

## Children of Men by PD James

This extract is from a novel by PD James. The extract comes when the main character goes to watch a “quietus” – the group suicide of elderly people in a dystopian future.

1       The mud-grey sea heaved sluggishly under a sky the colour of thin milk, faintly luminous at the  
2 horizon as if the fickle sun were about once more to break through. Above this pale transparency  
3 there hung great bunches of darker-grey and black cloud, like a half-raised curtain. Thirty feet below  
4 him he could see the stippled underbelly of the waves as they rose and spent themselves with weary  
5 inevitability, as if weighted with sand and pebbles. The rail of the promenade, once so pristine and  
6 white, was rusted and in parts broken, and the grassy slope between the promenade and the beach  
7 huts looked as if it hadn't been cropped for years. Once he would have seen below him the long  
8 shining row of wooden chalets with their endearingly ridiculous names, ranged like brightly painted  
9 dolls' houses facing the sea. Now there were gaps like missing teeth in a decaying jaw and those  
10 remaining were ramshackle, their paint peeling, precariously roped by staves driven into the bank,  
11 waiting for the next storm to sweep them away. At his feet the dry grasses, waist-high, beaded with  
12 dry seed pods, stirred fitfully in the breeze which was never entirely absent from this easterly coast.

13       Apparently the embarkation was to take place not from the pier itself but from a specially  
14 erected wooden jetty alongside it. He could see in the distance the two low boats, their decks  
15 festooned with garlands of flowers, and, on the end of the pier overlooking the jetty, a small group  
16 of figures some of whom he thought were in uniform. About eighty yards in front of him three  
17 coaches were drawn up on the promenade. As he approached, the passengers began to get down.  
18 First came a small group of bandsmen dressed in red jackets and black trousers. They stood chatting  
19 in a disorderly little group, the sun glinting on the brass of their instruments. One of them gave his  
20 neighbour a playful cuff. For a few seconds they pretended to spar, then, bored with the horseplay,  
21 lit cigarettes and stared out to sea. And now came the elderly people, some able to descend  
22 unaided, others leaning on nurses. The luggage hold of one of the coaches was unlocked and a  
23 number of wheelchairs dragged out. Last of all the most frail were helped from the coach and into  
24 the wheelchairs.

25       Theo kept his distance and watched as the thin line of bent figures straggled down the sloping path  
26 which bisected the cliff, towards the beach huts on the lower promenade. Suddenly he realised what  
27 was happening. They were using the huts for the old women to change into their white robes, huts  
28 which for so many decades had echoed with the laughter of children, and whose names, not thought  
29 of for nearly thirty years, now came unbidden to his mind, the silly, happy celebrations of family  
30 holidays: Pete's Place, Ocean View, Spray Cottage, Happy Hut. He stood grasping the rusty rail at the  
31 top of the cliff, watching as, two by two, the old women were helped up the steps and into the huts.  
32 The members of the band had watched but made no movement. Now they conferred a little  
33 together, stubbed out their cigarettes, picked up their instruments and made their own way down  
34 the cliff. They formed themselves into a line and stood waiting. The silence was almost eerie. Behind  
35 him the row of Victorian houses, shuttered, empty, stood like shabby memorials of happier days.  
36 Below him the beach was deserted; only the squawk of gulls disturbed the calm.