READING PASSAGE

A boy and his parents are welcomed to a prospective new school by the
headmaster and his wife.

The headmaster's wife said, 'And this is Charles? My dear, we've been
forgetting about you! In a minute I'm going to borrow Charles and take
him off to meet some of the boys because after all you're choosing a school
for him, aren't you, and not for you, so he ought to know what he might be
letting himself in for and it shows we've got nothing to hide.'

The parents laughed. The father, sherry warming his guts, thought that
this was an amusing woman. Not attractive, of course, a bit homespun, but
impressive all the same. Partly the voice, of course; it takes a jolly
expensive education to produce a voice like that. And other things, of
course, background and all that stuff.

"I think I can hear the thud of the Fourth Form coming in from games,
which means my husband is on his way, and then I shall leave you with him
while I take Charles off to the common room."

For a moment the three adults centred on the child, looking, judging.

The mother said, "He looks so hideously pale, compared to those boys we
saw outside."

"My dear, that's London, isn't it? You just have to get them out, to get
some colour into them. Ah, here's James. James — Mr and Mrs Manders.
You remember, one of our parents was mentioning at Sports Day."

The headmaster reflected his wife's style, like paired cards in Happy
Families. His clothes were mature rather than old, his skin well-scrubbed,
his shoes clean, his friendliness untainted by the least condescension. He
was genuinely sorry to have kept them waiting, but in this business one
lurches from one minor crisis to the next... "And this is Charles? Hello,
there, Charles." His large hand rested for a moment on the child's head,
quite extinguishing the thin, dark hair. It was as though he had but to clench
his fingers to crush the skull, but he took his hand away and moved the
parents to the window, to observe the broken window of the cricket
ejibbon, with indulgent laughter.

"And the child is borne away by the headmaster's wife. She never
touches him or tells him to come, but simply bears him away like some
relentless tide, down corridors and through swinging glass doors, towing
him like a frail craft, not bothering to look back to see if he is following,
confident in the strength of magnetism, or obedience. And delivers him to
a room where boys are scattered among inky tables and rulgless chairs, and
sprawled on a mangy carpet. There is a scampering and a rising, and a
silence falling as she opens the door.

"Now, this is the Lower Third, Charles, who you'd be with if you come
to us in September. Boys, this is Charles Manders, and I want you to tell
him all about things and answer any questions he wants to ask. You can
believe about half of what they say, Charles, and they will tell you the most
fearful lies about the food, which is excellent."