

Roald Dahl

# The Landlady

## WARMING UP

### Speaking

■ *Before reading the story, answer the following questions.*

- 1 Have you ever stayed at a B&B or at a hotel? What was it like?
- 2 What would you be looking for in a guesthouse if you were thinking of staying there?

## WHILE READING

### Comprehension

■ *While reading through, answer the questions in the margin.*

Billy Weaver had travelled down from London on the slow afternoon train, with a change at Swindon on the way, and by the time he got to Bath it was about nine o'clock in the evening and the moon was coming up out of a clear starry sky over the houses opposite the station entrance. But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is there a fairly cheap hotel not too far away from here?"

"Try The Bell and Dragon," the porter answered, pointing down the road. "They might take you in. It's about a quarter of a mile along on the other side."

Billy thanked him and picked up his suitcase and set out to walk the quarter mile to The Bell and Dragon. He had never been to Bath before. He didn't know anyone who lived there. But Mr Greenslade at the Head Office in London had told him it was a splendid city. "Find your own lodgings," he had said, "and then go along and report to the Branch Manager as soon as you've got yourself settled."

Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new navy-blue overcoat, a new brown **trilby hat**, and a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine.



a trilby hat

Why has Billy come to Bath?



He walked briskly<sup>1</sup> down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided, was the one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots<sup>2</sup> up at Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing.

There were no shops on this wide street that he was walking along, only a line of tall houses on each side, all them identical. They had porches and pillars and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that once upon a time they had been very swanky<sup>3</sup> residences. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was peeling from the woodwork on their doors and windows, and that the handsome white façades were cracked and blotchy<sup>4</sup> from neglect.

Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street-lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped up<sup>5</sup> against the glass in one of the upper panes.<sup>6</sup> It said BED AND BREAKFAST. There was a vase of yellow chrysanthemums, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice.

He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either side of the window. The chrysanthemums looked wonderful beside them. He went right up and peered<sup>7</sup> through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth.<sup>8</sup> On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked<sup>9</sup> into its belly.

The room itself, so far as he could see in the half-darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. There was a baby-grand piano<sup>10</sup> and a big sofa and several plump armchairs; and in one corner he spotted a large parrot in a cage. Animals were

What do the houses on the street look like?



### Glossary

1 with speed and energy 2 powerful and important people 3 expensive and snobbish 4 with uneven marks 5 supported 6 single pieces of glass in a window 7 looked intently 8 place where a fire is put 9 covered 10 long, three-legged piano

usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself; and all in all, it looked to him as though it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. Certainly it would be more comfortable than The Bell and Dragon.

On the other hand, a pub would be more congenial than a boarding-house. There would be beer and darts in the evenings, and lots of people to talk to, and it would probably be a good bit cheaper, too. He had stayed a couple of nights in a pub once before and he had liked it. He had never stayed in any boarding-houses, and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The name itself conjured up<sup>11</sup> images of watery cabbage, rapacious<sup>12</sup> landladies, and a powerful smell of kippers<sup>13</sup> in the living-room.

After dithering about<sup>14</sup> like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at The Bell and Dragon before making up his mind. He turned to go. And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there.

BED AND BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell.

He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then at once – it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell-button – the door swung open and a woman was standing there. Normally you ring the bell and you have at least a half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame was a like a *jack-in-the-box*.

Which aspects of the house make Billy think it is a good place to stay?

What are the advantages of staying at a pub according to Billy?



### Glossary

11 evoked 12 greedy 13 herrings 14 being uncertain

Why does Billy  
jump?  
What does the  
landlady look  
like?

He pressed the bell – and out she popped!<sup>15</sup> It made him jump. She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm welcoming smile.

“Please come in,” she said pleasantly. She stepped aside, holding the door wide open, and Billy found himself automatically starting forward into the house. The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong.

“I saw the notice in the window,” he said, holding himself back.

“Yes, I know.”

“I was wondering about a room.”

“It’s all ready for you, my dear,” she said. She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.

“I was on my way to The Bell and Dragon,” Billy told her. “But the notice in your window just happened to catch my eye.”

“My dear boy,” she said, “why don’t you come in out of the cold?”

“How much do you charge?”

“Five and sixpence a night, including breakfast.”

It was fantastically cheap. It was less than half of what he had been willing to pay.

“If that is too much,” she added, “then perhaps I can reduce it just a tiny bit. Do you desire an egg for breakfast? Eggs are expensive at the moment. It would be sixpence less without the egg.”

“Five and sixpence is fine,” he answered. “I should like very much to stay here.”

“I knew you would. Do come in.”

She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one’s best schoolfriend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays. Billy took off his hat, and stepped over the threshold.

“Just hang it there,” she said, “and let me help you with your coat.”

### Glossary.....

**15** jumped out suddenly

There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking sticks – nothing.

“We have it all to ourselves,” she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she led the way upstairs.

“You see, it isn’t very often I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest.”

The old girl is slightly dotty,<sup>16</sup> Billy told himself. But at five and sixpence a night, who gives a damn about that? – “I should’ve thought you’d be simply swamped<sup>17</sup> with applicants,” he said politely.

“Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course I am. But the trouble is that I’m inclined to be just a teeny weeny<sup>18</sup> bit choosy<sup>19</sup> and particular – if you see what I mean.”

“Ah, yes.”

“But I’m always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the off-chance<sup>20</sup> that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just exactly right.” She was half-way up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair-rail, turning her head and smiling down at him with pale lips. “Like you,” she added, and her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy’s body, to his feet, and then up again.

On the first-floor landing she said to him, “This floor is mine.” They climbed up a second flight. “And this one is all yours,” she said. “Here’s your room. I do hope you’ll like it.” She took him into a small but charming front bedroom, switching on the light as she went in.

“The morning sun comes right in the window, Mr Perkins. It is Mr Perkins, isn’t it?”

“No,” he said. “It’s Weaver.”

“Mr Weaver. How nice. I’ve put a water-bottle between the sheets to air them out, Mr Weaver. It’s such a comfort to have



### Glossary

16 crazy 17 overwhelmed 18 extremely little 19 highly selective 20 by luck


 a bedspread

Why does Billy want to go to bed as soon as possible?

a hot water-bottle in a strange bed with clean sheets, don't you agree? And you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel chilly."

"Thank you," Billy said. "Thank you ever so much." He noticed that the **bedspread** had been taken off the bed, and that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.

"I'm so glad you appeared," she said, looking earnestly into his face. "I was beginning to get worried."

"That's all right," Billy answered brightly.

"You mustn't worry about me." He put his suitcase on the chair and started to open it.

"And what about supper, my dear? Did you manage to get anything to eat before you came here?"

"I'm not a bit hungry, thank you," he said. "I think I'll just go to bed as soon as possible because tomorrow I've got to get up rather early and report to the office."

"Very well, then. I'll leave you now so that you can unpack. But before you go to bed, would you be kind enough to pop into the sitting-room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it's the law of the land, and we don't want to go breaking any laws at this stage in the proceedings, do we?" She gave him a little wave of the hand and went quickly out of the room and closed the door.

Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker<sup>21</sup> didn't worry Billy in the least. After all, she was not only harmless – there was no question about that – but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul. He guessed that she had probably lost a son in the war, or something like that, and had never got over it.

So a few minutes later, after unpacking his suitcase and washing his hands, he trotted downstairs to the ground floor and entered the living-room. His landlady wasn't there, but the fire was glowing in the hearth, and the little dachshund was still sleeping in front of it.

### Glossary

**21** behaving in a very strange way

The room was wonderfully warm and cosy. I'm a lucky fellow, he thought, rubbing his hands. This is a bit of all right. He found the **guest-book** lying open on the piano, so he took out his pen and wrote down his name and address. There were only two other entries above his on the page, and, as one always does with guest-books, he started to read them. One was a Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff. The other was Gregory W. Temple from Bristol. That's funny, he thought suddenly. Christopher Mulholland. It rings a bell.<sup>22</sup> Now where on earth had he heard that rather unusual name before? Was he a boy at school? No. Was it one of his sister's numerous young men, perhaps, or a friend of his father's? No, no, it wasn't any of those. He glanced down again at the book. Christopher Mulholland, 231 Cathedral Road, Cardiff. Gregory W. Temple, 27 Sycamore Drive, Bristol. As a matter of fact, now he came to think of it, he wasn't at all sure that the second name didn't have almost as much of a familiar ring about it as the first.

"Gregory Temple?" he said aloud, searching his memory.

"Christopher Mulholland? ..."

"Such charming boys," a voice behind him answered, and he turned and saw his landlady sailing into the room with a large silver tea-tray in her hands. She was holding it well out in front of her, and rather high up, as though the tray were a pair of reins on a frisky<sup>23</sup> horse.

"They sound somehow familiar," he said.

"They do? How interesting."

"I'm almost positive<sup>24</sup> I've heard those names before somewhere. Isn't that queer? Maybe it was in the newspapers. They weren't famous in any way, were they? I mean famous cricketers or footballers or something like that?"

"Famous," she said, setting the tea-tray down on the low table in front of the sofa. "Oh no, I don't think they were famous. But they were extraordinarily handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome,



### Glossary

**22** sounds familiar   **23** lively   **24** sure



When did the two other guests stay at the B&B?

my dear, just exactly like you.”

Once more, Billy glanced down at the book.

“Look here,” he said, noticing the dates. “This last entry is over two years old.”

“It is?”

“Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland’s is nearly a year before that – more than three years ago.”

“Dear me,” she said, shaking her head and heaving a dainty<sup>25</sup> little sigh. “I would never have thought it. How time does fly away from us all, doesn’t it, Mr Wilkins?”

“It’s Weaver,” Billy said. “W-e-a-v-e-r.”

“Oh, of course it is!” she cried, sitting down on the sofa.

“How silly of me. I do apologise. In one ear and out the other, that’s me, Mr Weaver.”

“You know something?” Billy said.

“Something that’s really quite extraordinary about all this?”

“No, dear, I don’t.”

“Well, you see – both of these names, Mulholland and Temple, I not only seem to remember each one of them separately, so to speak, but somehow or other, in some peculiar way, they both appear to be sort of connected together as well. As though they were both famous for the same sort of thing, if you see what I mean – like ... like Dempsey and Tunney, for example, or Churchill and Roosevelt.”

“How amusing,” she said. “But come over here now, dear, and sit down beside me on the sofa and I’ll give you a nice cup of tea and a ginger biscuit before you go to bed.”

“You really shouldn’t bother,” Billy said.

“I didn’t mean you to do anything like that.”

He stood by the piano, watching her as she fussed about<sup>26</sup> with the cups and saucers.

He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands, and red finger-nails.

“I’m almost positive it was in the newspapers I saw them,” Billy said. “I’ll think of it in a second. I’m sure I will.”



### Glossary

<sup>25</sup> delicate    <sup>26</sup> moved about in a busy manner

There is nothing more tantalising<sup>27</sup> than a thing like this which lingers<sup>28</sup> just outside the borders of one's memory. He hated to give up.

“Now wait a minute,” he said. “Wait just a minute. Mulholland... Christopher Mulholland... wasn't that the name of the Eton<sup>29</sup> schoolboy who was on a walking-tour through the West Country, and then all of a sudden...”

“Milk?” she said. “And sugar?”

“Yes, please. And then all of a sudden...”

“Eton schoolboy?” she said. “Oh no, my dear, that can't possibly be right because my Mr Mulholland was certainly not an Eton schoolboy when he came to me. He was a Cambridge undergraduate.<sup>30</sup> Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea's all ready for you.”

She patted the empty place beside her on the sofa, and she sat there smiling at Billy and waiting for him to come over. He crossed the room slowly, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. She placed his teacup on the table in front of him.

“There we are,” she said. “How nice and cosy this is, isn't it?”

Billy started sipping<sup>31</sup> his tea. She did the same. For half a minute or so, neither of them spoke. But Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup.

Now and again, he caught a whiff<sup>32</sup> of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him – well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

“Mr Mulholland was a great one for his tea,” she said at



### Glossary

**27** attractive and tempting   **28** takes a long time to disappear   **29** exclusive private school   **30** university student   **31** drinking slowly   **32** slight smell

length. “Never in my life have I seen anyone drink as much tea as dear, sweet Mr Mulholland.”

“I suppose he left fairly recently,” Billy said. He was still puzzling his head about the two names. He was positive now that he had seen them in the newspapers – in the headlines. “Left?” she said, arching her brows. “But my dear boy, he never left. He’s still here. Mr Temple is also here. They’re on the third floor, both of them together.”

Billy set down his cup slowly on the table, and stared at his landlady. She smiled back at him, and then she put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortingly on the knee. “How old are you, my dear?” she asked.

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen!” she cried. “Oh, it’s the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle<sup>33</sup> shorter than you are, in fact I’m sure he was, and his teeth weren’t quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that?”

“They’re not as good as they look,” Billy said.

“They’ve got simply masses of fillings in them at the back.”

“Mr Temple, of course, was a little older,” she said, ignoring his remark. “He was actually twenty eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn’t told me, never in my whole life. There wasn’t a blemish<sup>34</sup> on his body.”

“A what?” Billy said.

“His skin was just like a baby’s.”

There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup and took another sip of his tea, then he set it down again gently in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else, but she seemed to have lapsed into another of her silences. He sat there staring straight ahead of him into the far corner of the room, biting his lower lip.

“That parrot,” he said at last. “You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window from the street. I could have sworn it was alive.”

### Glossary

**33** a little    **34** imperfection, flaw

“Alas, no longer.”

“It’s most terribly clever the way it’s been done,” he said. “It doesn’t look in the least bit dead. Who did it?”

“I did.”

“You did?”

“Of course,” she said. “And have you met my little Basil as well?” She nodded towards the dachshund curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realised that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved.

“Good gracious me,” he said. “How absolutely fascinating.” He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa. “It must be most awfully difficult to do a thing like that.”

“Not in the least,” she said. “I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?”

“No, thank you,” Billy said. The tea tasted faintly of bitter **almonds**, and he didn’t much care for it.

“You did sign the book, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes.”

“That’s good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I can always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr... Mr...”

“Temple,” Billy said. “Gregory Temple. Excuse my asking, but haven’t there been any other guests here except them in the last two or three years?”

Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile.

“No, my dear,” she said. “Only you.”

What does Billy realize about the pets?



## CLOSE READING

### Comprehension

■ **Answer the following questions.**

**1** List all the information you are given about Billy.

.....  
 .....

**2** Which action does Billy perform as if driven by an invisible force?

.....

**3** What evidence is there that the landlady has been expecting a guest?

.....  
 .....

**4** Which aspects of the landlady's appearance and voice make her seem trustworthy?

.....  
 .....

**5** What evidence is there that there is no other guest at the B&B?

.....  
 .....

**6** At what point can the reader predict what will happen to Billy?

.....

**7** Identify some of the landlady's frightening remarks.

.....  
 .....

**8** What do you think the landlady means when she says "I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away"?

.....

### Definitions

■ **Read the story again and identify the words corresponding to the following definitions.**

**1** A person whose job is to carry things, especially travellers' bags at stations and hotels .....

**2** A heavy coat for use in cold weather .....

**3** A small area covered by a roof at the entrance to a house .....

**4** Thick soft cover for a floor .....

**5** Hard round vegetable with green or purple leaves .....

**6** The last main meal of the day .....

**7** Having an attractive appearance .....

**8** A strong material made from animal skin that is used for making shoes, clothes, and bags .....

**Vocabulary**

■ Label the pictures below with words from the story.



1 .....



2 .....



3 .....



4 .....



5 .....



6 .....



7 .....



8 .....

**Adverbs**

■ Match each adverb with the corresponding adjective, then provide the Italian equivalents.

- |               |               |       |
|---------------|---------------|-------|
| 1 Fairly      | A Ready       | ..... |
| 2 Brilliantly | B Honest      | ..... |
| 3 Perfectly   | C Cheap       | ..... |
| 4 Deadly      | D Sure        | ..... |
| 5 Terribly    | E Dotty       | ..... |
| 6 Slightly    | F Illuminated | ..... |
| 7 Always      | G Nice        | ..... |
| 8 Quite       | H Cold        | ..... |

**Matching**

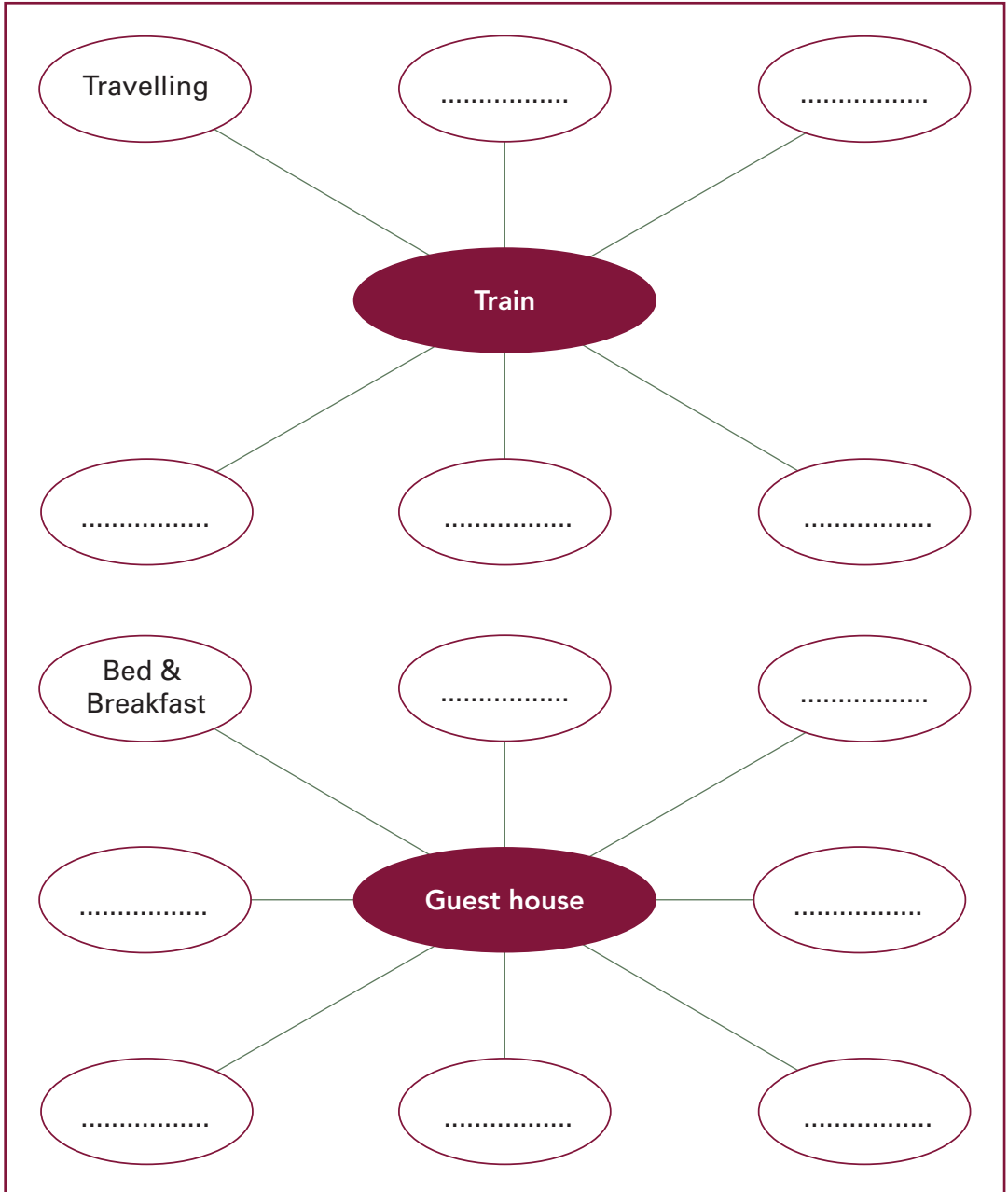
■ Match each verb with the corresponding noun. Then build a sentence of your own for each verb.

- |            |                   |       |
|------------|-------------------|-------|
| 1 Travel   | A One's memory    | ..... |
| 2 Walk     | B The bell        | ..... |
| 3 Stay     | C The steps       | ..... |
| 4 Climb    | D In a pub        | ..... |
| 5 Ring     | E Down the street | ..... |
| 6 Take off | F On a train      | ..... |

- |                 |                      |       |
|-----------------|----------------------|-------|
| <b>7</b> Unpack | <b>G</b> The room    | ..... |
| <b>8</b> Rub    | <b>H</b> A suitcase  | ..... |
| <b>9</b> Search | <b>I</b> One's hands | ..... |
| <b>10</b> Cross | <b>J</b> One's hat   | ..... |

**Mind mapping**

■ Complete the mind maps below with words from the story.









## Short story graphic organiser

- **Now fill in the graphic organiser below, focusing on the main aspects of the short story you have just read. Look online and gather some information about the author and the collection this story belongs to.**

Short story graphic organiser		
TITLE .....		
COLLECTION .....		DATE .....
AUTHOR .....		
AUTHOR'S SHORT BIOGRAPHY .....		
SETTING		
Time	Place	
.....		
CHARACTERS		
Main characters	Minor characters	Describe the main character(s)
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	Round or flat?
.....	.....	.....
POINT OF VIEW		
Internal or external? .....		
CONFLICT		
Person vs self .....		
Person vs person .....		
ATMOSPHERE/MOOD		
.....		
THEME		
What is the author's message about life, human behaviour, or society?		
.....		
IMAGERY		
Provide an example from the text for each of the following senses.		
Sight .....	Sound .....	
Taste .....	Smell .....	
Touch .....		
LITERARY DEVICES		
Provide an example of the following devices quoting from the text.		
Simile .....		
Metaphor .....		
Irony .....		

## Writing an analysis paragraph

- *Foreshadowing is a literary technique typical of crime fiction used to give you clues about things that will happen later in a text. Focus on some examples of foreshadowing employed by Dahl in The Landlady.*

## ACTING IT OUT

### Role-playing

- *In pairs, act out the dialogue between the landlady and Billy at the beginning of the short story.*

### Speaking

- *Imagine you are Billy and explain why you have decided to stay at the B&B.*

## FROM THE PRESS

### Reporting

- *Read the following article and report its content to the rest of the class. You may make use of notes and charts.*

Long before the brothers Grimm wrote about wolves eating grandmothers and witches luring children with candy, parents were telling fearsome tales to their offspring. Scary stories may have played a cautionary role in keeping young ones in line years ago, but you may wonder: Is there still good reason to let your kids read things that frighten them?

Absolutely, says Frank Farley, PhD, who believes exposing children to scary stories helps them “become strong, independent, and not inappropriately fearful.”

Farley, a Temple University professor of psychology and former president of the American Psychological Association, says fear is one of our most powerful emotions. When we address it with our kids, we help prepare them for life.

Another thing to consider is that scary stories are not just about fear. Often, they are also about

## I’LL GET YOU MY PRETTY!

**For centuries, scary stories have prepared kids for the real world.**

courage, problem-solving and the weak triumphing over the strong. Think about Harry Potter overcoming Lord Voldemort or Cinderella, who finds a way to escape from her evil stepmother and stepsisters. Farley says tales such as these empower children by showing positive endings.

Philadelphia-area author Jonathan Maberry agrees. As a child, Maberry suffered abuse, and through fiction he saw that “monsters could be defeated, and weak people could become strong.”

A multiple winner of the Bram Stoker Award for his writing, Maberry points to Stoker’s

famous book, *Dracula*, as a good example. “*Dracula* was not a book about a vampire, it was a book about people fighting vampires,” he says.

Still, you may wonder how much of the scary stuff is appropriate for your kids and how you can make sure they are not exposed to more than they can handle. Young children especially are affected by images, which is why many experts caution against exposing them to frightening pictures or movies.

Joanne Cantor, PhD, author and professor emerita of communication at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, explains why.

“Kids are not very good at distinguishing fantasy from reality until around the age of 5 or 6,” she says. “Picture books with scary images will be scary even if you say it’s make believe.”

(Adapted from [www.metrokids.com](http://www.metrokids.com))