

WAR OF THE BUTTONS
By Jonathan Dorf

Freely adapted from
La Guerre des Boutons
by Louis Pergaud

(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

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.

Who's your Dad then?
MORRIS

Leave him alone.
CHARLIE

Fine.
MORRIS
(Morris makes a crashing sound, as if
two cars collide.)
Andrews, what's that sound?

I don't know.
ANDREWS

Sounds like an *accident*.
MORRIS

Shut up!
TICKER

That's enough!
CHARLIE
(Beat. Andrews and Morris take a step
back.)

What's with the suitcases?
MORRIS

This a garage sale?
ANDREWS

I'm movin'.
CHARLIE

What you gonna' do when he's gone?
MORRIS
(to Ticker)

I'll *call* him.
TICKER

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

(sotto voce)

Walker!

CHARLIE

Get off him.

(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.

What we eatin'?

GENE

Burgers.

TRACE

Charlie, you wanna-

GENE

My Dad might come back, wonder where I went.

CHARLIE

I'll see ya' later.

GENE

Bye.

TRACE

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

Wait up.

HUGO
(to Emma and Siggy)

(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.)

I'll stay with ya'.

TICKER

(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.)

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.

GENE

It's big.

HUGO

Biggest building in town.

CHARLIE

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

GENE

Giant trucks rolling in and out all day long.

TICKER

Giant machine squeezin' out chocolate all day long.

HUGO

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

CHARLIE

They don't make anything anymore.

GENE

Hard to believe it's all just empty.

HUGO

We could have secret tunnels-

TICKER

And passwords. Lots of passwords.

CHARLIE

And places where you can see people without them seein' you.

(beat)

What if the preps are thinkin' the same thing?

GENE

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

CHARLIE

'Cause it's ours.

HUGO

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

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.

HUGO

Lump.

GENE

Geek.

HUGO

That's smart.

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.

HUGO

I can't afford a walkie-talkie.

GENE

Me neither. Can you?

CHARLIE

No, but at least it's an idea.

HUGO

(beat, to Gene)

Sorry.

GENE

Me too.

HUGO

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

(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.)

WALKER

That's mine.

HUGO

Where's your sailor suits?

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?

GENE

I don't know. Maybe pearl.

HUGO

Looks plastic to me.

TICKER

Charlie, what do you think they are?

CHARLIE

I say they're trophies.

TICKER

(warms to the idea)

Yeah.

CHARLIE

From our victory.

HUGO

Trophies!

(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)

CHARLIE

What about Trace and Emma?

TICKER

We can't have girls in the war.

CHARLIE

Why not?

GENE

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

CHARLIE

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

TICKER

No, I didn't. They just came.

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—

HUGO

My Dad'll whip me—

TRACE

We could sew.

EMMA

Yeah—if we can't fight.

CHARLIE

I didn't say you couldn't fight.

EMMA

We could be doctors.

HUGO

Nurses?

TRACE

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

CHARLIE

You can sew?

TRACE

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

CHARLIE

(beat)

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

HUGO

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

CHARLIE

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

(Gene, Ticker and Siggy nod.)

HUGO

We'll be sorry.

(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.

(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?

CHARLIE

I mean we gotta' dress by the rules: button-down shirts, shoes with laces, stuff like that.

TICKER

But I only got my school clothes.

CHARLIE

Then that's what you gotta' wear. That's all I got, and I only got one button-down. But that's the rules of this war: no T-shirts, or stuff without buttons or laces.

HUGO

But it's *not* fair. The preps got lots of shirts. If we cut one, they'll just get another one. Or pants or ties or whatever. But if they get us—

CHARLIE

That's why we got Trace and Emma as doctors. And that's why we got the war chest.

GENE

Hugo's right.

CHARLIE

Aren't we better than preps?

(beat)

Are you scared? Ticker, you chicken?

TICKER

No.

CHARLIE

Gene?

(beat)

Hugo?

HUGO

I'm not afraid. I'm just saying—

CHARLIE

If anything happens, I'm the one that'll get sent away. I'm the one that'll go to Upward Springs. Me.

(beat)

OK.

(The others resume their exodus.)

Trace?

(Trace stops. Charlie lets the stage clear before he speaks.)

Do you know if you have any extra blankets? My parents took the, uh . . . it's no big deal.

TRACE

I'll look.

CHARLIE

Thanks.

(Exit Trace. Charlie pulls his suitcases through the ice cream factory door. Lights dim on the factory. Enter GENE'S FATHER, played by the adult actor, pushing on a store counter, on top of which are three frozen meatloaf dinners, a two-liter bottle of soda and a large box of cereal. Charlie steps into the scene with him. During their scene, the other town kids enter the factory with what they have brought from home: Hugo, a bucket with a piece missing around the rim; Gene, some pepper in a paper bag; Emma, a needle in plastic wrapping; Trace, three buttons and a worn-looking blanket; and Siggy, a handmade-looking wooden box about the size that you'd put silverware in. The town kids should enter and exit as

necessary to set up their headquarters—
except for Emma, who moves to another
part of the stage, where Nelson enters.)

GENE'S FATHER

That'll be six-forty.

CHARLIE

(beat)

I thought the meatloaf dinners were on special.

GENE'S FATHER

They are: four for four dollars. You only have three. So
that's a buck and a quarter each.

CHARLIE

But if I buy another one—

GENE'S FATHER

It's only another quarter.

CHARLIE

I don't have a quarter.

NELSON

Hi.

EMMA

Hi.

NELSON

I'm glad you came.

GENE'S FATHER

Do you have the six-forty?

(Charlie recounts his money, then shakes
his head.)

What do you want to put back?

(beat)

Sorry I can't spot you. I'm just the manager, not the
owner.

CHARLIE

It's OK, Mr. Robinson.

(Charlie hands Gene's Father the box of cereal.)

NELSON

You like McGregor's?

EMMA

Never been there. I hear it's good.

NELSON

They have lobster on the weekends.

(beat)

You wanna' go?

EMMA

(beat)

Yeah. Sure.

GENE'S FATHER

How're your folks?

CHARLIE

OK.

GENE'S FATHER

Thought I saw 'em driving out of town yesterday.

CHARLIE

What's the best deal in the store?

GENE'S FATHER

How do you mean?

CHARLIE

You know how they're always sayin' "the most bang for your buck" on TV?

GENE'S FATHER

Don't watch much TV.

CHARLIE

Gene watches a little—just a little—and—

GENE'S FATHER

That better end when school starts.

CHARLIE

I'm sure it will, sir, but I was over and we saw this commercial—

GENE'S FATHER

"Most bang for your buck."

CHARLIE

Like if you were goin' on an expedition to a desert island and you had to make the food last.

GENE'S FATHER

You goin' on an expedition?

(beat)

I'd say the oatmeal.

CHARLIE

How much oatmeal does this buy?

(Charlie holds out his money—about five dollars in change. Gene's Father counts it.)

GENE'S FATHER

Few boxes.

CHARLIE

Get me a few boxes of oatmeal then, please.

(Gene's Father gets the oatmeal—either from offstage or from behind the counter.)

NELSON

When should I come to your house?

EMMA

I'll meet you.

NELSON

I don't mind.

EMMA

It's OK. Just meet me. I gotta' go.

(Nelson kisses her on the cheek. Beat.)

Do you have a real first name?

NELSON

Matt. At school they call you by your last name.

EMMA

You can kiss me for real, Matt.

(They kiss on the lips. Emma exits.)

GENE'S FATHER

So where'd you say your folks went?

CHARLIE

They just went away for the day.

GENE'S FATHER

So they're back now.

CHARLIE

(senses danger)

No. They had to stay a little longer. Overnight.

GENE'S FATHER

Where are they?

CHARLIE

I forget the name of the town. I don't think it's far.

GENE'S FATHER

They *did* tell you?

CHARLIE

Sure.

GENE'S FATHER

Be very irresponsible of them not to tell you. Case of emergency.

CHARLIE

They're not the world's most responsible parents.

GENE'S FATHER

Least they called to say they weren't gonna' be back right away.

(Charlie, lying, nods.)

So what you doin' with yourself?

CHARLIE

You know. Just hangin' out. School starts on Tuesday.

GENE'S FATHER

I know. You want a bag?

CHARLIE

Bag?

GENE'S FATHER

For the oatmeal.

CHARLIE

No thanks.

GENE'S FATHER

That'll be five-ten.

(Charlie is left with a few pennies.)

They coulda' left you with us for a couple of days.

CHARLIE

I didn't want to be any trouble.

GENE'S FATHER

Never have been.

CHARLIE

I stay over a lot. Gotta' give somebody else a chance.

GENE'S FATHER

You at Hugo Benzwen's?

CHARLIE

(a lie)

I told Hugo I'd meet him. I think I'm late.

(Gene's Father gives him the oatmeal and a small candy.)

GENE'S FATHER

Penny candy for ya'.

CHARLIE

Thanks.

(Charlie "exits" the store with his oatmeal.)

GENE'S FATHER

(calls after him)

What do you want with all that oatmeal?

(Charlie returns to the hideout, which should be set by now, and puts away the oatmeal.)

HUGO

I gotta' go. I brought the bucket, but I gotta' go before my Dad figures out I'm gone.

CHARLIE

(looks around)

This is nice.

HUGO

Charlie, I gotta' go.

TICKER

Hugo's scared of his Daddy.

HUGO

You're not scared of your Mom?

TICKER

You don't see me runnin' home.

HUGO

That's 'cause your Mom's not ever home to care where you are.

TICKER

Where's *your* Mom?

TRACE

Hey! Stop it—both of you.

(The lights flicker, and Charlie and Hugo step out of the scene. It's earlier in the summer.)

HUGO

Got a postcard from my Mom.

CHARLIE

She coming back?

HUGO

(shakes his head)

I can't believe they're closing the ice cream factory in the middle of the summer. It's so hot out.

CHARLIE

I saw my Dad's pink slip. He pinned it on the refrigerator.

HUGO

I don't think she's gonna' write anymore.

CHARLIE

Maybe she'd come back if she saw your report card.

(beat)

Your Dad sign the petition to save the factory?

HUGO

He was asleep when they came 'round. I told him wake up, sign the petition, but he tells me it doesn't matter. He says he doesn't want the Prep findin' out he signed, so tell 'em come back when he's not sleepin'.

CHARLIE

They come back?

HUGO

Once. He was still asleep. I think they gave up.

CHARLIE

I heard they might not do the petition anymore. Not enough people were signin'.

HUGO

I told 'em I'd sign, but they said I wasn't old enough.

(The lights flicker. Beat.)

CHARLIE

The grownups couldn't stop the town from goin' to hell, so it's up to us. Maybe winnin' the war against the preps isn't gonna' bring back the ice cream factory—

TICKER

You never know—

CHARLIE

You never know. But even if it doesn't, it's something. It says we're not gonna' be pushed around.

GENE

What was that thing in the Revolutionary War?

CHARLIE

What thing?

GENE

The snake flag.

HUGO

It was a rattlesnake. It said "don't tread on me."

GENE

Yeah.

TICKER

I think I still got the snakeskin I found in the creek last year.

CHARLIE

Don't tread on me. That's good.

HUGO

It's not enough.

CHARLIE

What do you mean?

HUGO

If you're in a war, you gotta' have objectives.

CHARLIE

Objectives.

HUGO

How do we win? How do we know when it's over and we've won?

TICKER

(beat, not sure)

They take back what they said about our Moms.

HUGO

Or Dads.

GENE

(getting more sure)

They stop treating us like we're dirt.

HUGO

(sure)

They stay at their school and stop trying to take over our town.

(beat)

You know they're turnin' this place into a new gym?

(beat)

My Dad heard it at work. Callin' it an "athletic center."
Reason nobody knows about it is 'cause they're bringin' the
people from outside. The contractors are all from outside.

(beat)

Bet that's what the guys in suits are: architects. From
the city.

GENE

A whole gym and they aren't usin' a single person that lives here?

TICKER

(betrayed)

They coulda' saved the town.

HUGO

How they gonna' buy it up if it's worth something?

(beat)

As long as nobody's got jobs—decent jobs . . . We can barely make the rent on our apartment.

TICKER

My Mom was late on the house payment two months ago.

HUGO

No offense, but you live in a shack.

CHARLIE

Hugo!

TICKER

It is too a house.

HUGO

It's better than mine. All I'm sayin' is everybody's barely making it—

CHARLIE

And . . .

HUGO

And every time somebody slips up, the Prep buys their place.
(to Charlie)

Who bought your house?

CHARLIE

My parents wouldn't tell.

HUGO

Bet it was the Prep. Probably turn your street into the new track. Sig, your aunt and uncle making their payments?

(Siggy crosses his fingers.)

Trace?

TRACE

We're all right for now.

GENE

Yeah.

HUGO

Emma?

EMMA

As long as my Dad keeps pickin' up fix-it jobs.

TICKER

You're givin' me a headache. Rent and payments and stuff is for grownups.

HUGO

You get to keep your paper money?

TICKER

(shakes his head)

Gotta' help pay our house loan.

HUGO

I don't have any money.

(Hugo turns his pockets inside out.
Empty.)

Does anybody here have any money?

(Heads shake unanimously.)

We could end up like Charlie, livin' in the ice cream factory.

(beat)

What this town needs is for the ice cream factory to come back.

EMMA

Like that's gonna' happen.

TICKER

It could.

CHARLIE

Or else it's gonna' be like Hugo says. The Prep'll just wait 'til we screw up, and then . . .

(Charlie makes the baseball sign for
"you're out." Beat.)
Maybe we can make the preps leave.

HUGO

How?

CHARLIE

If they hate this town so much they don't want to go to
their school anymore.

(beat)

If every prep that steps in our town gets his buttons cut
off, his tie shredded, shoelaces cut in half.

TICKER

Pants falling down.

CHARLIE

And when they get too scared to leave the Prep, we'll go
there, and we won't stop until we've got 'em all.

HUGO

And when we're done, they'll all know—all the way up to the
head of the Prep—they'll know they don't mess with our town,
and they'll give up.

(beat)

Then it's war.

TICKER

War.

ALL BUT SIGGY AND CHARLIE

War!

(Charlie holds his knife aloft.)

CHARLIE

War!

(Beat. The lights flicker, and all but
Hugo and Charlie exit. Hugo grabs a
box—probably hidden upstage—full of
shredded clothing: a buttonless blazer,
shredded ties, shirts and shoelaces. He

begins hanging it on the wall of the ice cream factory—it's late spring.)

HUGO

Thanks for helping me move in.

CHARLIE

Thanks for lettin' me sleep over.

HUGO

You don't have to help me unpack. My Dad just wanted somebody to show me where the school is.

CHARLIE

It's OK. We're neighbors.

HUGO

You live in a house. My Mom left me and my Dad. But don't tell anybody—OK?

CHARLIE

Where do you want stuff?

HUGO

Let's hang the clothes. I got a closet, so we might as well. If anybody asks, say you think she's dead, but you're not sure. Leave the underwear.

(Charlie helps Hugo hang the clothing.)

CHARLIE

Do socks count?

HUGO

(nods)

If you're gonna' be my friend, it's a really important rule that a guy is always in charge of his own underwear.

CHARLIE

Deal. You're a weird kid.

HUGO

I hate switchin' schools at the end of the year.

CHARLIE

I hate school.

HUGO

It's not that bad. We better get changed. I don't wanna' be late on my first day.

(Hugo takes off his T-shirt and changes into a button-down shirt—a not too damaged one. Charlie does likewise. They change into long pants if they were wearing shorts.)

Which school do we go to? I saw two.

CHARLIE

The ugly one. The Prep is for rich kids.

HUGO

It looks really nice.

CHARLIE

The preps are jerks.

HUGO

They ever come into town?

CHARLIE

Sometimes. Mostly right before school starts at the end of the summer.

HUGO

Why?

CHARLIE

I'll tell you later.

HUGO

My old school didn't have a dress code.

CHARLIE

Don't worry. School's almost over. Then we got the whole summer with no button-down shirts. My Dad works at the ice cream factory. So I can get us freebies anytime we want.

(Hugo exits as the lights flicker. Present time: Labor Day. The clothing Hugo and Charlie hung becomes the preps' shredded clothes. Enter Gene, Ticker

and Siggy carrying two more ties, a handful of buttons, a shredded shirt and shredded shoelaces. Their own clothing isn't shredded, but each is minus a button or two.)

War of the Buttons is a full-length play, of which this is the first half. To receive a complete reading copy, and for other contact information, please return to the "War of the Buttons" information page (click your browser's "Back" button or visit www.singlelane.com/proplay/buttons.html)