

**Source A**

This extract is from the beginning of a short story by H E Bates, set in the 1930s. Hartop and his wife own a van from which they sell produce to people in their local area, and their daughter, Alice, works with them.

- 1 A Ford motor-van, old and re-painted green with 'Jos. Hartop, greengrocer, rabbits'  
scratched in streaky white lettering on a flattened-out biscuit tin nailed to the side,  
was slowly travelling across a high, treeless stretch of country in squally November  
half-darkness. Rain hailed on the windscreen and periodically swished like a sea-  
5 wave on the sheaves of pink chrysanthemums\* strung on the van roof.
- 6 Hartop was driving: a thin, angular man, starved-faced. He seemed to occupy  
almost all the seat, sprawling awkwardly; so that his wife and their daughter Alice  
sat squeezed up, the girl with her arms flat as though ironed against her side, her  
thin legs pressed tight together into the size of one. The Hartops' faces seemed  
10 moulded in clay and in the light from the van-lamps were a flat swede-colour. Like  
the man, the two women were thin, with a screwed-up thinness that made them look  
12 both hard and frightened.

Hartop drove with great caution, grasping the wheel tightly, braking hard at the  
bends, his big yellowish eyes fixed ahead, protuberantly, with vigilance. His hands,  
15 visible in the faint dashboard light, were marked on the backs with dark smears of  
dried rabbits' blood. The van fussed and rattled, the chrysanthemums always  
swishing, rain-soaked, in the sudden high wind-squalls. And the two women sat in a  
state of silent apprehension, their bodies not moving except to lurch with the van,  
their clayish faces continuously intent, almost scared, in the lamp-gloom. And after  
20 some time, Hartop gave a slight start, and then drew the van to the roadside and  
stopped it.

'Hear anything drop?' he said. 'I thought I heard something.'

'It's the wind,' the woman said. 'I can hear it all the time.'

'No, something dropped.'

- 25 They sat listening. But the engine still ticked, and they could hear nothing beyond it  
but the wind and rain squalling in the dead grass along the roadside.

'Alice, you get out,' Hartop said.

The girl began to move herself almost before he had spoken.

'Get out and see if you can see anything.'

- 30 Alice stepped across her mother's legs, groped with blind instinct for the step, and  
then got out. It was raining furiously. The darkness seemed solid with rain.

‘See anything?’ Hartop said.

‘No.’

34 Hartop leaned across his wife and shouted: ‘Go back a bit and see what it was.’ The  
35 woman moved to protest, but Hartop was already speaking again. ‘Something  
dropped. We’ll stop at Drake’s Turn. You’ll catch up. I know something dropped.’  
He let in the clutch as he was speaking and the van began to move away.

Soon, to Alice, it seemed to be moving very rapidly. In the rain and the darkness all  
she could see was the tail-light, smoothly receding. She watched it for a moment  
40 and then began to walk back along the road. The wind was behind her; but  
repeatedly it seemed to veer and smash her, with the rain, full in the face. She  
walked without hurrying. She seemed to accept the journey as she accepted the  
rain and her father’s words, quite stoically. She walked in the middle of the road,  
looking directly ahead, as though she had a long journey before her. She could see  
45 nothing.

And then, after a time, she stumbled against something in the road. She stooped  
and picked up a bunch of pink chrysanthemums, and then she began to walk back  
with them along the road. Before very long she could see the red tail-light of the van  
again. It was stationary. She could also see the lights of houses, little squares of  
50 yellow which the recurrent rain on her lashes transformed into sudden stars.

When she reached the van, Mrs Hartop said: ‘What was it?’

‘Only a bunch of chrysanthemums.’

Hartop himself appeared at the very moment she was speaking.

‘Only?’ he said. ‘Only? What d’ye mean by only? Eh?’

55 Alice stood mute. Then Hartop raised his voice.

‘Well, don’t stand there! Do something. Go on. Go on! Go and see who wants a  
bunch o’ chrysanthemums. Move yourself!’

Alice obeyed at once. She picked up the flowers, walked away and vanished, all  
without a word.

## END OF SOURCE

### Glossary

\* chrysanthemums – a type of flower