

HUMANE  
By Polly Creed

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LINDA: Late 20s (female)

The following other characters are played by two female actors of any age.

MARK

LEWIS

SUE

ORGANISER

ELDERLY GENTLEMAN

NEWSREADER 1 NEWSREADER 2

*With special thanks to Daisy Blower who inspired this play, and offered her warmth, wisdom, and research.*

*HUMANE is based on real stories and testimonies from residents of Brightlingsea.*

*A plastic children's paddling pool sits in the centre of the stage on top of a plastic sheet. It is filled with water. Next to it stands a basket full of children's bath-time toys. Among other things there are plastic animals, toy tea sets, foam letters, and*

*little boats. A towel lies beside it. On either side of the paddling pool, there are two microphones.*

*LINDA enters. With purpose, she rolls up the sleeves of her woolly jumper, and begins to fill the paddling pool with more water, using a plastic watering can. The shipping forecast plays faintly from a small, slightly old-fashioned radio.*

LINDA: (pouring a final bucket of water) Um yeah. I didn't really have a huge amount to do with it. It was only at the real beginning, really.

*LINDA tests the temperature of the water. It is slightly too cool, she smiles. She kneels down next to the paddling pool. She begins to run her fingers across the smooth surface of the water. She seems thoughtful, uncertain. She carefully places two little boats on the surface paddling pool, making sure they float.*

LINDA: Yeah so, so it's a Wednesday and it's January. The 18<sup>th</sup>, I think. The sky is pale and big and white. And the sun, it's low in the sky. It casts white ripples over the sea, where the little boats are huddled in the marina, waiting for summer to come. All across Brightlingsea the cars are covered in sheets of ice. Brightlingsea is Essex by the way. Thames Estuary. Lots of cockle-fishing, pensioners, that type of thing. Engines on, bleary-eyed men scrape the ice off the window screens. Little ones scoot up the pavements on new Christmas presents, mums carrying PE kits and lunchboxes in tow. Some of the older kids dawdle on the pavement, eating illicit packets of crisps bought at the newsagents with their lunch money. Maroon blazers wrapped tight against the cold.

*LINDA flicks a switch on a toy kettle.*

I turn away from the kitchen window, back to the boys. Lewis is sitting in his high chair. His chubby fingers push a piece of banana around the little plastic table in front of him.

*LEWIS begins to eat pieces of chopped up banana smearing it round his face.*

Lewis, stop that please. Hurry up. We're going to be late. Sue will be round in a minute.

*LINDA pops the remaining banana in LEWIS' mouth, and then wipes his mouth with a wet wipe.*

*MARK steps forward to the microphone, putting on his tie.*

MARK: Linda, have you seen my keys, love?

LINDA: Um no sorry. Actually yeah maybe. Try your bedside table?

*MARK looks confused, as though straining to find something. LINDA holds a tissue to LEWIS' nose to blow it.*

LINDA: Or the drawers in the hallway?

*The kettle finishes boiling. LINDA picks up a plastic tea pot from the paddling pool, and fills it with water from the pool. She pours it into a toy tea cup, and then adds more water from a little toy watering can (as if it's milk). She stirs the water in the teapot.*

LINDA: I'm um thinking of popping down to the community centre today with um Sue and the kids. Gonna go and support the protest about the animals.

*MARK sprays after shave over himself and inserts his cufflinks.*

MARK: Hmm?

LINDA: The live exports, ya know? Yeah, so apparently they managed to turn a lorry back on Monday. Sue went.

MARK: Yeah?

LINDA: Some of the other mums from playgroup are going to go too with their little ones: Emma, Louise, Debbie Oakley. Your tea's going cold, by the way.

*LINDA passes him another toy tea cup. They sip on their tea together.*

MARK: Thanks, love. Um do you want me to run you down there?

LINDA: Nah, it's ok. Think it'll do Lewis good to have a little walk. You're all hyper today, aren't you, Lew? Besides there wouldn't be space for Sue as well, and both the buggies, and she's coming over in a minute (BEAT).

MARK: Well, just make sure you lot behave yourselves.

*MARK jokingly sprinkles LINDA with paddling pool water using his finger tips. LINDA*

laughs and squirts him back with a toy water pistol.

LINDA: I think it's mainly a group of grannies, and a few of us mums to be honest.

MARK: Well, Dorothy Baker next door certainly has the look of an anarchist about her. You should have seen the look she gave me, when I accidentally pruned her quince tree.

LINDA: Yeah, god that was embarrassing.

MARK: Anyway, I'd best be off or Jon will kill me. You two, behave yourselves for your mum. (MARK pecks LINDA on the cheek) Bye, love. Have fun with Sue.

LINDA: Sue and I push the buggies down Station Road to the Community Centre.

SUE: Oh my god. Did you see that there's gonna be another series of Ab Fab?

LINDA: That is AMAZING news. Hate January, it gets so dark now; it's like being in the frickin' North Pole. Need something to look forward to.

SUE: Yeah, it's not until March though.

LINDA: Oh. We're all bundled up against the cold; excited, expectant. I hold Lewis' hand as he struggles to run off ahead. Even though it's cold, his little hand is sticky and clammy in mine.

I've actually never protested against anything in my life. Nor has Sue, I think. Just about remember to vote. Well, sometimes. But we're not really political, ya know. They're all called John anyway, whoever you vote for. Well there's a Tony now as well, I guess? When we come to meeting point outside the community centre. I see a large crowd.

*LINDA starts to place toy dolls and stuffed animals around the outside of the paddling pool in a circle. She smiles as she does this.*

I recognise most of them; Brightlingsea is sort of one of those places where you know most people. You say hi in the street and all that. I mean that's one of the reasons we wanted to go. Brightlingsea's a small place, it's not a big port like Felixstowe or Harwich or something.

*She picks up a toy lorry, begins to play with its wheels, rolling them against her palm, thoughtfully.*

And yeah, it was like so wrong seeing the lorries going all round Colne Road (beat) down to the port with like um animals' legs sticking out through the slats.

*LINDA starts to crawl with it, pushing around the edges of the paddling pool.*

Past the Senior School, past like the Junior and the Infant School, and the youngsters actually seeing this like happening. And then also um being told that those animals didn't get rest and water and food before they got on the boat and some of them had travelled for hundreds of miles through the country.

These frightened little creatures, dehydrated, literally shitting themselves with fear, cramped in the dark.

*She stops, sitting up. She picks up a toy sheep, gently stroking it's legs, making sure that they are positioned comfortably.*

Like, I mean we had to do *something*.

I know about cattle and animals and stuff cos my family are all country people. I was brought up shooting and all that. So it's not like I'm a vegetarian or anything.

For me, it wasn't that they were being killed in the fields because to me that seemed as though, as long as it was being done ok it was not like a bad thing to do really.

*She pushes her hair pack of her face.*

It's just the cruelty of them travelling like that and having these animals, legs sticking out, and some of them maybe broken and things like that and the kids seeing. My boys and Sue's little girl, Lily, seeing that. Thinking it's normal.

ORGANISER: *(over a megaphone)* Hello, can everyone please keep on the right side of the street. We want to make sure the lorries definitely can't get through.

LINDA: Wow this is far more than I expected.

SUE: I know, I know. It's even more than on Monday. I think people are getting really angry about it all.

ORGANISER: *(still using the megaphone)* Let's have you ladies with the buggies over here, please?

LINDA: Heya, Mel!

ORGANISER: Morning!

SUE: This is all very exciting, innit?

LINDA: Then I see them. The police. Coming down Tower Street, and they were surrounding us on all three sides. Balaclavas on, visors pulled down. They are holding long batons and riot shields. Oh my god, Sue. They're in full riot gear.

*LINDA and SUE both pick up a toy baby dolls from the box of toys. They hold them close to their chests.*

ORGANISER: What do we want?

CROWD: *(shouting)* Humane conditions!

ORGANISER: When do we want it now?

CROWD: Now!

SUE: Do you think we should try to leave?

LINDA: I think we'd have a job getting back through now. (CLOSE) They start to move forward towards us. I realise they're trying to squash us in.

*LINDA and SUE climb into the paddling pool, covering herself, fully-clothed, in water. Squashed up against each other, clinging to each other.*

I can see the lorry trying to get up through the road. I see someone throw an egg at the windscreen.

CROWD: Brightlingsea stands together! Brightlingsea stands together!

SUE: What do you think you're doing! Stop that! Stop that!

LINDA: There are children and elderly people! There's no need, no need for that.

SUE: Stop that, please! Please!

LINDA: You're crushing the buggies. Someone's gonna get hurt.

ORGANISER: This is a peaceful demonstration! This is a peaceful demonstration!

LINDA: It's chaos. They're squashing us into a small area, with the buggies and everything. Lots of the students from the Senior School are there, mainly girls. Skiving off or there in their break or something. They're in the middle of the crush.

SUE: That's Em Taylor isn't it? Denise's girl?

LINDA: God, she's only fourteen/ fifteen! I see her crying and screaming with other girls. I remember her at the meeting last week, passionate and eloquent. Talking about how she had turned vegan. How she had emailed Greenpeace from the school computer, trying to get them to support us. We try to help them, pushing and shoving to get them out of the middle, but the police just keep pushing us in. Really like violent and aggressive.

SUE: Can you believe this? This is a scandal!

*ORGANISER sets off a toy police car siren.*

LINDA: I see more policemen running up the street, they have truncheons in their hands.

SUE: C'mon! We have to get the kids out of here.

LINDA: Excuse me, can you, can you help us? An elderly gentleman helps us lift the babies over the crowd into the police station car park on the other side of the wall.

*LINDA and SUE pass their babies to the ELDELY MAN.*

We manage to push through as well, and other mums start to do the same. The crowd lift the babies and the buggies over everyone's heads. We stand in a huddle in the car park, surrounded by babies and buggies. I see an old woman fall. The crowd around her try to lift her up, quickly before anyone stands on her.

SUE: God, this is mad. Someone's going get seriously hurt. Oh my god, now they're arresting Phil.

LINDA: The police start randomly arresting some of the men in the crowd. There aren't many men cos they're all at work, so it's mostly grandads.

SUE: What the hell are you doing? They haven't done anything wrong. They're protesting peacefully just like the rest of us.

*SUE and LINDA place their heads in and out of the water. Panting, spluttering and struggling to breathe.*

LINDA: Stop it! Stop it!

*SUE screams, then stops suddenly.*

*SUE AND LINDA step out of the paddling pool. THE ELDERLY MAN passes them each a towel. LINDA starts to dry her hair. The shipping forecast returns. LINDA starts to take all the toys and debris out of the paddling pool, placing them carefully back in the toy box.*

LINDA: You know my sort of thing of police has always been that they were very helpful and you always went to a policeman if you were in trouble. And you know that's we always told Christopher and Lewis as well. 'If you ever get lost or need help, find a policeman and he'll help you.' I don't know what we'll say to the boys now. I mean they were there as well. They saw it all.

I take the boys' dinner out of the microwave. The winter sun is low in the sky, turning the kitchen and the boys' faces golden. They sit at the little table their white pyjamas; chubby fingers wrestling on the laminated table cloth. I bury my face in Christopher's soft tuft of hair, stroking his cheek with my finger tips.

*LINDA takes the baby doll and buries her face against its head, cradling it in arms. She is still dripping wet.*

I always think they smell wonderful when they're ready for bed; clean and soft, all bubble bath and pheromones.

Outside a gull dips across the sun. A school girl walks lazily along the curb, rucksack hanging almost at her hip. Dorothy Baker's quince tree, casts long shadows across the front lawn. Everything is quiet, still, golden.

*LINDA wiggles the baby up and down on her hip, as if calming him.*

NEWS READER 1: Good evening (BEAT). The first lorry set for live animal export has failed to pass a human blockade at the Essex port of Brightlingsea.

NEWS READER 2: The first of an expected four lorries rumbled into the narrow high street to be met with a crowd swelled to about a thousand. Some of them animal rights campaigners, but most of them townspeople, indignant that Brightlingsea should become another centre for a trade they find repugnant.

NEWS READER 1: A senior police officer said that he had never seen such diverse, dedicated and articulate opposition to a single issue.

*At the same time as the NEWS READERS speak, words appear on the screen:*

Between 16 January and 30 October 1995, the local people of Brightlingsea protested to prevent the export of livestock through the town.

The majority of protestors were local women, mostly young mothers with babies, elderly people, and school girls.

On 18<sup>th</sup> January 1995 Essex police received more than 200 complaints about 'excessive riot-style violence' carried out by their officers.

Due to the protests, the exports stopped on 30 October 1995.

In 2018, the UK has finally moved towards a ban on exporting live animals for slaughter.