Cambridge English Readers

Level 6

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Frozen Pizza and other slices of life

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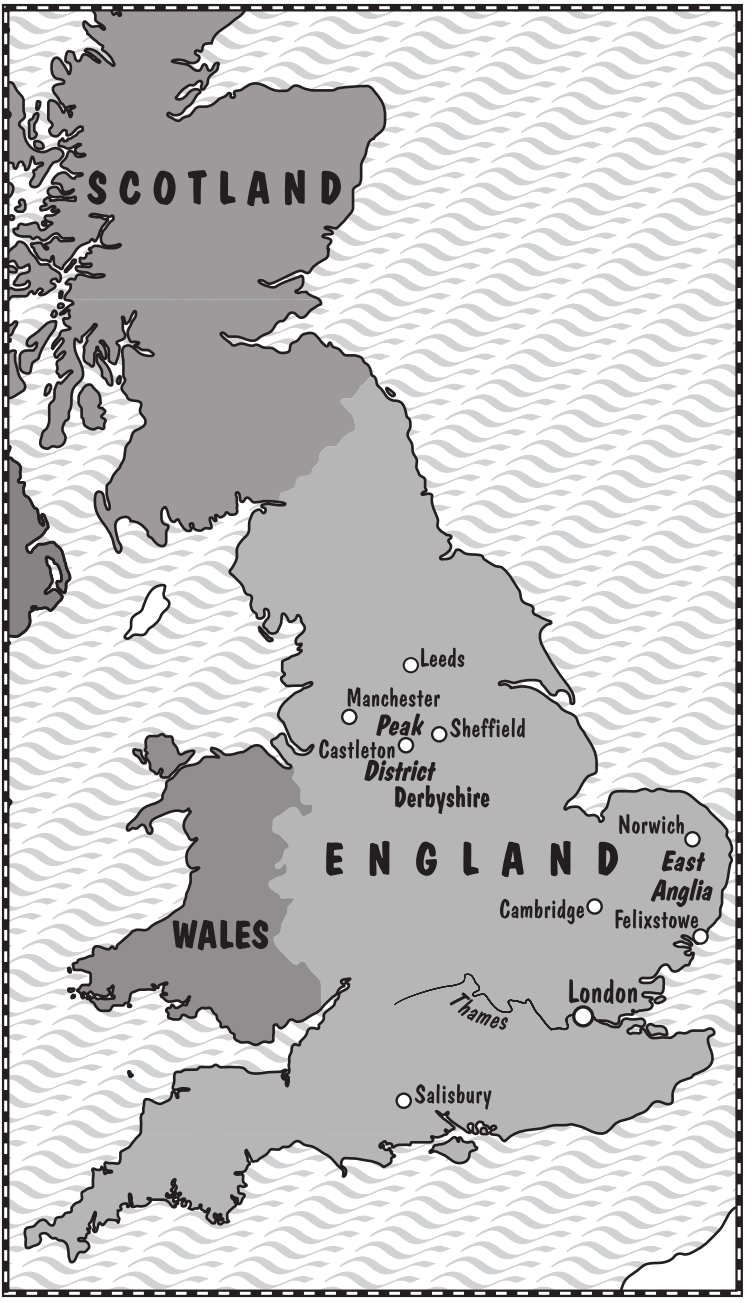
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Two Worlds

'I'm not taking my car! Not near that estate! The kids will steal it or steal the wheels off it! I only bought it a month ago! What if . . . ?'

'OK, OK,' Karen interrupted quickly. 'You've made your point, John. You don't have to take your new car on the film shoot tomorrow.'

She sighed to herself. John was a good cameraman, but he wasn't the easiest man to work with.

'Just hire a car big enough for the three of us and all your equipment. And let me get on with my work,' she added. It wasn't easy being a woman director, she reflected. Sometimes you had to be tough or your team wouldn't take you seriously. Unfortunately John had worked with her for too many years and knew Karen far too well. She could be tough, she had to be sometimes. But for the people who worked for her, she would do anything. That was what they said when she wasn't listening. John didn't even pretend to be upset when she got cross with him.

'Do we get danger money?' he began again. 'I've heard that . . . '

'Out!' commanded Karen.

'But . . . '

'John, get out of my office right now before I . . . '

'But I was only . . . ' John started again.

'Get out before I throw something!'

John left and Karen turned back to her computer and her preparations for the following day's filming.

The idea for the series had come to her while she was reading the newspapers one morning. There were a lot of articles about children in England. Compared with other European countries it didn't do very well. Too many children lived in poverty. The figures shocked her. She herself didn't know anyone who could really be called poor and she was sure that most of her friends didn't either. It was as if there were two different Englands living side by side. She knew immediately that she wanted to make a documentary series about this. She had sat up all that night and written an outline and the next morning she went straight to Adrian, her producer.

'Yes,' he had said. 'I like it.' This was one of the many things that Karen liked about working for Adrian. He made immediate decisions and said what he thought.

'One nation, but divided into the haves and the have-nots. I think it's the right time to do a whole series on England's forgotten children. Of course you will want to include the north–south divide?'

Karen nodded. This was the way most people thought that England was divided. The north of England was where all the poor people lived and the south was the rich part of the country. She knew that it wasn't that simple, but it was what people thought. No, she corrected herself, it was what some people who lived in the south thought. Reasonably wealthy people living in the south. People like Adrian and herself.

'Yes,' she answered. 'I think we have to.'

'The prime minister says the divide doesn't exist any more,' Adrian reminded her. 'Haven't you read about how England has changed? There are more millionaires in the north of England than in the south.'

'Yes,' Karen sighed. 'I've read all about that. I know that in Leeds there's now a branch of Harvey Nichols where people can buy all the same designer clothes that were only available in London before. But Leeds is only one northern city. There's still more unemployment in the north of England than in the south. Most of the best-paid jobs are in the south and most head offices are down here, in or around London. And house prices are much higher in the south. There is still a divide, whatever the prime minister says.'

'I agree with you.' Adrian smiled. 'But at the same time I think that a lot of the differences between the south and the north are simply to do with how we see people.' He frowned.

'What do you mean?' asked Karen.

'Well,' began Adrian, 'look at Linda, for example.'

Linda worked for their TV production company as a researcher. It was she who went out and found the right people to interview. She conducted her own interviews, which she gave to Karen, so that Karen knew before they did any filming who was likely to say what.

'Just because Linda comes from Manchester and has a northern accent, people here in London think that she must be stupid,' continued Adrian. 'In fact she got a first-class degree at Cambridge University, she knows more about economics than I'll ever know and she's the best

researcher we've ever had here. But there's always some idiot making jokes about pie and chips, as if that's all people from Manchester eat.'

'I know.' Karen said. Karen liked Linda and they sometimes went out for a drink or a meal together after work. Linda often complained about the very thing that Adrian was talking about.

'Everyone thinks I'm stupid because I have a Manchester accent,' she had told Karen. 'But I'm not changing the way I speak for any insensitive Londoners; I can tell you that right now!'

Karen smiled at Adrian as she remembered the conversation. She was fascinated by the way that Adrian seemed to care about Linda. Was there something going on between him and Linda that she didn't know about, Karen wondered.

That conversation with Adrian had been two months ago. And Adrian had not only liked her idea, but had rung up the head of documentaries at the network the same day. And only two weeks later he'd persuaded the network that it was just what they wanted right now. Karen had never known an idea for a documentary series go through the system so fast. It usually took months and months, and sometimes years. But the network had been criticised recently for not having enough serious programmes, and they had decided to cancel a new series on people with unusual hobbies. That had left a gap in the autumn programming and this new series would fill it nicely.

'So, here I am,' thought Karen, looking at the computer, 'with a six-part series to produce, very little time and too much to do. As usual.' Filming was starting the next day

and she still had only a rough idea of how she wanted to tell her story. She had written outlines and draft scripts, but there were still a lot of gaps.

'I think we should start close to home,' she had told Adrian. 'Home in the sense of the office,' she added.

Their company had a floor in Canary Wharf. Everyone called it Canary Wharf, but its proper name was Number 1, Canada Square. It was the tallest building in England, although Karen thought that it would not be long before someone built a taller one. She liked working there. It was a building that everyone knew. You could see it from miles away, a huge tower, fifty-two storeys high. Several newspapers had offices in the tower, and occasionally a friend of Karen's who worked for one of them would let her use their files to help her research her stories. It saved her hours of work and trips to the library.

But with this new series there was no need to go to the library or visit her friend at the newspaper. All the information she wanted was recent and that meant that all the facts Karen needed were on the Internet. It took her just two days to get all the facts she needed to write the background pieces. She would use these as the voice-over material.

The film would show views of the different places, while an actor's voice reported all the facts. Then they would cut to the interviews.

Karen still hadn't decided which actor to use for the voice-overs. That was her next job today. She had to listen to some tapes and decide which actor to choose to read the voice-overs. It was so important to get the right voice. You didn't want any of the report to sound like a boring lesson

at school. You didn't want people to switch off or change channels. So you had to choose a good clear but friendly voice.

It wasn't easy, but she had plenty of choice. There were so many good actors around, and most of them were perfectly happy to do voice-over work for documentaries, especially on a series like this one. Many of them had kids themselves. They cared about children.

Karen made a decision and then began to make notes for tomorrow's shoot. They were going to interview this kid, what was her name? Rosie. Karen read through the interview Linda had done with Rosie and underlined the bits that she thought were important. These were the things she wanted the girl to say when they filmed her.

'Poor kid,' Karen thought, reading Linda's outline on Rosie's background. Rosie lived on a housing estate only half a mile from her office, but it was a world away from Karen's London.

She looked out of the window and thought about how easy her life was. If she didn't go straight home to the flat she shared with two friends from university, there were plenty of other things to do. She could take a boat from Canary Wharf along the Thames and then visit the new Tate Modern. This gallery of contemporary art, housed in the huge old power station at Bankside, was one of the most exciting places that Karen knew. In fact that whole area of the Thames was so exciting now, she thought. There was the new Globe Theatre, an almost exact copy of Shakespeare's old theatre, where the audience stood and took part in the productions as they had in Shakespeare's day. There was the National Theatre and the concert halls

and the film theatre and festivals and free poetry events – all the things that made living in London such fun.

It wasn't a world that the kids on Rosie's estate knew. Karen read Linda's notes. Some of the children didn't go to school. They sometimes went in the morning to have their names ticked, and then left as soon as they could. Getting their names ticked made life easier, the children had told Linda. It meant that no one was looking for them.

'But why don't you stay at school?' Linda had asked them.

'There's no point, is there?' they had replied.

'No point?' she had repeated.

'No,' they told her. There was no reason to go to school because they couldn't see any point in an education. They only saw life on their housing estate, where a lot of the men were out of work.

'Why bother going to school?' Rosie herself had asked. 'What's the point?'

'It's awful,' Linda commented to Karen after she had got back from her research trip. 'These kids just can't imagine any kind of life outside the estate. If something isn't done about them, they'll become a lost generation of children.'

'Yes,' said Karen. 'And what makes it really horrifying is that these children live so near here. The London we know doesn't exist for these kids, does it? We just can't imagine what life must be like on an estate like that.'

'No,' Linda agreed. 'I thought I knew what it would be like there. I've seen places like that on television, in documentaries and in plays and films. But it's the smell. That never comes over on television. All the flats smell of damp and old meals. But it's not just actual smells, which

are bad enough, but the smell of hopelessness. I can't describe it any other way. I don't know how you can catch it on film.'

'Nor do I,' Karen replied, thoughtfully.

There were two worlds, she was thinking, her world and the world that these children lived in. A world of damp houses, of being hungry and bored. A world where violence was never far away. A world where some children couldn't even read or write and none of them thought that things would get better.

* * *

The next day was sunny and Rosie woke up as usual to the sound of her little sister, Kylie, crying. Her mother shouted something but didn't get up. Rosie knew that she had been drinking the previous night and probably wouldn't get up until lunchtime. Rosie swung her thin legs over the bed and walked on bare feet across the room, where she and her sister slept, to the kitchen. It was dirty as usual and the floor felt sticky under her feet. She opened the fridge, took out a bottle of milk and smelt it. Luckily, for once it smelt OK, and there was even a packet of cornflakes. Rosie poured some of the breakfast cereal into the bowl, added some milk and put it on the table. Kylie was three, but she had problems talking. Social services wanted her to go to a special school, but her mum refused. She was scared that she would never see her daughter again.

'It's not like that, Mary,' the social services had told her mother. 'Kylie will come home for the holidays.' But Rosie's mum still refused, and the social workers couldn't force her. They came round quite often to check on Rosie

and Kylie, but there wasn't a lot they could do. Rosie always said that she went to school and she did go in briefly once or twice a week. Then she'd go and meet the other kids on the estate or go back to the flat and look after Kylie.

'You kids, you're all I've got,' her mum would say whenever she was sober and often when she was drunk. It was true, Rosie thought. Rosie looked after her sister and made sure that her mum didn't fall asleep with a cigarette in her hand. And her mum did love her and Kylie. In her own way.

Kylie ate her cornflakes and Rosie wiped her face afterwards with a bit of a towel that wasn't too dirty. There was even enough milk and cornflakes for her, too. It was going to be a good day, she decided. Perhaps she'd go to town on the buses today.

It was one of the few times she and her friends left the estate. Going on the buses meant that you jumped on a bus, usually during the crowded time of day when people were going to work. Then you went upstairs and stayed on as long as you could before the conductor came round and asked for your money. When that happened, you pretended you'd lost your money and ran downstairs and jumped off the bus. You couldn't do it on the new buses where the driver took the fares, but only on the old double-decker buses where there was both a driver and a conductor. Some days you could get all the way into the centre of London before the conductor bothered to come upstairs to check travel cards and collect money for tickets. Other days you were spotted as you got on by a conductor who knew you and then you had to get off quickly before

they called the police. Getting home was always harder and sometimes you had to get lots of different buses. And sometimes you had to walk half the way home.

Yes, thought Rosie, she'd go on the buses today. She could go as far as Regent's Park, and then she might even be able to persuade someone that she'd lost her pocket money and get them to pay for the entrance to London Zoo. Rosie loved the zoo. She could look at the animals all day and people often didn't finish their meals at the cafés. She found crisps, chips, half-finished ice cream and once a whole hamburger that someone had ordered but not eaten.

All her life Rosie had been hungry. Not badly hungry, just a feeling that she wanted more. When she did stay at school she got a free lunch and could eat as much as she liked, but that meant lessons. It wasn't that she was stupid. When she was younger she had been near the top of her class. She just couldn't see why she should learn things. And someone had to look after Kylie. 'What's the point?' she always said. 'What's the point of school?' she'd said to that researcher woman the other day.

Rosie jumped off her chair. It was Wednesday. That meant that today was the day that they were coming to film the estate.

'That'll be a laugh,' Rosie's friend Bryan had said. 'Perhaps we can steal the wheels off their van while they're filming.' 'Or get a camera,' said an older boy. 'You can get a lot of money for a camera.'

'No,' said Rosie. 'No-one's going to buy a camera off us, they'd know it was stolen.'

'Yeah,' a boy called Pete agreed. 'And that film woman

Linda said they would pay us to watch the van and make sure that nothing walked.'

'They've been here before then!' Rosie laughed. 'They know what to do.'

She didn't tell her friends that Linda had chosen her. She thought they'd laugh at her. Anyway, Rosie decided, the film people had probably changed their minds by now. People never did what they promised.

But it seemed that they hadn't changed their minds. And they were subtle about the way they went off with Rosie. They asked to see Kylie and then it was natural for Rosie to take them to her flat. Karen had been shocked by the state of Rosie's flat and just couldn't bear the thought of being shut up there for a few hours' filming. But Rosie herself was great. She was so natural and bright.

'Do you know why they call this a sink estate?' she asked Karen.

'No,' Karen replied. 'Do you?'

'It's because we can't sink down any further,' Rosie laughed. Then she thought for a moment. 'Or because they've pulled the plug on us like we're just dirty bath water and they're letting us go down the plughole.'

'That's a good definition,' Linda whispered to Karen.

Rosie's mum was awake but hadn't got dressed, so Karen suggested that they take a boat trip.

'Do you like going on the river?' Karen asked Rosie.

'I've never been,' Rosie replied. 'You'd never be able to get on those boats for free,' she thought.

Anyhow she'd never liked going near the River Thames. It was where, when you were small, the bigger boys had threatened to throw you in. Where you went when the tide

was low to see if you could find old coins or anything else that you could sell.

But you didn't often go near the river because it was dirty and cold and there was enough dirt and cold in your life already.

'We could go to Tate Modern,' suggested Karen. 'We could go round the gallery and then have a meal in a café. Is that OK?'

'Yeah, why not?' said Rosie. Food was always OK, she thought. She didn't like the sound of the gallery bit, but she was hungry and you never got anything for nothing.

They couldn't film inside the gallery, so the film crew waited outside, setting up the camera for the interview, and Karen and Rosie went round the exhibitions.

'Wow! You could get the whole estate in here,' Rosie announced as they entered the huge entrance hall.

Karen had not been sure how Rosie would react to the gallery. She pointed out how the exhibitions were arranged according to subject – memory, the environment, real life. Rosie, however, had her own way of looking at the artworks. The lobster on the telephone made her laugh, but she said that she thought it was silly.

'I like these though,' Rosie said as they walked into the Mark Rothko room. Karen herself found the red and black paintings rather difficult. 'I could sit here all day,' said Rosie. 'It's like just before you go to sleep,' she added. 'You feel safe.'

Rosie liked the Henry Moore sculptures, too. 'You see that one,' said Rosie, pointing to a figure of a woman lying down. 'It makes me think of my mum. It looks all solid on the outside but there's a big hole in the middle.'

Karen nodded. She was amazed at Rosie's responses.

'I'm glad you like it,' she said.

'Yeah,' agreed Rosie. 'I didn't expect to like it. I thought it would be really boring. But it isn't. It's even better than the zoo. And it isn't as cold,' she added.

'You can come here any time you like,' Karen told her.

'I can't. I don't have the money,' explained Rosie.

'No, it's free,' Karen told her.

'And no-one would chase me out?'

'No. No-one.'

Rosie thought about this for a moment and then nodded. They walked round some of the other rooms and then went outside where the film crew was waiting.

Rosie's interview was perfect. Karen knew that the people watching the programme would be affected by Rosie and her story. Perhaps it would even bring the estate some money, thought Karen. Perhaps it might help. It was what she always hoped.

After the interview Rosie asked if she could go back inside the gallery.

'Of course,' said Karen.

Rosie walked back inside. It was true. No-one stopped her. No-one objected. She felt very small inside the huge space, but at the same time, strangely free.

It would be her secret, thought Rosie, her special place, her new world.