

**TICKER**

Look?

**CHARLIE**

Yeah—go look.

**TICKER**

Bet I find one.

(Ticker exits. Beat)

**GENE**

What do we do now?

**HUGO**

We could make a lookout.

**CHARLIE**

Lookout.

**HUGO**

Out here. Outside. That way if somebody—

**GENE**

The preps—

**HUGO**

Exactly. If the preps attack headquarters, we'll see 'em coming.

**GENE**

Not if we're inside.

**HUGO**

The lookout'll see. That's why you build a lookout out here.

**GENE**

And if he's out here and we're in there, how's he gonna' *tell* us.

**HUGO**

He'll yell.

**GENE**

Then they'll know it's an ambush. And they'll get the lookout.

**HUGO**

How do you know?

**GENE**

He'll be surrounded.

**HUGO**

(points)

Not if he's up in that tree.

**GENE**

Yeah he will. He'll be stuck in the tree.

**HUGO**

They'll have to climb up and get him.

**GENE**

So? What if they climb up and throw him out?

**HUGO**

Out of the tree? They wouldn't do that.

**GENE**

What if it's an accident?

**HUGO**

(beat)

We'll have to figure something else out.

**GENE**

Like what?

**HUGO**I don't know. Why don't *you* think of something?**GENE**

You're the one that skipped a grade . . .

**HUGO**

(beat as Hugo looks to Siggy for help)

Why don't you say something once in a while?

**GENE**

Maybe he doesn't want to.

**HUGO**

(to Gene)

You never think of anything. You're a log.

**GENE**

Dork.

Lump. **HUGO**

Geek. **GENE**

That's smart. **HUGO**

**CHARLIE**  
Shut up! It's dumb to fight over the lookout. You're so busy arguin', the preps could sneak up on us right now and you wouldn't even notice.

(beat)  
We could buy walkie-talkies. The lookout could call us.

I can't afford a walkie-talkie. **HUGO**

Me neither. Can you? **GENE**

No, but at least it's an idea. **CHARLIE**

Sorry. **HUGO**  
(beat, to Gene)

Me too. **GENE**

Sorry, Siggy. Not your fault you don't talk. **HUGO**

(Beat. A soccer ball rolls onto the stage. Charlie stops it with his foot, picks it up. Enter Walker and the other preps, dressed in button-down shirts and ties, walking shorts, the kind of shoes that have nice laces.)

That's mine. **WALKER**

Where's your sailor suits? **HUGO**

**MORRIS**

Where's your Dad—still cleaning my toilet?

(Hugo starts for Morris, but Charlie puts a restraining hand on his shoulder.)

Why don't you let him go?

**CHARLIE**

Because your Mommy wouldn't like it if he messed up your pretty clothes.

**MORRIS**

I can buy as many as I want.

**HUGO**

Is it just me, or does Morris look like a girl?

(Morris takes a step forward.)

**WALKER**

Morris!

(to Charlie, explaining the clothes)

We've got a soccer team dinner tonight.

**HUGO**

How come Morris is the only one that looks like a girl?

**WALKER**

It's your choice this year.

**HUGO**

That's right. Charlie's choice. Walker picked last year.

**MORRIS**

How do you know? You weren't here last year.

**CHARLIE**

'Cause he's a brain.

**ANDREWS**

("he" meaning Charlie)

Why's *he* get to choose?

**WALKER**

That's how it goes. I picked last year.

(to Charlie)

Your year. You pick the rules for the war.

(to the preps)

Anybody who doesn't go along with it answers to me.

**CHARLIE**

Gimme a sec.

(Charlie withdraws stage right. Morris pulls a watch out of his pocket and goes over to Hugo. The other boys on both sides occupy themselves waiting for Charlie.)

**MORRIS**

See this?

**HUGO**

It's a watch.

(Morris waves it in Hugo's face.)

**MORRIS**

The only way you could ever wear anything like this is if you stole it.

**HUGO**

(obviously bothered)

So.

**MORRIS**

I go to the bathroom at school, and there's your Dad, stickin' his hand in the toilet.

**HUGO**

At least he works.

**MORRIS**

You must be so proud.

**WALKER**

Preston—stop it. Hey, Charlie, hurry up or we're gonna' be late for the dinner.

**HUGO**

At least my Dad doesn't send me away.

**MORRIS**

(not the complete truth)

I picked my school. We all picked our school.

(Murmurs of support from the other preps. Beat. Morris waves the watch in Hugo's face.)

Here—want to steal it?

**GENE**

Shut up, Morris.

(Charlie makes eye contact with someone offstage—Ticker—and gives a nod. A water balloon comes from offstage right and explodes on the preps. Water balloons pelt the stage.)

**NELSON**

Ambush!

(Enter Ticker clutching several water balloons. Water balloons continue to come from offstage right—Emma and Trace. In the confusion, Hugo grabs Morris' watch.)

**MORRIS**

Hey!

(Morris chases Hugo, who runs around the stage with his watch.)

**TICKER**

Bonsai!

(Andrews and Nelson retreat and exit. Walker retreats with them but pauses at the edge of the stage.)

**WALKER**

This your choice?

**CHARLIE**

(shakes his head)

I'll let you know.

**WALKER**

We'll see you tomorrow.

(Walker, with a look back at Morris chasing Hugo, exits just ahead of a water balloon aimed at his head. Morris catches up with Hugo, but the chase brings Morris into the midst of the town kids. Morris realizes what's happened and tries to escape. They grab him.)

**MORRIS**

(to Hugo)

You *are* a thief.

**CHARLIE**

Take him to the wall.

(Gene, Siggy and Ticker drag Morris, who fights them every inch of the way until Ticker grabs his ear, to the factory door.)

First, apologize to Hugo for callin' him a thief.

**MORRIS**

He's got my watch.

**HUGO**

Like I want your cruddy watch.

(Hugo gives Morris the watch.)

**CHARLIE**

Now apologize.

(Morris spits at Hugo, who moves out of the way.)

Hold him still.

(Morris tries to spit at everybody until Gene clamps a hand over his mouth. Charlie pulls out a pocketknife. Beat. Morris loses his confidence.)

**GENE**

Big tough Preston Morris, cryin' like a girl.

**TICKER**

Maybe he *is* a girl.

**HUGO**

We could make him one.

**CHARLIE**

Hold him still.

(to Morris as he puts the knife to Morris's chest)

Say you're sorry.

**MORRIS**

Sorry.

**CHARLIE**

You gonna' run home and tell Mommy on me?

**GENE**

Mommy sends him away.

**TICKER**

Aw, poor baby . . .

**GENE**

Cry for Mommy.

**HUGO**

Go ahead. Cry!

**TICKER**

Come on!

**CHARLIE**

Tell Walker that this is what happens when you mess with us.

(Charlie cuts off Morris's shirt buttons, his pants button, his tie and his shoelaces. Charlie gives Morris a kick in the butt to push him away.)

Tell Walker.

(Morris, trying to hold his wardrobe together as best he can and still holding his watch, staggers off in the direction his comrades exited.)

**MORRIS**

We'll get you back!

**HUGO**

Have a nice dinner!

(Morris spits, then exits in a hurry when Charlie takes a step toward him. Charlie and company celebrate their victory with backslapping, shouts and high-fiving.)

**CHARLIE**

Where'd you get the water balloons?

**TICKER**

Trace and Emma brought 'em.

(calls offstage)

You can come out now!

(Enter Trace and Emma.)

**GENE**

(to Hugo and Siggy, quiet)

What are they doin' here?

(Hugo shrugs. Siggy, as is his custom, says nothing. Beat)

**CHARLIE**

Thanks.

**TRACE**

You're welcome.

(Ticker grabs Morris' buttons off the ground.)

**TICKER**

Hey look! Morris' buttons.

(The boys gather around to look.)

**GENE**

They look expensive.

**TICKER**

Duh—they *are*. What you think they're made of? It's not gold.

**HUGO**

(incredulous)

Gold?

**TICKER**

What is it?

I don't know. Maybe pearl.

**GENE**

Looks plastic to me.

**HUGO**

Charlie, what do you think they are?

**TICKER**

I say they're trophies.

**CHARLIE**

Yeah.

**TICKER**  
(warms to the idea)

From our victory.

**CHARLIE**

Trophies!

**HUGO**

(The boys ad lib excited gestures and celebration—"we are the champions," "victory," etc.—until they realize Trace and Emma stand there watching them. Beat)

What about Trace and Emma?

**CHARLIE**

We can't have girls in the war.

**TICKER**

Why not?

**CHARLIE**

'Cause it's a war. We never have girls in the war.

**GENE**

You were fine when they were throwin' water balloons. *You* brought 'em, Tick.

**CHARLIE**

No, I didn't. They just came.

**TICKER**

**GENE**

We didn't need them.

**HUGO**

Girls in hand-to-hand combat? No way.

**CHARLIE**

(to Hugo)

They could take *you*, brainiac.

**TRACE**

We want to help.

**TICKER**

Boys only.

**GENE**

Think I want my sister gettin' her clothes all cut up?

**HUGO**

(half to himself)

You shoulda' asked us first about the buttons, Charlie. Who here's got extra shirts and pants?

(beat)

All I have's my school clothes. I heard they sent five kids home last year on the first day 'cause they weren't in the dress code.

**CHARLIE**

You didn't even live here 'til spring.

**HUGO**

I said I *heard*. "For male students, a clean shirt with buttons—no pull-overs—is required."

**GENE**

You memorized it?

**HUGO**

I gotta' have a clean button-down shirt for school. We all gotta' have 'em, or we'll get sent home.

**TRACE**

We could—

My Dad'll whip me—

**HUGO**

We could sew.

**TRACE**

Yeah—if we can't fight.

**EMMA**

*I didn't say you couldn't fight.*

**CHARLIE**

We could be doctors.

**EMMA**

Nurses?

**HUGO**

Doctors. Somebody's gonna' have to take care of the wounded.

**TRACE**

You can sew?

**CHARLIE**

You think our Mom has time to mend  
(points at Gene)  
 his jeans every time he tears 'em?

**TRACE**

(beat)

The war has to come first. If somebody needs patching up—

**CHARLIE**

Yeah, if I come home with no buttons on my pants—

**HUGO**

Are we all agreed to Trace and Emma joining the war effort as doctors?

**CHARLIE**

(Gene, Ticker and Siggy nod.)

**HUGO**

We'll be sorry.

**HUGO**

(beat)

Fine. You better be ready to sew round the clock.

(Charlie gestures for Ticker to give Morris' buttons to Trace.)

**CHARLIE**

Keep them somewhere safe.

**TICKER**

The trophies.

**CHARLIE**

(shakes his head)

The war chest.

(beat)

Everybody listen—

(to Ticker)

Did you find an open door?

**TICKER**

A window.

**CHARLIE**

Can you open the front door from the inside?

**TICKER**

I think so.

**CHARLIE**

Then open it.

(Exit Ticker.)

Listen: go home and get whatever you can grab that your parents won't miss.

**HUGO**

My Dad won't let me out tonight.

**CHARLIE**

Sneak out. Everybody has to bring something.

**GENE**

Like what?

**CHARLIE**

Anything.

Pepper?

**GENE**

(Charlie thinks, then nods.)

**CHARLIE**

Use it to make 'em sneeze.

**HUGO**

Or for cooking.

**EMMA**

There's a soda bottle.

**CHARLIE**

What kind?

**EMMA**

Just plain. It might be kinda' flat.

**CHARLIE**

Bring it. We'll figure out something.

**HUGO**

I think we got an extra bucket.

**TRACE**

Buttons.

**GENE**

Where do we have buttons?

**TRACE**

Mom's sewing kit.

**GENE**

If she sees there's buttons gone—

**TRACE**

When was the last time *Mom* sewed anything?

**CHARLIE**

Buttons would be really great. Just in case.  
(Ticker pushes open the factory door.)

Everybody run home. I'll get my suitcases and stand guard 'til you get back.

**CHARLIE** (cont'd)

(All but Charlie start to exit in various directions.)

Wait.

(The others stop.)

There's one more thing: it's gotta' be a fair fight.

**TICKER**

What do ya' mean?

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