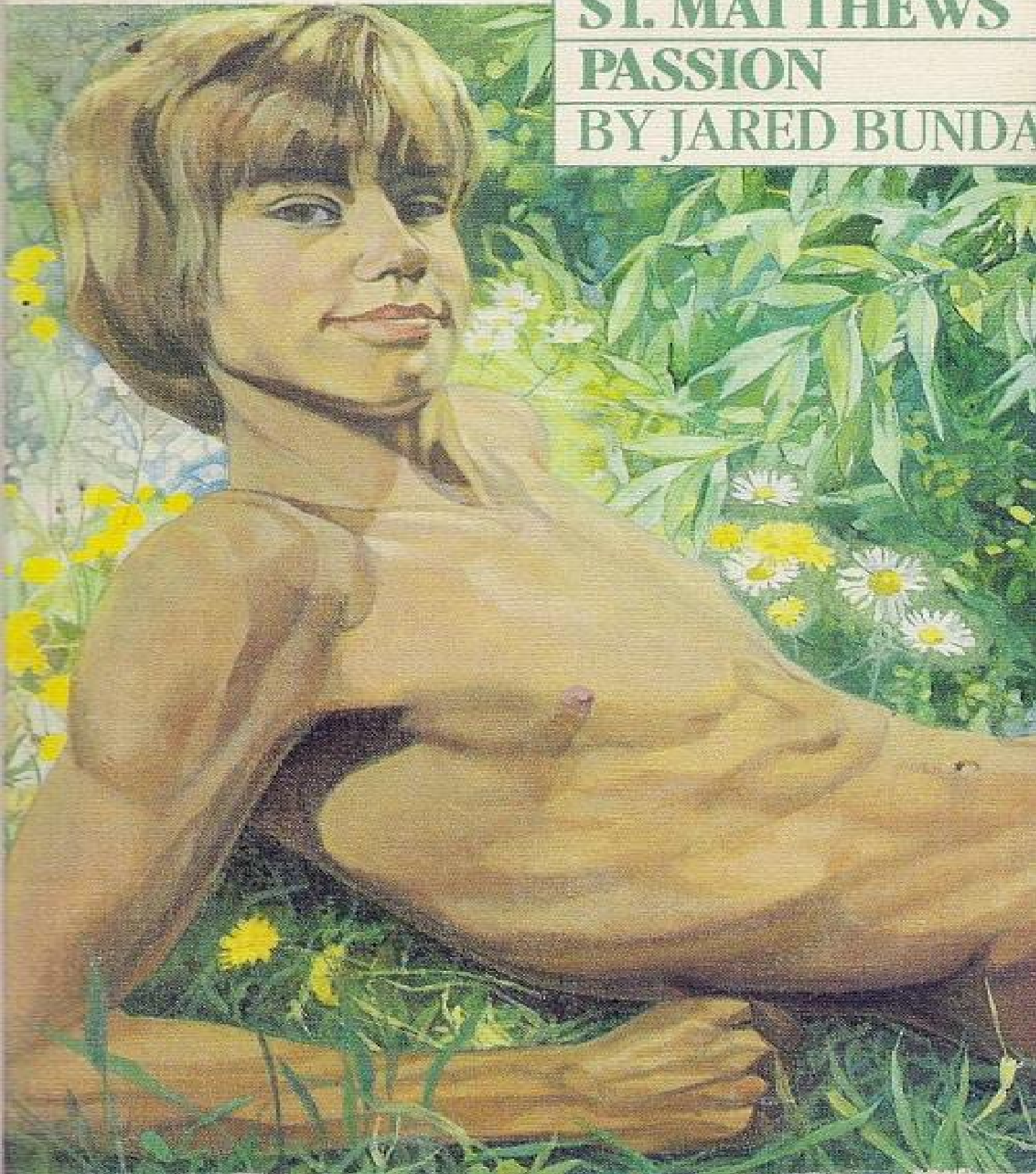


A **BL** CLASSIC

**ST. MATTHEWS**  
**PASSION**  
BY JARED BUNDA



**St. Matthews Passion  
or  
The Schoolboy's Dilemma**

by Jared Bunda

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*At school, friendship is a passion. It entrances the being, it tears the soul. All loves of after-life can never bring its rapture, or its wretchedness; no bliss so absorbing, no pangs of jealousy or despair so crushing and so keen! What tenderness and what devotion; what illimitable confidence; infinite revelations of inmost thoughts; what ecstatic present and romantic future; what bitter estrangements and what melting reconciliations; what scenes of wild recrimination, agitating explanations, passionate correspondence; what insane sensitiveness, and what frantic sensibility; what earthquakes of the heart and whirlwinds of the soul are combined in that simple phrase, a schoolboy's friendship!*

– Disraeli

## **1. Bobby Ames is Entered at St. Matthews**

Bobby Ames sat in the anteroom of the headmaster's office waiting for his mother to complete her conversation with Dr. Soames-Winthrop. It had been arranged for him to enter St. Matthews School at mid-term, an event for St. Matthews, a commonplace for the young man who sat now chewing unhappily at a cuticle.

It would be his second school that year. If it worked out. If his mother could sufficiently charm the rector. If the rector hadn't already done a credit check. But his mother did have the power to charm, to convince, to woo. How well did he know!

It had first been when he was nine. It was Lester then, who decided the schooner was too crowded. Bobby went to school in Athens. Gordon had felt that Seville was no place for a boy of eleven and so he had been packed off to Florence. Raoul had worried that Tunis might be risky for a boy of twelve and had made arrangements in Paris. He had managed to win enough in Monaco to pay most of the fees, but not all. Bobby would not be welcomed back. And so Beirut.

The summer after Beirut Raoul was gone and his mother was in Alexandria. Mark had moved in. Mark took much more to Bobby than the others had. A great deal more. When Olivia announced that she had made arrangements in Lugano, he recommended St. Matthews instead. "One sends a boy to England for manners and finishing," he told Olivia. "Not Switzerland!" And indeed, Bobby was in need of manners. He had started to talk back. But Olivia wisely thought it better to save St. Matthews. One shouldn't waste schools, after all. And so, the summer ended, our young hero bid adieu to Alexandria, to his grateful mother and, with a good deal more feeling, to the dashing young Englishman with the sandy hair, upon whose cashmere collar he shed a few unanticipated tears, and made his way to Lugano.

At the Christmas holidays Bobby returned with his trunk and a copy of the unpaid account. They discussed the matter of his of St. Matthews and thought he might be able to pull a few strings. After all, a mid-year entrance, though all too common for Bobby Ames, was not the rule among the better schools. And yet, Mark allowed modestly, he had cut something of a figure

there in his day and it might work to write a few letters. It was agreed he should try and that Olivia should write for an appointment. It could not be done over the telephone, Mark told her. St. Matthews was, after all, St. Matthews. And so here they were.

It seemed to him that the interview was taking over-long. He leaned forward in the wing-backed chair that almost hid his small frame. It was, dear reader, the sort of chair which seemed determined in its design to diminish its occupant, especially a smallish, light-complected fourteen-year-old the span of whose thighs was quite unequal to the requirements of its cushion. He sat forward, his shoes neatly upon the beige carpet, his hands upon his knees and studied the array of magazines on the table before him.

He picked up the school annual for the third time and leafed through the photos of the faculty. Two of the men who instructed the younger boys appeared to have pleasant faces. Mr. Phillips he liked especially. He had fair hair. Most of the masters, it appeared, had very little hair at all. Mr. Becker, the other junior master, had tufts on the sides of his head that gave him the appearance of a clown.

He tried to remember if it was Mr. Becker whom Mark had called Boffo. He looked at the boys. Faces. He had known so many and not known any at all. It was a world to itself, this boarding school world. Boys came and went. Sometimes if you were lucky they reappeared. It saddened him to think how seldom.

Bobby had not spent the better part of his childhood in boys' boarding schools without some profit of experience. Adjudging the extent and quality of this experience Mark had embellished it with tales of St. Matthews. They were tales of his own time there, told with the natural modesty and reserve of an Englishman, and yet in such a manner that their subject was not too deeply hidden away. Bobby understood quite well that there were different kinds of friendships among boys and masters and that a master's attentions were not necessarily limited to things pedagogical.

On facing pages were the juniors and the third formers. The third formers were called preps. There was a narrow man called Skelton and a ton of a woman called Grundle. He studied the group of juniors. There were only twelve and they certainly weren't all the same age. That was strange. Who was that boy? The eyes looked right out at him. The lashes almost blinked.

The boy smiled. Bobby smiled back. Mrs. Dimplewhite noticed from

behind the desk. She had been watching for some time and was glad to see him smile. It was a lovely smile, she thought. And he was a lovely boy. But he seemed so sad. She saw his lips move but could not decode their meaning.

Bobby had found the name of the boy. It was Anthony Parker. He said the name to himself. Then again. *Be my friend, Anthony Parker*, he said. *Please.*

Mrs. Dimplewhite offered him a peppermint. He smiled and declined. A glass of water he thought would be nice, if it wasn't too much trouble.

He returned to the front of the book where the headmaster had written:

St. Matthews is a treasure which each boy will open in his own way. Here there is something for everyone, someone to be a friend to each of you; some new thing to learn each day in the company of your teachers. Here there are no idle hands nor idle minds. Here we seek to find that which is hidden from sight and know that which is clothed in mystery, to penetrate the very depths of nature...

Suddenly the door to the headmaster's office opened and they emerged, very pleased it appeared with their conversation. The headmaster smiled broadly and Olivia looked satisfied. She had that generous and yet impatient air. She was done with this now and it was time to be getting on. There were the signs of fresh makeup covering her recent tears.

The headmaster rubbed his hands together. He looked at Bobby and winked. Yes, there was no question. It was not a tick. It was impossible but true. The proof was in the headmaster's own surprise, which was, if anything, greater than Bobby's. It was one of those occasions which Mrs. Soames-Winthrop called an inspiration. In simple fact the headmaster was smitten by the boy's beauty, had been the moment he walked in the door to the outer office and now felt very satisfied indeed that he had persuaded Mrs. Ames to place him at St. Matthews. He could not for the life of him recall Mark Brightly, but made him out in any case to have been one of the school's most successful, distinguished and influential graduates.

"Well, young man. It appears that you will be joining our small community of scholars," he said, placing a hand on Bobby's shoulder. Then he looked at him with a mixture of wonderment and pleasure. "Yes, I can see the resemblance. To Sir Gregory Ames in particular." Then he turned Bobby to face the receptionist who had offered him the peppermint. "Don't you

think so, Mrs. Dimplewhite?"

He realized now that their attention was divided between his own face and the very unpleasant and dour face in the gilt frame by the door. Presumably it was Sir Gregory. He hoped they were wrong about the resemblance.

Certainly there was no relationship, though he could imagine it was just the kind of thing his mother would have insinuated at the slightest invitation.

"Sir Gregory was the last of the Amesbury Ames to attend St. Matthews, young man. Until now. And that was nearly a hundred years ago. So you see, this is a very special occasion for us." He squeezed Bobby's neck for emphasis.

"Think of it, Mrs. Dimplewhite!"

Mrs. Dimplewhite made a noise which was meant to convey surprise, admiration and pleasure but which sounded more like a gasp of fright.

"Indeed, Mr. Soames-Winthrop," she said.

Everyone at St. Matthews knew of the Amesbury Ames. There was a seat in the chapel bearing the family coat of arms. They had been wandering monks, scholars carrying the lamp of knowledge through the dark passages of time, founding not only schools but education itself.

His mother caught his disapproving eye and looked away.

"You are too kind, headmaster," she said.

"The very fountainhead of education. Madam. You have a grave responsibility, young man."

"Yes sir."

The headmaster studied him and sighed.

"You must take him to the Tate, Mrs. Ames. Let him see the stock from which he has come."

"Would you like that, Bobby?"

"I guess so."

"You will break hearts, young man."

"I hope not, sir."

"Oh, 'tis true, 'tis true."

"Sir?"

"What's that one, boy?"

"Sir?"

"The poem."

"I don't know sir."



“When I was one and twenty, I heard a wise man say, give pounds and something and something or other but not your heart away. Pounds and ...? Hmmm. Houseman, boy.”

“Yes sir. I’ll remember that, sir.”

“You hear that, Mrs. Dimplewhite? Sensible boy. Young people think too little of advice nowadays, if you ask me. Better the advice than the poem. Take the grain; leave the chaff behind. Remember the dancer, not the dance. Who’s that!?”

“Sir?”

“Eliot, boy.”

“Yes Sir. Sir?”

“Yes, boy.”

“Will I be staying in Sprinkles House?”

“Is that what you’d like?”

“I think so, sir.”

“We’ll see what the situation is, then. Mrs. Dimplewhite, will you ring up Mrs. Grundle and see if there is an empty bed on second in Sprinkles House. Coming at midterm this way you may just have to take what’s available. But we’ll see. We’ll see.”

“Yes sir.”

“Sprinkles is the oldest building on St. Matthews’ campus. Oldest building, youngest boys. Built by the Second Earl of Sprinkles for the hunt. Fine building. Mr. Skelton is in charge. Fine master. Too permissive, if you know what I mean, Mrs. Ames.”

“Really?”

“Nothing to worry about. Doesn’t believe in discipline. New ideas. Lets the boys have too much freedom if you ask me. Too many lights on after hours. Too much cake and ginger ale. Too much mothering. Boys need toughening. The empire was not won cosily. Not at all. No pillows and comforters, boy.”

“No sir.”

“Khaki and twill and cold showers.”

“Cold showers, sir?”

“Seals the pores; hardens the will, strengthens the jaw.”

“Yes sir.”

“Not here, boy. In the days that were. In the days of the empire.”

Mrs. Dimplewhite had been standing now for some time, waiting for an opportune moment. She had exchanged a glance with Mrs. Ames, which was meant to convey that universal sympathy among women which has evolved over hundreds of years and has to do with the vulnerability of young males. She could not tell with certainty that it was reciprocated.

“There is a bed on the second floor, sir,” she said.

“Good. Well done. So it’s Mr. Skelton then. Well, you could do worse.”

Bobby extended his hand with a sincere smile of gratitude.

“Thank you, sir. I will try to make St. Matthews proud of me.”

“Well said, boy. Proudly is as proudly does. Choose your friends wisely; a boy is known by the company he keeps and a man by the company that keeps him. Damned if you aren’t a handsome boy! Well, Mrs. Ames, we’ll keep an eye on him, don’t you worry. So.”

Shaking hands around a second time they proceeded to the door.

## 2. Sprinkles House

Sprinkles House, our hero's destination, was pre-eminent in the landscape of St. Matthews School. Architecturally less imposing than Santa Sophia, yet it was evocative of the surroundings to that great mosque. A warren of corridors, turnings, attics, the edifice was a composite of styles and uses. A previous rector had once described it as Alexandrian English-country Gothic.

Beneath the mouldering 16th century rafters of this unusual edifice lived forty-two boys ranging in age from eight to fourteen. The ground floor accommodated the dame, the kitchens, common rooms, the senior prefect assigned to Sprinkles and a smattering of preps. Most of the preps, however, lived on the first and second floors. The juniors – called “the mice” by the older boys – lived on Sprinkles Three.

The top floor was an attic where the racks for drying clothes were placed and which the little boys used for a playroom on rainy days.

There were only twelve mice this year at St. Matthews. The number varied according to the needs of St. Matthews' more influential families.

Most boys would not be considered for entry into the school until their fourteenth year, the prep year. But second or third or fourth or tenth generation youngsters were sometimes allowed in early – even, to Mrs. Grundle's great consternation, as young as eight.

The thirty preps and the twelve mice thrived under the benign and yet proprietary eye of a middle-aged history master named Hector Skelton, assisted by a housemother named Clarissa Grundle. Clara for short. Hector Skelton was, as Bobby guessed and as mnemonics might suggest, the person known as Helter Skelter. The name fitted his angular ubiquity well. He was everywhere at once, a thin, nervous man whose birdlike eyes missed nothing and whose spider-like fingers moved incessantly, rearranging papers, his wardrobe, the serving dishes at seated meal, the mail, laundry and the borders of the Ottoman Empire.

Mrs. Grundle was opposite from Mr. Skelton in every respect one might imagine. If he was a waterspider, she was a carp. She moved as infrequently as he sat. One reason for this conservation of energy was her size, which some had estimated to be at 300 lbs. Another was her philosophy, whose distinguishing element was its fatalism.

What would be would be. What had been still was. What might be had already been at some time earlier. The most practical explanation, however, and the one which she most often voiced, was that she could best be available to all forty-two of her “little men“ if she was stationary. How, otherwise, would they know where to find her?

“There’s enough running around in this house already without my adding to it,” she was said to have remarked to the Rector on the occasion of his first and only visit to Sprinkles House. (He had unwittingly ventured as far as The Bog, as Sprinkles Three was called and where no circumspect human being ever intentionally set foot. The occasion unfortunately was never recorded in the archives of St. Matthews and was now forever lost in the cellars of history.) Sprinkles House was not a place which welcomed visitors, be they parents, staff or older boys. It had its own life, its own standards of order, its own particular ambiance. Upperclassmen recalled it with tender nostalgia, the kind that is usually reserved for grandmother’s parlor or the nursery, and which often derives from an olfactory inspiration.

Some said that the air in Sprinkles Three should be considered a national treasure, it being uniquely evocative and, like a very ancient sourdough, leavened with antediluvian, or at the very least, medieval microbes. It was an atmosphere in which Hector Skelton thrived and in which the little boys appeared to prosper as well. It was said by some of the older boys, and not without a mixture of affection and regard, that Helter Skelter was embalmed, that Sprinkles Three, like the planet Uranus – which they would pronounce meticulously and with knowing smiles, was so amoniac as to have pickled the old man.

There are many stories to tell of Helter Skelter, of The Bog, and of the philosophical-pedagogical pilings upon which, like the sinking city of Venice, it was built. And these stories in due course will find a place in our narrative. But now we must pause, for a limousine has just now pulled up at the front of Sprinkles House and it appears that our hero is about to embark upon the adventure which is the subject of our tale.

Olivia Ames had declined the rector’s offer that he accompany them to Sprinkles House. “We will need a chance to say our goodbyes,” she whispered as they left, a tear newly glistening at the edge of her eyeliner. The rector had nodded appreciatively, they had all shaken hands a third time and returned to the limousine.

There had been altogether too many good-byes over the years for this particular one to have warranted any ceremony. Bobby listened to his mother's catechism of advice as he might have overheard a conversation from another room. He knew it all by heart: write but tell me only what I want to hear; enjoy the school but not things which will cause my phone to ring; make yourself attractive to those in positions of financial responsibility and unattractive to teachers who muss up your hair. When she had finished he said,

"I don't have any spending money."

It was a lie. Mark had given him fifty pounds. But he felt it was a fair lie. If he didn't get something now, he certainly wouldn't later. And he would need it. She reached in her purse and produced a twenty pound note.

"That will have to last until I can send you more," she said.

It wasn't much, seventy pounds. Hardly enough to buy a couple of friends with. He put it in his pocket.

The driver had stopped the car at what appeared to be the front of a building. It was hard to tell. The building meandered from one architectural form to another rather like a game of dominoes. It looked anything but friendly.

"Well, I guess this is it," she said. "Shall I come in?"

"No," he said, getting out of the car. He gave her a peck on the cheek and wished she had not been wearing that perfume. He was not armed against olfactory attack. He had always liked her smell. Suddenly his throat was very tight and he had to blink his eyes more than normally to help the evaporative process. Saying goodbye is difficult for a boy in the best of circumstances. Saying goodbye to someone who was never there is much harder.

The driver, an impossibly cheeky and foolish young man who had talked non-stop from Heathrow, helped him in with his trunk, quickly surveyed the somewhat decayed interior of Sprinkles House, gave him a thumbs up and said, "Keep your pecker up, kid."

Bobby could think of nothing to say but "thanks" and so he said it, feeling immediately compromised and even exposed. He knew what it meant to "keep your pecker up" and it did not mean what the young man thought. He could tell that from the brazen twist of his mouth. Mark had told him. It meant keep a stiff upper lip. Right now he couldn't have accomplished either

and so it mattered little what the man knew or didn't know.

The place appeared vacant. He summoned what volume he could and said, "Hello?"

"In here, boy," came from around the corner and he followed the sound.

It is a surprising thing to contemplate Mrs. Grundle for the first time, an experience which is apt to distract one from other thoughts, even other worries.

Without rising from her chair she studied him. It was a benign and not an intrusive scrutiny. She smiled.

"Come over here and let me see my new lodger. You'll be Ames."

"Yes, ma'am." It took Bobby by surprise to be called by his surname. It was two schools back that they had done that. But not the dame. She had called him Bobby.

Mrs. Grundle beckoned for him to approach.

"I will call you Bobby. You'd like that better, wouldn't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"And you can call me Clara. That's short for Clarissa Amelia."

"Yes, Clara."

"That makes it nicer, doesn't it? It's not a real family of course. Nobody ever had this many boys, except maybe one of them Persian women. But it's more comfy that way. Mr. Skelton has his own way which is the school way. To him you'll be Ames. And to the other boys. I can't abide it but there you are. You'll be the only Bobby."

"Usually there are lots."

"Not in Sprinkles House. Not this year. One year we had four. I had to call them by both names. 'Bobby Turner!' I'd say, 'you get down here and pick up that puzzle.' Or. 'Bobby Clarence, you take a bath right now!' That was when Bobby C. was a Sprinkles Three boy. It's the little boys up there. Juniors some call them."

"First and second formers?"

"That and some younger. Two nines, a ten and three elevens. It's not right they should be away from their mamas if you ask me. But nobody does ask me. And I guess Henry Skelton makes a pretty good mama and papa. Probably better than most. So."

"My mother's friend, Mark, started on Sprinkles three. He told me some about it."

“Now which Mark would that be? We’ve had a few in my time.”

“Mark Brightly.”

“He was a handful, Mark Brightly was. And became first prefect! A good boy, a kind boy even. Yes, I remember Mark. Well, what has he done with himself?”

“I guess he buys and sells things. I don’t really know. He has a cargo boat in the Mediterranean. He said they called it the bog.”

Clara laughed deeply and, he thought for a moment, dangerously. Her face became bright red. She wiped her eyes with a lace hanky she had up her sleeve.

“They still do. And it still is. Hector Skelton! He’s one in a thousand. Oh, my. And Mark was one of the worst!”

Then she made a significant noise and it appeared was about to rise from the chair. Bobby was left wondering what it was that Mark was one of the worst of. It appeared he would have to find it out another time. The interview was apparently over.

“They’ll be back from morning classes soon. Maybe we’d better get you moved in.”

Mrs. Grundle did now arise from the chair, which was no easy feat, put her hand on his shoulder for support and pursed her lips tightly. He could not tell at once whether it was prefatory to the giving of advice or the consequence of a gastrointestinal adjustment. It was neither, he would learn over the next weeks. It was the sign that Clara Grundle was changing gears – from conversation to action. It was not a change which came easily.

She walked down one of the halls to a large set of cupboards.

“We’ll need linen from that closet there. Two sheets from the top and two towels from the bottom. And a pillowcase. No, we’d better take a pillow too. Pillows have a way of wandering off from empty beds.” She held out a rubber sheet. “Would you like one of these?”

“No thank you,” he said. He was sure he must have been as red as a fire engine. He looked away.

“I always ask. There are more on beds than in the closet, I can tell you that. Well, that should do. The trunk will need another boy to help you. She handed him the pile and started off for the staircase.

Even more remarkable than to behold Mrs. Grundle was to behold Mrs. Grundle ascending a staircase. He kept a discreet distance.

The room was more than he might have expected. There were two single beds against opposite walls, each with a desk at its foot and a dresser at its head.

He was pleased that the room was neat, for the hall they had traversed and the other rooms into which he had had a quick view were certainly not. Here were calendar scenes taped to the wall – scenes of snow-covered mountains, exotic beaches, even one of a seaport which looked vaguely familiar. Above the bed which belonged to his roommate were several soccer stars. He recognized Terrence Buckingham and John Trevellyan. There was a cricket bat in the corner and a music stand.

Mrs. Grundle participated very little in the actual making up of the bed. Bobby was an adept at corners, for which he was commended. It turned out that they had forgotten blankets and he was sent down with directions to retrieve them.

Occasionally the mere exercise of the limbs has a salutary effect on the soul, or so it is claimed by enthusiasts of the outdoors. The retrieval of the blankets served such a purpose now for Bobby who, returning, felt lighter of heart and suddenly inquisitive.

“Where is everybody now,” he asked.

“At the chapel. The Market, they call it. You’ll learn about all that. You probably saw it as you drove in. The great old thing with the belltower.”

“It’s gray.”

“That’s it.”

“And old.”

“Older than the government!”

“Older than this place?”

“Oh no! Nothing is older than Sprinkles House. It’s been made up a lot over the years, though.”

“Made up?”

“Made over for the school,” she said. “Bits added on here and there. It’s a regular warren. Staircases everywhere.” She intoned the word with a mixture of wonder and dismay, as though there were in Sprinkles House places which she had never explored and never hoped to explore.

“How many boys live here?” Bobby asked, trying out the bed.

“Twelve juniors up with Mr. Skelton on Sprinkles Three and thirty preps. You are a prep.”



"I know. That's what you call third formers isn't it?"

"That's right."

"What about the older boys?"

"Well, the oldest get called seniors. The sixth formers, that is. The ones sitting for the A levels. The other ones..." she laughed. "Well, they don't get called anything that's written down in a book." She surveyed the room and settled on the music stand. "Anthony plays the cello."

"Anthony?" There had been an Anthony in the book. Anthony Parker. The boy with the beautiful eyes. He dared not hope.

"Your roommate. He's good. He played at tea once." Bobby walked to the other bed and picked up the Teddy bear. He said the name in his mind with a prayer: Anthony Parker. He held the bear more off-handedly than he wanted to. Then he returned it carefully to its place on the pillow.

"Who did the drawing?" He pointed to a pen and ink sketch of a lady that hung over Anthony's desk.

"Anthony."

"He did that!"

It was a quick rendering, a few lines capturing the vitality of life from an empty page. The shiver went through him again. Was there anything that Anthony didn't do?

"It's his mother, Lady Fairchild. She's very pretty, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes... Lady Fairchild?"

"That's right. But not the way some of your gentry are. She's a plain lady. There are no airs around Lady Fairchild, and none around Anthony."

His hopes fell. Why couldn't there have been another Bobby instead of another Anthony! Of course it was only a face in a book. But the eyes had sought him out. It even seemed that for a moment the picture had smiled. He felt like a kite in a gusty wind, blown aloft by the currents of his own hopes, only then to dive the more precipitously toward the hard ground of reality. It was a thing he always did. "Don't get your hopes up", his mother always said. And for good reason. But he always had. He was always making magic.

He knew suddenly with an unreasonable certainty that he would not like Anthony Fairchild. No, that Anthony Fairchild would not like him. That was the way it usually went.

"Well, you can't do your unpacking until the boys get back. Anthony can

help you up with your trunk. We can go down and I'll make a cup of tea and they'll be here before you know it."

"I guess I'll just stay here for awhile. Sort of get used to the room." He sat on the bed and bent to tie a shoelace. His eyes had misted over again.

"You do that then. I'll be in the parlor. What else now? Oh, the bath tubs are down at the far end of the hall and the toilets are next to them."

"Thanks."

The floor squeaked as Mrs. Grundle turned to leave. It was an old building and not an unusual thing to have happened, but the sound struck Bobby Ames, as he sat there staring at his shoe, as the loneliest sound in the world. He felt a tear start down his nose and then watched it hit the floor.

It would be awful again. He knew it. Even if it had been Anthony Parker. It was always awful. The boys never liked him. He always did everything wrong. He talked too much, boasted too often. It was his whole person; it just wasn't a likeable person. He knew that with an absolute and awful certainty and then felt sorry for that person as if it were other from himself.

He was awoken from his reverie by a tumult below, an earthquake. The very foundations of the house shook. He stood up, recognizing the sound. It was the sound boys made in schools around the world. It was the sound he had helped make so many times and wondered if he could help make again.

The boys had returned from chapel. He wiped his eyes and waited. The door was open. He saw four or five nondescript boys rush by and was glad to see that they weren't all wearing the same things. Still, what clothing he saw was pretty grey. He worried about his own. Most wore long pants but one or two had shorts and socks down around their ankles. They were so busy with their destinations that they passed without noticing him. He was just as glad. He thought he would run away. Then it became a certainty. He saw himself walking back through the gates of the school and at the thought his heart lifted.

Then the door opened and Anthony Parker walked in.

"Hi, I'm Parker."

"I know."

"Mrs. Grundle told you."

"No, she said you were Fairchild. I saw you in the book."

"The annual?"

"In the rector's office."

“Yes, that’s it. My mother is Fairchild. She’s re-married.”

“I’m Bobby. I mean I’m Ames.”

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Well, shall we get your gear.”

“OK. It’s down stairs.”

“I saw it in the hall.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

Parker led and Bobby followed. He wondered if Parker looked at everyone that way. Or maybe it was just his eyes or his eyelashes. Or the way his lips were. Or the way his hair curled around his ears. Bobby’s kite had found a breeze again and carried his spirits skyward. He felt something different with this boy. He couldn’t have given it a name but he wanted more desperately than anything he could imagine, that Anthony Parker should like him.

They wrestled the trunk up one stair at a time. A bigger boy who Parker called Bryce-Jones and said was the senior prefect gave them a hand at the corner and another small boy named Wells helped them down the hall with it. At last it sat at the foot of Bobby’s bed and he lifted the top.

“Wow!”

“Wow what?”

“Color. I’ve never seen so much color. I think you’re going to make quite a splash.”

Mark had said that St. Matthews was grey, that English schools and English boys were grey. But Anthony wasn’t. He had blue corduroys, a grey collared shirt and a crimson pullover. It was a nice outfit, Bobby thought. He said so.

“Oh, this is sort of school stuff. Blue cords, or blue shorts. It’s not bad. But look at these!” He held up a pair of red white and blue styled running shorts.

“Can you wear jeans?”

“Not officially. But everyone does.”

“Good.” Bobby lifted out a stack of new jeans and placed them on the bed.

“Buttonups.”

“What?”

“That’s what we call them. Five-O-Ones, you know.”

“Is it bad to make a splash”, Bobby asked.

“I don’t suppose so. Just watch out for the older boys.” He examined the running shorts. “These even have pockets.”

“Take them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want you to have them.”

“Really?”

“Sure, there are more in here.”

“I don’t think I’d better.”

“I wish you would.”

“Maybe I’ll borrow them some time. Here, let’s put your stuff away. This dresser is yours and half the closet over there.”

They discussed the allotment of hangers and Parker showed how he had his dresser arranged. He had his unders in the top drawer, he said. Bobby had never heard the expression before. He smiled to himself and decided to remember it. Parker was much more beautiful than the photograph had made him. And so nice. His eyes were emerald green and his hair was sable. It looked soft, curling around his ears. He wanted to touch it. But it was mainly his voice, as surprising as an evening mist.

Two boys wandered in from the hall. Parker introduced them. One was named Martin and the other was Small. Martin was bigger than any of them, by a good two inches. He seemed very pleasant, even a little formal. Small looked like a rodent and had a grating voice with he now offered a running commentary on the remaining contents of Bobby’s trunk.

“Jesus Christ! Two, three, four, *five* pairs of buttonups. You’re the richest man in school, Ames. Do you know what you can get for a pair of these in the Market? He held up a pair, like a hawker. Look at these, Martin! Not even washed yet. Pristine.”

“Too small for me, Ames, but keep your eye on Small,” Martin said in a slow and desultory way. It was humorous. Bobby liked him.

Small ignored the comment. He had spread Bobby’s shirts out on the bed. He stepped back.

“I see trouble Ames. I hope you have a steel jock-strap in there.”

“Huh?”

“Confucius say brightest butterfly get pinned first.”

“I don’t get it.”

“The stokers, Ames! The butt-room gang. Sex-craven ring-wraiths bent upon despoiling the young and pure in heart.”

“I guess that makes you safe enough, Small,” Anthony said. He was refolding Bobby’s underwear and putting it in the first drawer of the dresser.

“Judge not lest ye be judged, Parker. Ames, it’s best you know that Anthony Parker is in fact *the* Anthony Parker of whom you have read in the Guinness Book of World Records. The only fourteen-year-old boy alive who can suck his own dick while playing the acoustic guitar with his toes.”

“Jesus, Small. That is disgusting. Sorry, Ames, we aren’t all craven. I’ll take Igor back to his pen. Come along, Small. See you guys at dinner.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

“Thanks.”

Parker closed the door. “I hate that stuff. I’m sorry.”

“What did he mean about the stokers? It isn’t true, is it?”

“Oh it’s part of the lore. You know. Prep school lore. They’re fifth formers. And they smoke in the furnace room. So they’re called the stokers.”

“And the rest?”

“He’s probably right. It’s best to stay away from the fifth formers. For all sorts of reasons. Look, I’m supposed to take you to the school nurse and then you’re to go to Helter Skelter to get your divs arranged. And I have to study up for a geography exam. So we better get started.”

“OK. I can do the rest of this later. Do I look OK? I mean, is this sweater all right?”

“It looks great. Look, don’t worry about that stuff, really.”

And with that hesitation we sometimes feel in a new place, leaving the few square feet of the barely familiar for the infinite spaces beyond, Bobby glanced back over his shoulder at the array of shirts on his bed, the Teddy bear on Parker’s and followed him out the door.

### 3. A Friend in Need

He did it all wrong. He talked when he should have listened. He listened when he should have talked. He took polite courtesies for overtures of friendship and simple offerings of information as confidences.

He met the rest of the boys in Parker's crowd. Anthony went to pains to be sure it was done right. Everyone, he learned, thought of Small pretty much as he had learned to that first day. Trying to make use of that in order to secure a place for himself, he instead got the cold shoulder. He was not entitled, he learned. They didn't laugh. They changed the subject.

He boasted. He told the tales he had told before of far off places and a smoky adult world where he moved with grace and brilliance. He spoke in forbidden ways and of forbidden things that yet failed to tantalize. One by one, like guests at a tiresome party, they took their quiet leave without bidding good night. It had all happened before. It broke his heart not be able to do it right, to lose everything even before he had taken its measure. He was saddest about Parker who had been especially nice and whom he liked even more than he had thought he would, despite the misery of his condition.

But even Parker had things to do most of the time, other places. He could see that Parker cared for him in the best way he could, but he was reserved. He couldn't solve the problems; it was up to Bobby to solve them.

He sat alone at meals until he was joined by a menagerie of the mice. They provided a willing audience for the stories the others had tired of hearing. Their enthusiasms even carried him away from time to time, until he realized boys at other tables were watching and he felt himself flush. He couldn't understand the English, that was really it. They wanted him to be modest and self-effacing and he wasn't. Or perhaps they knew the lies from the threads of truth upon which they hung. Yes, there were exotic places, and boats and camels and casinos and wine to drink. But the boat stank of alcohol and in the casinos his mother encouraged the gigolos to flirt with him. In his stories they were girls; even the princess of Carthage one time sent her servant to ask if he would dance with her. But there wasn't a princess of Carthage and he had never learned to dance.

He looked longingly at the table where Parker sat with the others but they rarely glanced his way except to observe and then whisper to one another.

Except Parker who simply looked helpless and whose eyes seemed to be saying, "Sorry, friend, not today. I can't help it. The time will come. Buck up. Things will get better." Or was that what he wanted to believe Parker's eyes said.

It seemed that everything turned into a problem for him. There was nothing he could have that he could enjoy having. He liked the mice. Not just their attention and the celebrity status they had awarded him, but he liked them. He was sad when the older boys bullied them and made jokes about Helter Skelter's swamp. He resolved that if he did ever make friends of his own age, if he was ever accepted, that he would champion the mice, even in the face of public disdain. Yet now, when one or another of them yelled to him across the grounds in his high-pitched voice Bobby might pretend not to hear, especially if older boys were nearby.

In evidence of his adventures Bobby one day spread out upon the table at lunch a small pouch of ancient coins. They were, he explained to his audience of mice, Carthaginian. He had bought them from a guide at one of the ruins while their boat was in Tunis harbor for repairs. The boys were impressed, except for one bespectacled lad who claimed a knowledge of numismatics. That they were old, he could see; that they were Carthaginian... well. Had there been open disagreement it would have been short-lived, however, for at that moment Michael Drury Bryce-Jones, the prefect assigned to Sprinkles House and who was just now inspecting the cleanup of the tables, condescended to turn his attention to the conversation at table fifteen.

"Yes, they are the real thing."

He picked one up and examined it closely.

"Interesting. Very interesting. Usually when they're this size the image is indecipherable. But see here, you can tell that it's Hadrian."

He held the coin out to Bobby. It was necessary to get quite close to point out the distinguishing details.

"But Hadrian was a Roman," the bespectacled boy had the temerity to comment.

"True, but the coin was minted in Carthage."

The boy looked quizzically at the coin and then at Bryce-Jones who was looking neither at him or the coin. The boy wasn't stupid about Roman History and he wasn't stupid about prefects. Ames had said it was Carthaginian. It had been minted in Rome. He looked over his shoulder at

another boy and rolled his eyeballs up under his lids. The issue was the face from America, not the face from Rome. He decided to be ingratiating.

“Bryce-Jones is a super collector, Ames. He has soldiers and everything.”

“And you collect coins.”

Smiling was not Bryce-Jones best thing. It always looked as though there were someone peering out sheepishly from behind the face itself. The face looking out wasn't necessarily cruel or designing, it was kind of lost. One boy said Bryce-Jones was really an android. Another said he needed an exorcism. Ames didn't notice just then. Bryce-Jones attention was flattering.

He had noticed him doing his inspections of the House and had heard the boys speak of his influence. He was a confidant of Helter Skelter's. They spent time together in Skelton's study drinking sherry.

“Well I don't have lots, but I've picked some up in my travels.”

“We should get together sometime. I have some that might interest you.”

“Sure.”

“Well then.... All right boys, on with you now.”

And that was all that was said. On several occasions to follow, however, there were found pretexts for the examination and discussion of coins, model racing cars and even dusty old Psalters. Bobby accepted this courtship with an understanding that it was precisely that. And who could fault him. Bryce-Jones was a thoughtful and solicitous friend. He helped Bobby feel less lonely, less unworthy and, if the truth be known, safer.

There were other older boys who spoke with him as well. Mostly they were Uppers. A boy who sported a walking stick hailed him one day outside the refectory and asked him how things were going. He was so taken aback that he stammered. The boy, whose name was Blake and who played on the first eleven, said it was nice to have a yank at the school. He glowed all the way back to the room.

Then there were others. Two or three together would stop talking as he passed and invite him over. They would ask him what masters he had and give him advice. They'd joke about Mrs. Grundle in a friendly way and ask if she had moved from her chair since he had been there. Then they'd send him along and pick up where they had left off.

One day a boy whom he knew to be a sixth former stopped him and asked him what he thought of England. He said it was a little damp and the boy laughed. “Who's your haberdasher?” the boy asked. He said he didn't know



what a haberdasher was. "Where do you get your threads?" the boy asked. He tried to smile, feeling very foolish. "Your togs, your outfit, the stuff you've got on."

"Oh," he said, "my mother," knowing at once that he had said the worst thing a fourteen-year-old boy could say to a sixth former. He blushed, helplessly.

But the boy laughed. "I'll bet she's a looker too. Be cool, yank," he said and walked away.

Bobby asked Parker that night while they were studying what a looker was. Parker told him matter-of-factly. It made him feel light-headed.

Then Parker said, "Why do you ask?"

He said. "Oh, someone said my mother was a looker."

"Is she?" Parker said.

"Yes," he said.

"I can believe that," Parker said, and then as if in the same breath, "Of course.  $X$  equals  $Y$ . Stupid, stupid. I've just wasted ten minutes on this stupid problem."

Bobby was inspired, in reflecting upon his afternoon's encounter, to consider the matter of his wardrobe. It was true that he dressed differently from the other boys. Parker had been right. He did make a splash. But at least it gave some people a reason to talk to him.

"Parker?"

"Yes."

"We're more or less the same size, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, I should say we are, more or less."

"What would you say to letting me wear some of your clothes?"

"Why on earth would you want to?"

"Well mine are different."

"So?"

"I think that's why people don't like me."

"Oh."

"Well?"

"It's not the clothes, Ames."

"Oh."

"It's not you either, Ames. Well, not entirely. I mean it's tough to come in for spring term. People aren't always very nice."

“You are.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say that.”

“I’m sorry. Forget it.”

“It’s so complicated.”

“It’ll work out, don’t worry.”

“You’re telling me not to worry.”

“I didn’t mean to lay the problem on you. It’s my problem.”

“Ames?”

“Yeah?”

“I think your colors are the best thing that’s happened here this year. Wear them. They’re fine.”

“It’s not the clothes.”

“It’s not even what we’re talking about.”

“What isn’t?”

“Look. I need some fresh air. You want to come?”

“You want me to?”

“Yes, I really do.”

“Ok.”

They walked to the lake, and sat on the footbridge, snapping twigs from the oleanders and tossing them into the water. Anthony talked of the masters, the scandals, the week’s events, the food and all the other things that St. Matthews boys had discussed from the time of Bolingbroke. It was a balm to Bobby’s soul: to be included, to have an opinion, to practice ways of not saying too much, to listen to the voice he loved. They laughed, they were silly. They watched two swans court and Anthony began to weave his oleander into a circlet. Bobby got up to get a trailing of vine from the bank. When he returned, he sat closer. It seemed all right. Perhaps Anthony even pressed against him. He couldn’t be sure, but it seemed that way. He wanted to think so.

“Tell me about the Market,” he said.

“What about it?”

“Why it’s called that, what happens there, why I have the worst seat in the whole place.”

Anthony laughed. “I forgot about that. Sorry. I should have told you.”

“Well, tell me now.”

“It’s so complicated.”

“I’ve got the time if you have.”

“OK. Let’s see, where to begin.”

Anthony’s recitation will go on for some time, past the time for lights out. Henry Skelton will notice their absence when he checks the rooms and will be sure that the window above the drainpipe is ajar. Its sandstone ledge is as worn as the fountain at Pompeii. He will nod to himself and hope that maybe things are getting a little better for Bobby Ames. The boys will forget the time because for the moment they have stepped out of it into a place neither past or present, full of intimations, fragrant with vague hope.

Curious, sympathetic and interested though we are in the meanderings of Anthony’s tale, yet it is best that we leave them here for now. Rare plants, if they are to bloom to their fullest, must have a time in the quiet and cool dark.

You will not regret your patience in this, either, dear reader. Of that you have my promise. So let us too share a bench for the hour and I myself will tell you about the market – all the things known to Anthony, and a few more.

## 4. The Market

Society, like the hermit crab, makes its home in borrowed places. Especially the society of the young. Having no natural habitat of its own, it concocts, modifies, adapts the environments which come to hand: an attic, a basement room, the shed out behind the barn, a boathouse or an abandoned loft. Occasionally circumstance or tradition carves out a grander edifice as for example among the ruins of a war or as in the case of the Chapel at St. Matthews School.

At some unrecorded early moment in the school's history it was determined by the majority populace, certainly without the blessing of the school's stewards, that this most holy building should serve the least holy of purposes. When the chapel ceased being called the chapel and became instead The Market, is not known, but such an event did occur. There was no living graduate of the school who did not know it as such.

Chapel was held there of course and it would be an exaggeration to say that no one ever gave the building its originally appointed name. The headmaster, for example, always referred to it by its proper name. So did those on the faculty who were not themselves graduates of the school. So would a guide with a crocodile of visitors in tow.

The Market was, as the name suggests, a place where business was done, where one went to acquire life's luxuries, where news could be had and given. Boys could be observed in and around the Market at all hours of the day. No boy would be alone for long. He would have come by prearrangement to barter some object, an arcane fact, a bit of gossip, a favor or to purchase one of the many "entitlements" that might be for sale on a particular day. An entitlement might be anything from a weekend off the school grounds to the caning of another boy or, as it was called uniquely at St. Matthews, a candy-sticking. An entitlement was a salable privilege. It was a privilege that one had acquired and which could be sold or traded for other privileges.

Boys also came to market to see and be seen. Some came simply to see who was being seen by whom, and were in turn observed by others who wished to watch watchers. It was a promenade, an exchange and a souk all rolled into one.

It was not only during the morning hours that the market buzzed with activity. One might find at virtually any hour of the night small groups of boys amusing one another in conversation, cloistered in tight suspicion of others, or simply waiting for some event to include them. Indeed some might be found in the attitude if not the enactment of prayer in the hidden corners where shadow was a friend. At times one might notice no sign whatsoever of human presence and yet there would be ten or twenty youngsters in its secret niches, like insects, going quietly about their business.

Whether in all of this activity there was anything of a sacred or sacramental nature is a question difficult to answer. Certainly offerings were made, thanks were given for congenial circumstance, passions were enacted and wine was drunk. In two centuries one imagines that the stone grotesques leering from among the ancient rafters must have seen a great deal and that the somber shadows of colored light filtered through the vaulted windows of stained glass must have dimly lighted countless pantomimes: even, now and then, a miracle play.

Most interesting of all traditions associated with the Market, however, was the manner in which the two hundred and sixty nine seats were distributed. It would have been explained to a visitor, standing soberly in the great stone edifice, his breath held in reverence, that the rows of benches, the great chairs emblazoned with heraldry were assigned by ancient custom. These customs, the guide would intone, reflected the ideals of the school. He might have added truly, that here one felt the very pulse of the school's being and heard its breath. Indeed at that moment our visitor might well have heard such a breath. A sigh of pleasure, for example, a stifled giggle. Or something of a different sort. Perhaps the the muffled gasp of breath from a luckless prep, pinioned in the organ gallery, another trophy for the wall of the Stokers' study.

Where one sat in chapel, the guide would continue, had to do with the level of one's accomplishments as scholar, athlete, leader. Here indeed, as on a medieval tapestry, one found the kingdom drawn in miniature.

While in spirit the guide would be speaking the truth, it would not be a truth wholly consistent with practice. Indeed the seats were distributed and their distribution revealed a great deal about the school's values. But it was according to the economy of the market and not the rewards of merit that this distribution was made. The seats were, finally, the coinage of the realm.

This may explain why they were not called seats at all by the cognicenti, but “numbers”.

A prudent boy sought from the moment of his arrival at the school, to acquire as many numbers as his wits and his wealth would support. Preps learned that, while numbers could be rented, leased, occasionally borrowed, even occasionally purchased, that the best of them became available only through the beneficence of the seniors. If one had a friend one might very well end his first year with a number. Bryce-Jones had seven numbers.

Watching the market, applying one’s capital carefully to achieve the greatest return, buying and selling at the right time: all these worldly arts were learned at St. Matthews.

How, the reader asks, can this be true? Why would a boy care at all what number he occupied when there were plenty for all? Ah, but there are plenty for all at the opera, or the races, or in any of those other places where society collects; and is it a matter of indifference which seat one occupies? Of course not. Imagine a gentleman at the opera, his attention wandering during a long recitative to the box beneath and opposite his balcony seat. He notices a lady. His glasses bring her closer. He is enamored. If only he might occupy that seat beside her, now held by one so inferior to himself. Imagine that he might at intermission, discover the owner of the seat to be someone other than the occupant and that, for a price, the seat could be his.

Act two and the gentleman sits smartly by the lady in question. He smiles. He reaches as she does, to pick up her misplaced fan and their cheeks brush.

Act three and both seats are again available for purchase.

Numbers in the market were no more equal in their value than seats at the opera.

Perhaps at one time numbers were actually affixed to them. But no longer. Their designation now was determined by their proximity to the great chairs which comprised the last rows on both sides of the apse and which were occupied by the faculty according to a far more incomprehensible system called tenure. Their crests were the crests of England’s nobility at the time of the building’s construction and the seats descending from them carried that same nomination: Thus the Duke of Cornwall three, the Bishop of Ely five, the baron of Eastcheap seven and so forth.

An exception to this classification occurred at the center of the chapel on the side opposite to the choir where, by tradition, the middle four rows were

designated according to the squares on a chessboard. These were the seats of choice! Here was where Bryce-Jones sat. In fact in the queen's bishop's seat. The head prefect sat, by tradition, in the king's seat. Also by tradition the queen's seat remained empty. There were stories told that at one time the case was different. But such boldness as might have allowed there to be an occupant of that chair in 1570 was not in evidence now.

That the four rows contained the court of the white king and queen rather than the red, our visitor would learn was in consequence of the war of the roses. Asked if boys objected to occupying queen's pawn seats one and two, the guide might smile and confess that for some reason they were very popular indeed. But then he would say no more.

Opposite the board, as this very high rent district was called, sat the choir. These seats were not a part of the currency and remained random in their occupation depending on the composition of the choir. Since most of the little boys with unchanged voices were encouraged to sing, it was in some measure a junior gallery. Most older choristers owned other seats as well which, for the time being, they would have rented out.

Watching the market, applying one's capital carefully to achieve the greatest return, buying and selling at the right time; all these worldly arts were learned at St. Matthews.

But there was more to tell than history on this particular night. There were things afoot and they were not pleasant things. As Bobby and Anthony sat by the quiet water of the pond, even now listening to cooing of the pigeons in the mulberry tree there came to the ear of the attentive listener in the Market, other sounds, far overhead in the belltower. Sounds muffled but unmistakable to the practiced listener.

## 5. Five Stars for the Stokers

It had begun that day at the conclusion of the noon meal. Rodney Naismith had approached three preps as they stood discussing the football match planned for that weekend against Wichencroft. He appeared very concerned.

He told them he was upset that rumors were getting out of hand. He had heard certain things about himself and his friends that appalled him. He could hardly find the words to describe his shock and disappointment. He even managed to blush convincingly. He referred, though obliquely, to allegations that he and his friends, known for their smoking habit as “the butt room gang” and also as “the stokers”, were methodically bugging the entire prep class!

Now the reader should know that at St. Matthews there was a tradition called the prep tatoo. Like the market, it dated from time out of mind. It required of the fifth form that they inscribe on the left buttock of each prep in the school, by the spring holiday, a message of their choosing. The message would be inscribed using an indelible laundry pen and carefully protected by the prep until the end of the school year whereupon, in another ceremony, the preps would run from noon meal to the pond, strip, and scrub the brand from one another’s backsides. The event was a sort of aquatic Bastille Day which turned generally into a total riot of water games to which most of the male residents of St. Matthews eventually would become audience, for one or another set of reasons.

The rumor of which Naismith spoke was that the group of fifth formers in whose hands the tradition of the tatoo rested this year, were perverting that tradition to something more primitive – perhaps more in keeping with the derivation of the tradition but certainly not appropriate for a civilized school in a civilized world.

“You guys call the shots with the preps,” Naismith said to the surprised boys. “We need to get this cleared up.”

They assented, somewhat sheepishly, in fact very surprised to suddenly have been so elevated. Muggeridge and O’Leary were reclusive boys, more given to mechanical things than society. But society held an attraction for them nonetheless and they were clever enough to recognize in this overture



from the infamous Naismith the promise of marketable information. They noticed too that it was Bret Tully who held Naismith's attention and not they.

With a mixture of wounded vanity and practical gratitude they recorded this fact.

It was coincidence that Tully should have been sitting with them; Mr. Skelton had teamed the three of them on Mozambique and they were using lunch to divide up the work. Tully was cleverer than Muggeridge and O'Leary and more popular. He was also one of the smallest and prettiest boys in the class, inclined to get more paternal care than he wished, the sort of lad who attracts even from his contemporaries a friendly pat on the head.

To O'Leary, Naismith remarked that he liked the way he tended goal. He told him he had potential – real potential.

He said other things as well designed to appeal to fourteen-year-old boys who certainly did not call the shots, who played soccer marginally and to whom life had been niggardly in its gift of social graces.

He was getting some good stuff at Market that evening he said. They could go up to the belltower and try it out.

If you were a prep you were very lucky to be offered a joint. You didn't turn it down lightly. The clincher was that there were three of them and only one of him. How could they possibly be at risk? They agreed.

By eight o'clock they were feeling pretty good.

"I've never understood why the British Empire has survived as long as it has," O'Leary observed. They were talking about the power of gossip and the cavalier way in which reputations get besmirched. He passed the butt end back to Naismith who took a long drag, examined the remains, pinched it out and then placed the remnant in a strawberry pastilles box which he put in the left breast pocket of his shirt. He took another joint from the stash in front of him and lit it.

"It didn't," Muggeridge said, affecting a languorous pose.

"Long enough to make your old man a few million selling defective guns to Senegalese guerillas," Tully added. He took a deep drag and coughed.

"It was doing away with corporal punishment," Naismith said. "That's where things fell apart."

Muggeridge and O'Leary assented, having no idea what the connection was but feeling an obligation to their host.

"Real thrashing has gone out of style. You never hear of it anymore.

Schools like this one have gotten soft.” Naismith was sincere. There was a sadness in his face.

Tully thought of Krause, the German sixth former who had bought an entitlement to candy-stick one of the fourth formers. The fellows had said he was sweet on the boy but couldn’t get anywhere with him. So he had got the idea of buying the entitlement and blackmailing him. But the boy wouldn’t go for it and so he gave him ten of the very best, put the boy in the infirmary and got himself sent back to Germany. The rector had commented later to a select group of boys, including Tully, on the ineluctable German character and thanked divine grace that he had been born English. Here here! they had all said.

“No keel-hauling either,” O’Leary volunteered.

“What this country needs is another Oliver Cromwell,” Muggeridge offered, more tentatively than the sentiment probably required. That was overlooked, however, and there was another round of ascent.

“Clean out the muck, sleaze, sludge. Get rid of polyester. Back to the wool standard! Build bombs, destroy Picadilly Circus.” It was a new voice, Blake’s. He had appeared out of the night and smiled.

“Down with BBC-3. Down with hamburgers.” Cardin had also joined the party, unnoticed. Naismith passed him the joint.

“What is to become of our beloved Island?” Naismith asked the growing assembly. “This emerald isle, this contorted erection testicted forever to Ireland.”

“Dear old Ireland,” said Blake and wiped at an imaginary tear. “Dear old Notting Hill Gate. Dear old Petronius Arbiter.”

The three boys pricked up their ears at the mention of the ignoble Roman. They knew of the book. It circulated. There was a whiff of something in the air. but they were too contented to catch the scent.

Half an hour later, after more than two or three joints, when O’Leary had confided that his father was in Borstal for mail fraud, and Muggeridge had gotten teary about letting three goals get by him in their game against Peakshill. Naismith was prevailed upon to do his imitation of the rector and Cardin sang God Save The Queen.

Muggeridge, encouraged by his hysterical peers, became scatological. It was during a story about three ladies from Leeds as he recalled later, that he realized he couldn’t stand up very well. He tried to because Naismith was

unzipping his pants and he knew that something unpleasant was about to happen. O'Leary later recalled giggling at the sight of Muggeridge's feet being where his ears should have been. Naismith squirted something out of a tube and Muggeridge began to whimper. It was very sad, O'Leary recalled. So plaintive. It made him think of a ballet or a silent movie he had seen once with his great aunt from Dorchester.

Naismith's size had been quite incomprehensible, which was the thing that made Muggeridge realize they were at the Royal Observatory. The lights confirmed the impression. So did the fact of Blake's sweaty hand over his mouth. He wanted to see the stardust move. He saw the spaceship just before it entered the Andromeda galaxy. He tried to imagine where the bent tip of Blake's cock was inside him. He could feel it all the way to his throat but that was impossible. He tried to lift his head to see if there was a protrusion in his tummy, but he was too dizzy.

Muggeridge and O'Leary had been right in their first impression of the seduction however. The stokers were less interested in them than in Tully. Their deflowering was ceremonial, for the record book. Tully's was more prolonged, repeated and thorough. They each got one star next to their names on the chart that hung in Naismith's room behind the print of Blue Boy. Tully got three.

## 6. Chastity's Friend and Nature's

Michael Drury Bryce-Jones had in most things surpassed the record of his father who, during his time at St. Matthews, had been second prefect, secretary of the debate, had played in the second nine, was olfatto renowned and had played Miss Neville in *She Stoops to Conquer*. Lord Bryce-Jones had by the end of his third year requited his passion for the red-headed son of a Welsh mine owner, the dark son of a Greek shipping magnate and a fair-haired Italian viscount with only one testicle.

His son, in the beginning of his fourth year, disdaining the perversions of his pleasure-seeking peers, took communion with a pure heart and an unblemished body. When his hands idly sought entertainment he applied them to the keyboard of the organ in the chapel. But now Michael Drury Bryce-Jones had sailed the fragile bark of his young life into troubled waters. He was in love with Bobby Ames!

The alteration in his demeanor brought about by this elevation of sentiments has not gone unnoticed by his peers. Perpetually piqued by their friend's arrogant petulance, tired by his humorless righteousness they have recently taken the opportunity of trying out on the cutting board of his temper, like practiced drapers, the various cloths which circumstance brings to hand. It is the work mainly of Sebastian Codwiler, also a prefect and master of the older boys' revels.

With a casual remark here, an indelicacy there, the simplest offhand observation concerning Bobby's physiology, Codwiler can inspire in his pitiful friend a thunderstorm of outrage.

Whether it was the beast in himself or his pitiless comrades is of no importance. It was at large and its prey was the boy in the red, white and blue running shorts. Jones was called by powers beyond himself to be the lad's protector! The more the others played upon him the more finely tuned became the instrument of his art. The more ominous he perceived threats to the boy's purity, the more global became his attention to the details of Ames' life. What would have appeared outrageous to him in the behavior of another, he now practiced with brazen impunity. Like an ogre protecting his treasure, he guards the boy with his body, sheltering him in the compass of his arm, even sitting at a game with Ames pouched between his legs like a

kangaroo cub.

All of this, as the reader may surmise, has done little to improve Bobby's modesty or, as we have observed, to win him many friends.

With earnest conviction Bryce-Jones took his concern to Henry Skelton, his model, inspiration and most sympathetic listener.

Michael shared with Skelton, as if to purify them in the bright fire of their mutual abhorrence, each carefully contrived indelicacy to which his friends subjected his imagination, adding sometimes, perhaps from reasons aesthetic or from a want of exactitude in the original material, details of his own invention.

It is on the occasion of such a visit that we join them now, sitting in Skelton's study, sharing a glass of dry sherry. Bryce-Jones has brought with him, carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied securely with a red string, a pair of Bobby's underpants. Codwiller had offered them that afternoon over perfect tea, as palpable evidence of a recent debauchery. In fact he had paid Small a handsome sum to pilfer them from Bobby's dresser so that they might provide verisimilitude to his otherwise bald and unconvincing story.

The performance had produced the desired result. Bryce-Jones had purchased Codwiller's interest in the small wad of cotton for five pounds, as one might buy the freedom of a serf.

The retelling of the tale to Skelton takes considerably longer than the original. There are times in such vulgar revelation when one simply must pause to catch one's breath. Together they regret the depravity of their fellow men, pray for their redemption and silently offer the nearly new and perfectly good pair of size fourteen briefs to the meager coal fire which burns like an eternal flame in Skelton's study.

In fact the two penitents at this small altar of ----- have less in common of method than of madness. Perhaps that is too strong a word, but which of us, in the quiet of his own counsel, won't admit to a kind of madness in our affections? We too, perhaps at the age of this young man, denied that which we most desired and, like Mrs. Jessel, created ghosts. It is not uncommon, even among those as wise as we.

Henry Skelton's madness, however, was of a different quality and had about it a finer integrity. Your narrator won't presume to say whether his attachment to the theory or to its practical application was the greater.

Perhaps with some information on each, and in light of his own experience,

the reader will be willing to conclude for himself.

Henry Skelton had read Rousseau and kept by his bedside table, along with the Bible, *The Origin of Species*. From this alone the reader might theorize upon the geography teacher's intellectual determination.

"Most of the evils attendant to civilization," he could be heard to argue in the staff room, "have their roots in child rearing. You say you want to civilize a boy but instead you ruin him. Your espaliered little prude will become a philanderer and a bankrupt, given a few years. Give me the tangled bank."

And that is indeed what he was given. The upper floor of Sprinkles House was indeed a tangle – of rooms and passages, moldering heaps of laundry, collections, treasures, hobbies, unmatched socks, bits of shoelace and unfinished compositions. There was no property. All was communal. A boy never ran out of clothes until everyone else had, unless he was largest.

"You can have your pommades and perfumes and all the pretensions that go with them." Skelton would harangue, "I will take the honest fragrance of youth." And he did. And so, perforce, did others though not without occasional protest.

The other masters thought it highly peculiar, probably unhealthy and certainly offensive, that their youngest pupils should so darken in the course of a week, or that the fingernails they chewed should appear so impacted with history.

Their greatest outcry, however, concerned the bedwetters, of whom the third floor had a suspiciously disproportionate number. On this subject Skelton was more often heard to mumble than expostulate, for it was a tender matter with him. Society's corruption had its clear and obvious roots in toilet training, "the rack upon which every child in the nation is stretched and from which he never escapes, though he be prime minister." Hector Skelton had, in his youth, been beaten for that same offense.

"If a child is abused for his love of disorder, for his delinquency with a mud puddle, a jam jar, or his own trousers, then he will become a very naughty boy indeed, who will continue to make a mess of the world and his own life for as long as he lives. He will want things to be neat and tidy as you now want him to be. But the world is not neat and tidy. People make messes. Trees make messes when their leaves fall and branches come unhinged in a storm. Ponds make messes when their bottoms come up. That

is the way of the world. The young must live it to know it!”

In fact Skelton was unable to discriminate among his boys with respect to their pungency. He lived, as they did, in the upper stories of Sprinkle Hall whose olfactory ambiance, as the reader has learned, was both palpable and ubiquitous, inclined to paralyze that sense in normal human beings.

Skelton accepted, however, that there was a larger reality beyond the stone ark of Sprinkles House and that his little boys would be ill suited for the world beyond the security of his hearth if he did not teach them accommodation. And so on Friday night there were required showers. He explained this regimen to the new boys as symbolic of accommodation, which had its place but cautioned them against adopting the easy logic of sanitary historians who, while celebrating the Renaissance for its genius, decried the “filth” of its streets. “A garden is the richer in its fruit for that same filth; then why not a society.” And on this the boys would ponder with a mixture of bewilderment and gratitude.

Skelton attended to the weekly ablutions personally, inspecting ears, fingernails, feet, scalp and those recesses which, though they most inspired the attention of their possessors during the rest of the week, were most subject to neglect on the occasion of the ritual ablution. Perfunctory as this inspection usually was, it served a disproportionately great part in establishing Henry Skelton as master not only of Sprinkles Hall but of the boys themselves. No boy would have dared either to miss the shower or question Helter Shelter’s proprietary rights with respect to his body. It was in the shower room that St. Matthews’ young colts were broken. Such are the inconsistencies of purpose upon which empires are built.

Skelton’s detractors pointed out that the natural tendency in boys was to organize things, to make social hierarchies, not simply to decay, like radium. He needed more of Darwin and less of Rousseau, they chided.

“Not all boys want to live like badgers!” Henry Truebooth had said in something of a twit one night over staff meal when Skelton was holding forth.

It was a delicate moment, for there were some in the staff who thought Skelton’s philosophy was not a philosophy at all but simply another perversion of a familiar sort. In that case the comment would have been very indiscreet, for the staff ethic was to live and let live. Certainly Henry Truebooth did not have a crystalline reputation.

On this occasion the first thing Hector Skelton did was to finish boning his kipper. That was usually his style. Then he tasted it. None ever knew with any certainty whether Hector liked the school's kippers or not. His face never revealed his judgments. Then he looked at Henry and nodded, pursing his lips. "I'm sure there's something to that, Henry," he said, "but I see nothing wrong in giving them the chance if they want it. God knows they'll never get it again." Then he had another piece of the kipper, this time with a swatch of mashed potato.

It was of some significance that history was on the side of Henry Skelton. There were members of parliament and captains of industry who had prospered under Skelton's roof and recalled the Swamp with a nostalgia more commonly reserved for home, mother and gooseberry fool. There was also Edward Clendennon Vileborn, Baron of Haltmere, who lived just on the other side of the wood from St. Matthews. Neither the school nor Henry Skelton had a fonder or more caring friend. Uncle Ned, as the Baron was called, had also spent his time on the third floor of Sprinkles House. Now his own vast estate, Haltmere Hall, was itself a refuge and an amusement for the boy's of St. Matthews: a much grander and less urethral amusement!

But my dear reader must despair. One thing at a time! you say. And rightly. There will be time for Haltmere Hall. And a good time too.

Bryce-Jones swirled the sherry in his glass and looked at the threadbare carpet beneath his feet.

"I'm not certain what I should do."

"About Ames."

"Yes."

"Do you believe these stories?"

"Of course not! Codwiler has my number, that's all. I'm such a fool to listen. It's just that he walks on the edge, if you know what I mean."

"He is very noticeable."

"Yes. They don't do the things they say, but they want to. I have no doubt about that. I can't believe they would though. Not really. I mean we are St. Matthews boys."

"Ah, yes. We have that. But he is exotic. This is a cold and ancient climate. I fear for him; he is too good for our rough ways. He reads to the juniors."

"He reads to them?"



“Almost every night. I can’t recall when a boy did that before. And he looks after them, like a little shepherd. It touches me to see it.”

“I think it would have been better for him to have come after the Christmas holiday.”

“He would have had an easier time of it.”

“I was thinking of the weather.”

“Oh?”

“Long trousers.”

“I take your meaning. Yes. That would have been easier on our worries. He is very brown.”

“He doesn’t always sit just as he should. I mean. Well, you know.”

“Indeed.”

“It’s worrisome.”

“But how much better, Michael, that you are there to worry!”

## 7. A Confabulation in Martin's Room

The boys gathered in Martin's room because of the window seat and the view of the quad. It was bigger than the other rooms and had four bunks instead of two. They called it Martin's room because he was the biggest of them. He was also apt to be the one who ran conversations, to whom the others deferred when deference seemed appropriate, which, among fourteen year old boys is not very often.

Swann slept under Martin. Mason and Wells had the other bunks. Small, of whom the reader may already have formed an opinion, slept down the hall with Benjy O'Leary. O'Leary had not been a mouse the year before and was not a member of Martin's crowd.

Parker sat on the window seat observing the comings and goings in the quad. Swann lay on the scrap of red rag carpet and read a Spider Man comic book. Small sat at the desk drawing an intergalactic battle cruiser. Martin had emptied out his drawers and was refolding his clothing into neat stacks.

Small added a reconnaissance tower and took a blue marker from Wells' pencil can.

"Ames has fastened himself on Bryce-Jones like a leach. I think it's the real thing. What do you say. Mason?"

"I say the more power to him. Bryce-Jones isn't the worst ally you could have in time of war."

"He has halitosis."

"How would you know. Small."

"I got a whiff from the other side of the quad."

"Tell us Small, can you detect life in outer space with that dong you call a nose?"

Martin put the last stack of undershirts in the drawer and closed it smartly, as if to emphasize his next remark.

"We could use a few allies, the mess we're in, that's for bloody sure. I wouldn't mind having Bryce-Jones on our side."

Mason, who was working half-heartedly on a geography assignment, sat up and looked at Parker.

"Bryce-Jones seems to have taken to your yank pretty fast."

"He's not my yank. We just share a room."

“Taken to him! My god, he can’t keep his hands off him! That lovely blond hair and those sperm-encrusted fingers.”

“Small, you have a leprous imagination.”

“It’s true. I swear I’ve seen saliva at the corners of his mouth. Unctuous Saint Michael with a perpetual hard-on.”

Parker, notable among his friends for a naive and endearing candor, observed that he wouldn’t mind having a friend like that. “Someone you could go to for things,” he said.

“And we know what things too. Parker.”

“I am going to ignore you Small. Martin, does Small have to be here?”

“Shut up Small.”

Now Swann looked up from his comic book, one finger delicately searching his left nostril. Are we going to bleed talk about it or aren’t we? If we aren’t. Spider Man and I have better things to do with our time.

“Right, Swann. Well, are we?”

“Small’s the one with the first hand report on Tully and that crowd.”

“I think they should turn the buggers in.”

“Right, Mason, and be found with their scorching throats slit behind the observatory.”

“Don’t be melodramatic, Swann.”

“They’d be heroes.”

“Yeah, they’d also be breaking the code!”

“Screw the scorching code!”

“That’s all there is here, Swann. Don’t forget it.”

“Pig teats!”

“If they were in Egypt they’d cut off their hands.”

“That’s it! Slip into their rooms at night with a pair of pruning shears. Snap! Oh! Sorry old buddy. You’d better do something about all that blood.”

“In Egypt they’d make them bloody lords. Fucking boys is what it’s all about there. All those Arab countries. They kidnap kids and sell them in the market. I read it.”

“Any scorching stoker who fingers me is going to get a knee in the balls.”

“What about three or four scorching stokers, Swann? What do you weigh this term? Ninety pounds? Eighty?”

“I’ll bet it was bloody awful. For Tully especially.”

"I'll bet it was awful bloody too."

"Small. Why don't you crawl into one of your spaceships and go back to where you came from. You are so insensitive I can't believe it."

"Hey, maybe we ought to include the rainbow gigolo in our band of counter-revolutionaries. If he's so close to Bryce-Jones, maybe the protection would rub off on us."

Anthony winced. They referred to Bobby Ames. They had given him several names; this was one of the kinder ones.

"No way, Mason. We'd have to have third Sprinkles as well. What did O'Leary say, Small?"

"They have a chart. They had it there with them. They all signed after Tully's name. Blake signed after O'Leary's and Naismith after Muggeridge's. Then they stuck stars on it. Three for Tully.

They had this oriental rug, too. And an incense thing. He said it was weird."

"They are sick."

"Sick? How can you say that, Parker? It's the way of the world, big people fucking little people. Did you know that in ancient Rome kids who didn't have a little thing on a chain around their necks were fair game. There you are with the guys, kicking the ball around in the town square and this guy comes up and nails you."

"Nothing's changed, I guess."

"Well, it's not exactly public policy."

"I heard that Helmsley had four stars."

"Christ!"

"Actually that's a pretty good rating, four stars. Five is really terrific of course. But three is the pits and I'd never go to a film that had only two..."

"Small, in a minute I'm going to move your nose down under your chin."

"Small doesn't have a chin."

"I still say Ames could help us out. I know he's an asshole, but he does have the royal seal of protection. You know, if the Stokers got the idea he was one of us, I mean if he saw us together at lunch. Well, then they'd think twice about putting us on the chart."

"He's not an asshole."

"Is he cute, Parker? I mean *au naturel*."

"I'm going to kill him, Martin."

“Can it, Small. What about it, Parker. We could give him a try.”

“You don’t like him and he knows it. Forget it.”

“But you like him, Parker.”

“That’s true, Swann. I do. Just like I like you and the others. And I wouldn’t want to be a phony to any of you. You ask him if you’re determined to try.”

“But you’re his roommate.”

“No.”

“Wells, you ask him.”

“OK. But I don’t see the point.”

“Oh guys...”

“What is it Small?”

“There’s one other thing I forgot to tell you.”

“Well?”

“No, never mind. It’s really beside the point. Just a little piece of information I picked up.”

“From Mrs. Grundle.”

“Not from Mrs. Grundle, cuntface.”

“I thought you got all your information from Mrs. Grundle, Small.”

“Small, what’s it like with Mrs. Grundle. I’ve never made it with a four-hundred pounder myself. I suppose it’s important to stay on top. And then of course there’d be the problem of finding it...”

“Small can’t even find his own.”

“Cut it out, Swann. He isn’t going to tell us anything if you don’t give him a chance.”

“Thank you for protecting me from these cruel boys, Martin. I can always count on your thoughtfulness. But you’re wasting your time.”

“Look, Small. You’re a cynical, nasty little brute, but you are part of us, too. And we’ll keep you along for the ride. It’s pretty cold and lonely out there. Now, if you know something that’s important you’d better tell us.”

“They got Tom Dickens.”

“Where?”

“Where do you think?”

“Try to cope with reality for one minute, Small, will you?”

“Summers got him up to his room.”

“How many?”

“It was a one-star performance. Solo for unaccompanied asshole.”

“How do you know?”

“I know that I know.”

“It doesn’t matter, Parker.”

“That’s where the chart is. And the photographs.”

“Photographs!”

“Very good, Mason. You pronounced the word perfectly.”

“Photographs of what?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t believe it. They couldn’t be that crazy.”

“People would of seen the flash.”

“Apparently not.”

“Oh my God. They are crazy. I’m going home.”

“Unlikely, Mason. Anyway it’s war, so you can’t. It would be desertion.”

“Pig teats! It’s a massacre.”

“Well, we could start by circling the wagons. That’s what they do in the movies. We spend more time shooting one another than we do the enemy.”

“You too, Martin.”

“All right, me too. Let’s cut it out. I say we need a plan, and none has come up with one yet. So let’s get down to business!”

And while they do get down to business we will shift our view to another part of the grounds. For, as Bobby has been in Anthony Parker’s thoughts this past thirty minutes, he has also been in ours.

He has not been as neglected as we might have imagined. At the noon meal he was joined by three fifth formers who were interested in hearing about the north of Africa. They were friendly, appreciative and civilized. Especially a boy named Rodney Porter who had been to Alexandria once.

With lunch finished Porter asked if Bobby had seen the grounds beyond the quad and Sprinkles House. Apart from the Chapel and the pond he had not and accepted the offer of a guide.

In the old observatory. Porter took him up to see the telescope. It had been vandalized for lenses and other things during the war and never repaired. He studied the mechanism. “It’s a shame,” he said.

“What is?” Porter asked.

“That it’s never been fixed. You could see a lot from here, I’ll bet.”

Porter didn’t answer. Bobby turned. Porter was sitting on a crate with his

pants down jacking off. Not seriously jacking off, not with any real fervor, but sort of casually stroking himself. He had a theatrically maniacal smile on his face. Bobby turned away.

“What’s the matter.”

“Nothing.”

“Why don’t you turn around?”

“I was looking at this.”

“How about looking at this.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Let’s look at yours, then. You do have one, don’t you?”

“No. I mean yes.”

“Well.”

“Look, Porter...”

“I’d like to.”

“You know what I mean. I thought you were my friend.”

“That’s the whole idea. What do friends do where you come from? Hang around the corner drugstore?”

“I’ve never seen a corner drugstore.”

“That’s right. I forgot. It’s the Riviera and Algiers and what’s that island off Greece?”

“Santorini.”

“That’s it. Well, what do you think friends do there? What do you and Parker do?”

“Nothing.”

“Come off it, Ames. You sure it wasn’t the Virgin Islands? Look, Ames. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. You just come over here and close your eyes and I’ll take care of everything. No? You know, it’s rude to turn your back on someone when he’s jacking off.”

“I’ve got to be going.”

“How about coming instead. Oh! Of course! How thoughtless of me. You can’t come yet! I didn’t realize...”

“I can too!”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Cut it out. Porter. I don’t like this.”

“I’ll make a deal with you, Ames. You come over here like I said, and I won’t tell a soul that you’ve got only one testicle, an undersized dick and a

great ugly birthmark on your ass. How's that? Ames? You know, I could come over there and solve this whole..."

"You bastard! You stinking bastard! You cocksucker, son of a bitch. I hate you. I hate this school. I hate England. I hate all the fucking English snobs in the fucking English school..."

It was about all he could have gotten out anyway, even had Porter not stuck his hand over Bobby's mouth, for he could barely find a breath between the sobs that twisted his body. Porter, alarmed into instantaneous flacidity, was sure that Bobby's outburst had been heard at least at the Rectory, perhaps even at some of the outlying farms near Tuppington-on-Smart.

"Look, Ames. Let's just forget about all this. It was a mistake. I figured you wrong. No more shouting, OK?"

He took his hand away and pulled up his trousers, then dropped them and pulled up his underpants and pulled them up again, jammed the zipper on his fly, swore and looked at Ames.

"Now look, Ames. You pull yourself together. You can find your way back. I'll just be on my way."

And he was, cursing the entire way. For it had not escaped him as he held the boy to stifle his cries that he was finally an irresolute coward. The chance had been there and he had missed it. Next time he resolved that he would not.



## 8. A Flutter of Eyelashes

Bobby cried into his salty pillow, late-night safe sobs that started in the interstices of his toes and rose like aquarium bubbles to his throat. Every cell and sinew felt the sadness rise from the depths of his young and unready soul into the empty world. He was a good crier because a practiced one. And a good silent crier, for a forty-foot sloop is a small place, and especially when others act as if you were not there and you have to pretend they are right.

And even when they weren't there and you lay alone under the bulkhead listening to the water slap against the deck and the furtive rustlings along the dock, you were quiet lest *they* find you. *They* who collected little boys in harbors from boats like his mother's to sell on the auction block in Tangiers or pass from cellar to cellar through the back streets of Casablanca. His mother had told him the stories and he believed them even to this day with the preposterous certainty that one carries from childhood like a birthmark.

His nightmares took on the theme of such an abduction, not from the bulkhead of the yacht but in plain sight of his mother who pretended not to see. He had learned from a Syrian boy why men might steal boys away. The boy said he knew another boy who got fucked by his father, but Bobby suspected it was the boy himself because sometimes he walked as if he had messed his pants and he hadn't. It was this boy's father, an enormous and ill-tempered man, who lurked in his dreams and carried him off while his mother watched; or it was a man whom he saw in the street or came to the yacht on some business and looked at him the way men sometimes did. He was at great pains to ingratiate himself to his mother, to be compliant, helpful even, to watch her cues and mind them.

And so he was silent and mourned the lovelessness of his childhood, sharing that sadness only with the boy who slept in his bed and cried into his pillow. He learned to take care of Bobby Ames as a mother might. He comforted him when he was frightened, told him stories when he was lonely and even took the time to teach him how things worked. His mother and the string of "captains" she picked up to sail the yacht back and forth from one harbor to another, acted amused by the conversations he carried on with himself. Amused, that is, until he was nine and ten and it seemed more peculiar than cute. Then he had to hold the conversations in private and keep

his secret sharer hidden under his bunk in the chest with his clothes.

The nightmares of his childhood had been, until the last week, a thing of the past. But the event in the observatory had served to rekindle the old fear.

Twice now. Not with the old terror but enough to frighten him awake. Then he would discover his whereabouts, consider his condition, bury his head in his pillow and sob. The difference now was that Anthony figured in the dreams. Once as his mother; once at her side.

It was when Bobby had called out the first night that Anthony had awoken, startled, disoriented and then heard the muffled sobs. He lay awake for a long time, for a longer time even than it took for Bobby to cry himself back to sleep, and thought. He thought how poor a friend he was and how unskilled Ames was in making friends. He wondered what the resolution of that would be. He imagined conversations they might have and went over the parts in his head.

The second night he heard because he couldn't go to sleep. And he couldn't go to sleep because he couldn't get Ames out of his head. It wasn't a matter of conversational strategies, however, or social rehabilitation which preoccupied him; it was something new and not at all clear to him. It was the night after their conversation by the pond. They had come back late, climbed the pipe and come in through the leaded window in the commons room.

Bobby had gone off to sleep at once. Anthony had read, but not with his mind on the text. His mind was on the rhythm of Ames' breath. He put the book aside and turned on his side. Ames lay on his, curled toward Anthony, his mouth slightly open. His eyelids moved – not opened, but squinted as if in discomfort. It was the not the first time he had studied Ames' face without his friend's being aware, but it was the first time he understood why he was drawn to that scrutiny.

He fell back on his pillow and stared at the ceiling. Even in full knowledge he remained for the time methodical. Never having been in love before, he did not understand that the intentional part of Anthony Parker would shortly be immobilized and that another would take over. And so he thought still about conversations they might have. But these were interrupted by the sounds of his other senses. He felt against his right hip the pressure of Ames' hip as they sat on the bridge. He smelled the pungent newness of Ames' denim. He realized that he did not at all have to turn on the light to see Ames' face. It was as perfectly etched in his mind as any face had ever

been. He could rotate the head even and capture it from any angle.

Ames slept soundly. His breathing was deep. And so Anthony risked it. He got out of his bed, took Ames jeans from where they lay on the floor and crawled back beneath the covers. Then he buried his face in them and breathed. That was the smell of Ames. He wondered if it would go away when they had been washed many times. Probably. Probably it wasn't Ames at all, but just the new cloth, the starch.

When Ames cried out, Anthony's heart nearly burst from his breast. A choke arose in his throat and caught at the back of his mouth. He caught his breath and stared at the ceiling, clutching the trousers beneath his covers. Then he waited to hear the sobs and they came. A tear formed at the side of his right eye trickled down secretly over his hair and tickled his ear.

How can sadness be so beautiful, he wondered. How can I feel so much and lie here unmoving, he thought. But he wanted to test the feeling more. How could he be so overcome as this? And what was it which could so mix up feelings which ordinarily did not keep one another's company. Had he in fact recorded consciously those mornings in the shower the anatomical detail which now presented itself to his mind? It seemed to him that he had looked away, that he had been particularly careful not to be interested. But now Ames stood there in his mind's eye like a statue. He sat on the bench toweling his toes. His body almost all brown, his penis lazily resting on his thigh, his nipples tight from the cold, a look of concentration on his face. Or a look of sadness? Or a protected far off look? That he could not be certain of.

He wanted to say the boy's name now. He wanted to rouse him from his sobs and... What? Talk? But wouldn't Ames feel that he had been spying? He didn't want anyone to hear, or he wouldn't have cried so into his pillow. And how would he explain that he had taken Ames' jeans to bed with him?

While these speculations filled his head. Bobby's sobs ceased and he resumed his deep breathing. Anthony was both relieved and disappointed. He replaced the jeans on the floor and took out the washcloth he kept in his side drawer for jacking off. But the images and feelings remained so oddly combined and contradictory that he realized he really didn't want to, or couldn't and while he considered the causes further his own breathing slowed to the deep rhythm of slumber and he turned his head into his pillow, still clutching the cloth.

The next night it was not really a matter of thought at all. Parker had awoken dreaming of Ames. They were riding bicycles together. That was all. It was in the woods, along a path. They came to a bridge that was guarded by some of the fifth formers. But not only the fifth formers. His mother was there as well. And the rector. They stopped their bikes and waited for instructions but none came. So he continued across the bridge and turned to encourage Ames. But Ames was lying on the ground crying. He started back but now the group of people, which had grown to include many of the preps, blocked his way. They said nothing and so there was nothing to prevent his hearing the boy at the other side of the bridge as he wept. He tried to force his way through but became entangled in his mother's long gown.

He awoke with the bedding wrapped beneath him. He had tried to turn on his side but couldn't. His pillow was on the floor. The moon was nearly full and the night clear. He saw his friend's head upon the pillow, his arms beneath it, muffling the sobs, his shoulders, above the covers, shaking with each tumult. He arose, crossed the room and lay on the covers beside him. Then he stroked his friend's head as he imagined one might do such a thing and said nothing.

At first Ames turned from him, surprised, ashamed, and choked into a false silence. But Parker's hand was softer than intention and gentled forth his tight and private grief. Then Parker was there beside him, beneath the covers, beneath the moonlight, against him, and he fell safely now into depths he could not have fathomed alone. At each dizzying and darkening place his friend held him the more tightly until, their descent checked, his tears abated, he arose into sleep.

Parker lay awake, amazed at what he felt, staring at the grey wall of their room, watching the patterns of ivy-filtered moonlight, savoring a new feeling, awaiting a glorious doom.

Bobby had thought he might run away and join the merchant marine. Or try to find his father on St. Croix. But there was no money and you couldn't hitchhike to the Caribbean. So where then? They hated him here, anyone who mattered, and the others liked him for the person he had pretended to be or that they had wanted him to be. Now the stories had begun to feel dry on his tongue, strange even to his own ears. Had there ever been any truth to

them? Yes a grain here and there. The places at least. Telling them to Parker made him feel especially empty. When Parker showed interest, it confused him. He became jealous of the person he himself had invented.

But there was no other person brave enough to take his place. He felt emptier each day and his loneliness became a lump that settled in the top of his throat like a stuck lemon drop. He wanted to cry all the time, but he waited till he thought Parker was asleep and then choked his misery into his pillow.

He thought mostly of Parker. Nothing had changed from the moment in the rector's office when he had first seen the picture. But now he was inclined to call it love, because what he felt was something he had never felt before and it needed a new word. It was a peculiar thing, so gentle and soft, like a swoon. Yet a thing that could make him ache with an almost unbearable pain. He was at constant pains to hide his feelings, so sure was he that Parker felt none in return, so fearful of being discovered in his secret longing. The evening of their walk had been almost more than his puzzled imagination could compass. He had felt so close. The softness of Parker's voice had made him sad, giddy, happy and expectant. But expectant of what he could not have said, except that the feel of the other boy near him had aroused him to what he could only consider, in his present state of mind, a physical profanity.

He had wanted then to take Anthony's hand. But he had been afraid to think of it. If something should happen, then it too could be taken away.

When he awoke to the sound of the first bell he felt Parker's arm across his chest. Parker's dark head lay on the pillow beside him. He breathed contentedly. Bobby wondered what he should do, whether get up and dress and pretend this had not happened and talk about what might be in the porridge today, or lie as he now lay, his heart quieted by the hand that lay upon it.

After all, it was Parker who had come to his bed. He would not be shocked on awakening. He had come as a friend knowing what he was doing. And what was that? Not pity, he hoped. But what then? And how was he to discover? It was suddenly a new world as well as a new morning, filled with daring promise and new fears. Half-consciously, Bobby made their legs touch. His heart quickened. He whispered his friend's name and

watched his face. He had very long eyelashes over his emerald eyes. They were as nice as the eyes. They fluttered. The eyes looked at him and darted for recollection. Oh no! he thought. Then they calmed and blinked.

“First bell went.”

“Oh.”

“Thanks, Parker.”

“For what?”

“You know.”

“You were crying.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you feel better now?”

“Yeah.”

“What was wrong.”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh.”

“I miss my mother.”

“Oh. So do I. You’re not supposed to, you know. Not at fourteen. The other boys don’t.”

“Bull shit! This place is a morgue. It’s so grey and damp. You have to think of mothers, or something that’s... I don’t know.”

“You have a lot more to miss than most fellows.”

“Huh?”

“You know. All the places you live, and all your things.”

“My things.”

“Right.”

“I don’t have any things. It’s all a crock, Parker. I don’t even have a room to spread my things out in, even if I had things. My mother’s a whore and my father smuggles heroine. And I’m going to join the merchant marine when I’m fifteen because I know how to get a false ID. And all the rest is a crock.”

“They were pretty good stories.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m sorry your mother’s a whore. Is she really?”

“I think so.”

“That’s too bad. How come you came to school here?”

“We’ve used up most of the others. They don’t pay the bills. I think

that's it. I'm always being told that my mother wants me to come home and when I get there she's all pissed off and says she's gonna sue the school and then I stay with her and her latest boyfriend as long as they can stand it and they find another school. Once they just took off."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. They left me in a hotel where we were staying and cut out. One night. I woke up and they were gone. I waited for three days."

"What happened."

"My mother came back without the guy. Then the next day I was in a school in Tunis. That's where we were. And then she was gone again."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"Adults aren't always very nice."

"I was thinking last night that I'd run away. But then I thought that you can't run away unless there's somebody looking for you. And nobody would. That's what made me cry."

"I'd look for you."

"Thanks."

"I would."

"I know."

"I wouldn't mind running away, just to get away from those scuzzy fifth-formers."

"Like Porter."

"What about Porter?"

"He's sick."

"What did he do?"

"Let's not talk about Porter."

"OK, but it's important. He didn't get you, did he?"

"What do you mean?"

"I guess you don't know what's going on, do you?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, they've got a list. The fifth-formers. The stokers. Blake, Summers, Porter, Naismith. You know. The names of all the preps are on it. And they're checking them off. Wells got checked off last week. There are about ten others."

"Wells?"

“They buggered him.”

“What’s that?”

“Screwed him. You know. Between the buns.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Ask Wells.”

“But things like that don’t happen.”

“They happen. It’s pretty awful, I guess. Wells won’t even talk about it. They all did him. He said they put five stars by his name. I can’t stop thinking about it. And when you said what you said about Porter I thought maybe...”

“No, but... shit.”

“What?”

“I think if I hadn’t of thrown a fit and scared him off he might have. Boy! I don’t believe it.”

“We thought you had protection.”

“Huh?”

“Bryce-Jones. We thought the fifth-formers would stay clear of you because of Bryce-Jones.”

“He’s my friend.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Does he know about this stuff?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe.”

“Anthony?”

“That’s funny.”

“What is?”

“My name. Hearing it. I mean instead of Parker.”

“Do you mind?”

“I like it. But if you say it in front of the other fellows we’ll both get a lot of crap.”

“What kind of crap?”

“You know. They’ll think we’re homosexual or something.”

“Just for using a first name?”

“It isn’t done. But we can do it in private. It can be a secret. I say your name sometimes.”

“I never heard you.”

“Not out loud.”



“Oh.”

“Bobby.”

“What?”

“I like saying it out loud. Bobby. We’ll probably screw up, you know.”

“Say it out loud?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll risk it.”

“Me too. Anyway they’ll just be jealous.”

“Of us?”

“Of me.”

“How come just you?”

“Well, I’m not so much. You’re the fellow everybody notices.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Why?”

“Because it is. You’re the beautiful person, Anthony. You’re the one who had the guts – which I never would of had in a hundred million years – to come over and sit on my bed and not pretend you didn’t know I was crying. I can’t believe you did that! I never had a friend like that. Don’t ever put yourself down or I’ll punch you out.”

“Sorry.”

“Just watch it.”

“You better watch it too. I studied Tae Kwon Do this summer.”

“Yeah? Well I took Karate.”

“I took boxing.”

“I took wrestling.”

This conversational squaring off provided a pretext for the boys to face one another and for Bobby to look squarely and unabashedly into the eyes that so fascinated him. Anthony blushed and lowered his gaze. His eyelids fluttered.

Who is to say how it is that there is a first time for things and that it arrives unheralded, unexpected and, like a busy man with appointments, or Santa Claus, gets on with its work. Had either boy known that this would be the first morning in his life when he would share his body with another whom he loved, probably inhibition and fright would have paralyzed him. But neither did know, or even at precisely what moment it happened. And so the visitor in the small room with the grey walls who had come precisely to get these

lives started in a new direction and who had other appointments to keep that morning in other schools, decided that no more should be said.

Each discovered in the mirror of the other his own desires, and was rendered speechless by his astonishment. The world had suddenly become infinitely large and yet small enough to be reflected in the eyes of a friend.

It was not by agreement or foreknowledge that each undressed the other, but as prologue to the theme of love which was to follow in the weeks and months ahead. Though they were eager, they savored each moment, finding their way, as it were, in an enchanted and infinitely fascinating place. They examined each sensation together, each discovering the other as he was himself revealed.

There is in a young body an agile exuberance which expresses itself in the form of a mild explosion, which resides in that body perhaps no more than those first two years after its birth out of childhood, which precedes even adolescence itself and the first down of puberty, and which is the experiment of muscles as yet untried, of naive and simple sentiment to which later they will give the name "love".

They did no more than this simple act. It was enough, being as it was, new to each boy and desperately exciting in its newness. No hand other than his own had ever before coaxed forth that sublime pleasure, and the touch itself was an ecstasy; that it was for each the wished-for touch was a miracle.

"I think my heart will break," said Anthony.

The second bell rang.

"Oh, no. Go away!" said Bobby and held Anthony so close that he could not tell which heart he felt beating. When the bell stopped, he drew back and looked again into the emerald eyes. But now he saw something new there. His own image captured. "I see myself in your eyes," he said.

"I know."

"Anthony, I've made a mark on your neck. Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"I liked that a lot."

"Yeah."

They found a yellow turtleneck in Bobby's dresser and Anthony put it on. It covered the mark. Then Bobby cleaned up their mess, remarked on their collective virility and tasted the mixed juices. "It's salty," he said.

"It's sweet," said Anthony, licking the end of his finger.

“Mine is sweet; yours is salty.”

“It’s all mixed.”

“Yeah.”

“Anthony?”

“Yeah?”

“We’ve got to figure out a way not to make such a mess.”

“I think I know one.”

“What is it.”

“I’ll tell you tonight.”

## 9. Bryce-Jones Feels a Chill

On that particular morning in which the memory of a salty taste lingered on Bobby's lips, Anthony Drury Bryce-Jones observed something which he would later describe to Hector Skelton as an aura. It was, he would say quietly and secretly, in order to share the quality of his amazement, a manifestation of the divine spirit. He recollected in the boy's glow the reason Christ had so loved children. Skelton was so willingly inspired by the thought that he readily translated Bryce-Jones' theology to his own earthier and more romantic pedapsychology and, later that night somewhat light-headed and even giddy from the amoniac fragrance of his pickled boys, prepared a belle lettre on the subject of radiance among the innocent.

The text of the rector's sermon that morning was "The Temple of the Body". Bobby, delightfully confounded by the humors of his own body felt suffused with a not entirely celestial light which confounded his attempts at concentration and caused there to appear on his bewilderingly beautiful face, a smirk totally out of keeping with the sobriety of the rector's message. Had he been more anatomically adept or even given to a search for explanation he might have concluded that his condition was a direct result of the disproportionate concentration of blood now enormously contained beneath the hymnal and the zipper of his shorts, which had for the moment left his brain undernourished. But the extent of his perception went no further than a vague tactile memory of Anthony's arms and a flutter of eyelashes. He was indeed in a state of grace and it was probably by divine intervention that the hymn first chosen was one which he knew by heart and for which, upon standing, he did not require his hymnal.

Bobby's nomadic life had taught him the humors of change. He had learned to take happiness when it was offered and savor it, but not to expect that it might last. One went on with life when life went off with someone else. And yet now there was something new, a sense of vulnerability.

Anthony was less practiced in adversity and less subject to extremes of emotion. This morning's rapture had been a new thing, totally unexpected, totally bewildering. He too felt vulnerable as he had not before, not from the fear of loss but to the new and unfamiliar stirrings in his heart. He was certain that these changes must be fully apparent to the world, that his

thoughts must clearly be written on his face, and so he was at pains to convey sobriety. He tried to imagine the lines that crease a sober face and tracked with his finger, as if registering seriously a fine point in the sermon, the contour of his right cheek to be sure it had not dimpled. His trousers were another matter and, for all his thinking about the day Wells upchucked in the refectory he could do nothing about it. He was sure that the mark on his neck glowed in the grey light of the chapel and that when the rector scanned the assembly he had paused upon seeing it.

As if all this were not difficult enough to manage, he had additionally to accommodate in his young and unpracticed heart the outrageous wish that everyone in chapel might know that he loved Bobby Ames and celebrate their betrothal. A revolution of spirit would occur then in the school. Peace, tranquility and joy would enter the world and strife would be no more.

He retraced in his memory the moment they arose from bed and remembered that he had felt modest. Bobby too, he suspected. He had glimpsed him naked for only a moment, not enough to make a picture. It was the smell of him and the feel of his tongue against his neck that stayed with him. All he could summon was the white of his underpants and the tan of his legs. No boy at St. Matthews was tanned like that. Only his adventurer friend.

No sooner had this fantasy sketched itself in his imagination than he was beset with contrary and more realistic imaginings. What would the other boys do and say when they found out. for it was certain that they would if the subject came up. How could he hide it? What would happen now when they spoke unkindly or lewdly of his friend? Could he feign indifference?

Such were the considerations in the mind of Anthony Parker as the rector droned on.

Bryce-Jones had experienced the sermon differently from our young heroes. It had shaken him, coming as unexpectedly as it did in harmony with his own thoughts. Perhaps Mr. Skelton had put a word in with the rector. He folded his arms across his chest and surveyed the room. Yes the body was a temple. A sanctuary! He saw the white banner of the church unfurled over Sodom. Such power lay there. He looked across at Bobby Ames. Such beauty! *No!* Such purity! The bangs of his yellow hair were a halo. He recalled the smell of soap and fresh air as he had walked past earlier. A shiver ran down his back. Get thee behind me, Satan. He looked away at a

hideous head of stone peering from among the rafters.

Then a thought struck him with such force that it made him giddy. This was not the rector's assembly, it was God's assembly and it was for him! It was a test!

How arrogant he had been!

Yes there were sinners there, rank upon rank of them, fresh from their sweaty sheets, gravy stains upon their shirts, their hair unkempt, their eyes sunken from debauchery. But that had simply been to mislead him, to test his complacency. He knew suddenly with the force of certainty that God's eye was upon him.

He stood for the benediction and his eyes dropped again to the boy in the third row. Like some golden animal awoken from a peaceful slumber he stretched in a beam of sudden sunlight. For a moment Michael thought he might faint. The spirit of darkness rushed from the damp cellars of the chapel, paralyzing his sinews, stealing his breath, and then was gone, a rush of air in the belltower.

There was no time to waste. The boy would fall, already might have fallen. No, not that! Was this ignorance, innocence, the garden before the fall? Did the child not know that simple yawn might bring the rafters themselves and two hundred years of dust crashing upon their heads?

Yes it had been to remind him, to test the strength of his resolution, to open his eyes for one moment to the abyss, that he might lead this child safely from it, safe in the shelter of his arm.

When the senior prefects gathered after chapel for a glass of sherry, Bryce-Jones was in a particularly good humor. It was not surprising, for spiritual awakening renders the mundane affairs of life helpless to affect our mood. Our tranquility is sublime. We feel a calm beneficence toward those still struggling earth-dwellers who surround us. We feel a sad but disengaged sympathy.

The point of view of those to whom we condescend, however, may be quite different from our own. In their ignorance they may mistake our quietude for a practiced art, our separateness for aloofness, our self-enlightenment for self-absorption. They may in fact regard us as impossible bores!

It was Bryce-Jones misfortune to be so perceived. Otherwise Codwiller might have kept to himself the news which had recently come to hand

concerning the incident in the observatory. Though it had about it the unmistakable timbre of truth, it was not up to the inventions which he usually provided on these occasions. He had thought to keep it until he could provide more inciting embellishment. But Bryce-Jones was being impossible and something had to be done.

We can surmise that it was coming as close as he did that inspired Porter to the indiscretion of telling his story. After all, Bobby Ames was the prize and all anyone had done up to this point was talk. Porter may have failed, but he could at least claim the notoriety of an attempt. That he should have failed required an explanation, a very compelling one. And so one can imagine that the story Codweller heard was enhanced both in the quality of the attempted seduction and in the hysterical response of the intended victim. It was this story to which he now treated Bryce-Jones.

Perhaps he told it with more conviction, perhaps more offhandedly. Perhaps it was more persuasive because it was the story of an attempted but unsuccessful seduction. Perhaps the manner in which the other prefects let on that they had heard bits and pieces of the tale as well. Perhaps it was in part all of these things. But mostly it was the enticement Codweller added as they broke up their gathering and started back to classes. "Ask him," he said.

This was a new provocation. It nearly upset Bryce-Jones newfound equilibrium. In fact by luncheon, it had.

## 10. The Best of Intentions

In the days following, Bobby and Anthony had sat at different tables in the refectory. Anthony thought it prudent. In fact it was no more than a penance which he believed magically, if paid, would allow them to enjoy their other pleasures with a clearer conscience. There was a problem in the arrangement, however. He could not keep his eyes off his friend. In order to hide this from his table-mates he talked. Since he was ordinarily quite reticent, the change served more to alert his friends to new circumstances than to distract them. The matter was complicated further by the fact that he talked mostly nonsense. Heretofore he had been credited with a terse, not to say disconcerting capacity for clarity.

His other problem was jealousy. It made no sense that he should be jealous but he was. He imagined that every pair of eyes at St. Matthews was trained on Bobby Ames at every possible opportunity. In fact things were very much as they had been before that wonderful morning. Bobby commanded no more or less attention. Still, it was more than any boy's fair share and that was hard for Anthony.

Bryce-Jones, for example, remained concerned with the lad, and it was a manifestation of that interest which now caught our dark-haired lover with a spoonful of apricot porridge suspended half-way to his mouth. He was squeezing, massaging, stroking, fondling, touching Bobby's shoulder.

Anthony could have cried with frustration. Instead he talked more and faster, and the faster he talked the harder he got, as if his mouth were some sort of tire pump. He feared something horrible might happen and that they would have to take him to the infirmary in front of the whole school with a burst organ.

He left the meal briskly, on his way to science, even cantering once free of the throng, desperate not to encounter his friend yet stopping to look wistfully over his shoulder and disappointed not to find him in pursuit.

Had he caught a fleeting glimpse of Bobby it would have been at the tail of the exodus from lunch, his shoulder under the protective hairy hand of Michael Drury Bryce-Jones, engaged, it would appear, in a serious and engrossing conversation on his way to the prefect's study.

Bryce-Jones had determined at last to ask Bobby about Porter. The more



he had thought about it the more he realized that the battle of which he had been the subject – the battle between God and the Dread Spirit for possession of his soul – was won for a purpose: to purify that soul and arm him for battle. No. he would not come down again to the level of his compatriots. He would no longer be their willing victim. But his mission remained: This boy. This pure and holy vessel of radiant youth. This visitor to their damp and dark land.

In the early hours of that morning he had again been visited and now he knew what he must do. It was painful and nearly more than he could bear to undertake, but his duty lay clearly before him. We must lose our life in order to gain it. We must lose our innocence in order to preserve it! Not lose, but know. That was the paradox which had eluded him and was now clear.

How could he protect the boy when he did not even know the form the enemy might take. No! Vigilance was not enough. He would have to make the boy his own protector. He would have to inoculate him against the virus which grew like a mold at St. Matthews and which threatened his young constitution. Therein was the paradox: to keep Bobby safe he had to hand him that shiny apple and bid him taste of the fruit. Knowledge was sin. But knowledge was also defense! He must leave the garden, but armed, “armed only with a....” What was it? A spear, perhaps, or a bow. No, something else. One had to be armed.

And one could not stay in the garden. This he knew with the certainty of revelation. For the revelation of the night before had been in the form of a dream. It was of Christ on the cross; but it was not Christ at all. It was Bobby Ames, facing the wrong way, his hands tied to the cross piece his legs wrapped around the post as a boy wraps himself around a tree in order to climb it. And then he saw why. A serpent wrapped around the post flicked with its tongue at the hollow of the boy’s rump.

He had discussed it all with Skelton, and in that discussion discovered the last ounce of resolve he required.

For Skelton had asked the question that must not be asked. Might not the lad have fallen already? The thought of it had forced him to seek a chair. He had become pale. Skelton had remarked on it with some concern. Then together they had dismissed the possibility. There had been the aura. Bryce-Jones had seen it clearly. Of course. Of course. He had for a moment forgotten. That settled it. But it was a chastening thought, a motivation.

There was no time to lose. Bryce-Jones recalled, but did not share with Skelton, the other anatomical miracle which he had observed on that same morning and which offered clear proof that the child was no longer wholly a child.

It was in light of these things that the story of the observatory claimed his attention and insisted upon resolution.

Bobby stood by the window in Bryce-Jones' study looking out across the quad, hoping to catch sight of Anthony. Anthony had suggested that he talk with Bryce-Jones about the plot on the part of the Stokers, but Bobby's instincts warned against such a revelation. And he wanted to think only pleasant thoughts. Bryce-Jones was talking of coins. He turned around.

"I believe it's Alexandrian. I can't be sure, however because it's so worn." He handed it over. "The head isn't too bad but the tail is pretty much a loss."

Bobby felt the blood rush to his head and some place else as well. Heads and tails. That was what Anthony called it. They had discovered it that morning. He looked past the coin at the buttons of his jeans to discover how obvious his thoughts might be. But all he saw was the same bulge of buttons which was always there in new jeans, a provocation of tailoring rather than nature.

He dared to think of Anthony's eyelashes and then of his belly-button. He put his tongue in the belly-button and Anthony giggled. Then he....

"Ames? Is something wrong? Ames?"

"What?"

"You seem to have drifted off."

"Oh. I guess I had."

"Daydreaming?"

"I guess so."

"A penny for your thoughts."

"Anthony."

"Oh?"

"My roommate. I was thinking about him just now. He's really a nice person, Michael. I wish you could get to know him."

"Yes, well. Maybe some day. Look, Ames. I have something rather important I want to talk over with you. It's not about coins. Actually it's rather delicate. I won't beat around the bush. I guess that's best."

“Sure.”

Bryce-Jones was going to be stuffy. He could see that at once. It was his worst thing, next to the smile. He wondered if he ever got a hard-on and imagined him running to the cold-water tap to quench it. He grinned and looked away for a moment to regain his composure.

“...but I don’t suppose you know what I mean by vulnerability. After all a boy who has everything, who has health, intelligence, all the good fortunes of parentage, beauty...”

Bobby was sure Michael blushed. He was sure of it. If he had been more in the mood, he might have flirted. He had come to like flirting, even though it was a sin. They called it “tarting” here. He was impatient to be outside again. He felt slightly drugged. Bryce-Jones had a print of two fish in a circle, each biting the other’s tail. They were the same size. He and Anthony were the same size. And between the legs they were the same size too. But Anthony’s hairs would be black and his own were blond. Bryce-Jones was taller. He wondered if it would work with someone taller.

“...aren’t really native here. Like a tropical plant. That’s what I mean by vulnerable. Not that you aren’t in health but that there are things in the air that are foreign to your experience. Did you ever read *War of the Worlds*?”

“I think I saw the movie.”

“Well, then you understand.”

“What?”

“About microbes, germs, things in the air.”

“Oh, sure. Especially in the boys’ WCs. There must be stuff growing there that’s centuries old.”

“Precisely!”

“And I think some boys are naughty in there too, if you know what I mean.”

That was mischief. He did it to make Bryce-Jones turn red. What had gotten into him? He tried to look very sober and concerned. Bryce-Jones appeared to be choking. Then he walked to the window, cleared his throat and went on.

“Surely you’ve noticed how pale most of the boys here are.”

“A lot of them are. I guess it’s the climate.”

“Exactly my point. It’s a damp climate.”

“Even the sheets are damp.”

“What?”

“The sheets are damp.”

“Yes, I guess they are.”

“Until you warm them up.”

“Yes, well, that’s what I mean. If English boys were suddenly exposed to the Mediterranean climate you’ve known, they’d fry up like a plaice.”

“What place?”

“What do you mean what plaice?”

“You said they’d burn up like some place.”

“I meant the fish.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Plaice is a kind of fish. It’s spelled differently.”

“Oh.”

“You see, there’s yet another example! The language! A person who has not grown up with it is at a disadvantage. It’s like the climate, or the microbes I was talking about.”

“Like pants.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Underpants. You call them pants. And you call pants trousers. Actually I never wear trousers. I wear pants. Get it?”

“Bobby, this is serious.”

“What is?”

“What I have to talk with you about.”

“Sorry. You called me Bobby.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“It was a slip. I’m sorry, Ames.”

“I like to have people call me Bobby. Especially my good friends. Anthony calls me Bobby.”

“All right. Bobby.”

“Can I call you Michael?”

“Well, you know how things are.”

“I mean just when we’re together.”

“Yes, I guess so.”

“If you don’t want me to...”

“It’s fine. I’m very fond of you, Bobby. That’s why I want to talk with

you now.”

“OK. Then there’s something special I want to tell you, too. OK?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

Bryce-Jones began to pace. Bobby again looked out the window. Maybe he would tell Bryce-Jones and maybe he wouldn’t. It was nice that he called him by his first name. He wasn’t really a freak. Not inside.

“I’m concerned about your vulnerability, Bobby.”

“What’s that?”

Bryce-Jones looked at him peculiarly, almost sadly. But not sadly. Maybe he was crazy after all.

“Of course you wouldn’t know.”

“I don’t think we’ve had it.”

“Dear God.”

“Are you OK?”

“Sorry, Bobby. It means able to be hurt. Unprotected.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess so.” He thought of the weeks past. The loneliness was just there, just over his shoulder like dark feathers. He had to look away. He hadn’t expected this. Not now, when things were just getting better.

“The soul is fragile, Bobby. In a school like this it must be strong.”

“The soul?”

“You aren’t religious, are you Bobby?”

“I don’t think so. Anthony is. He says his prayers every night.”

“Think of the spirit. The heart.”

“My heart is a milkweed.”

“A milkweed?”

“Anthony says that.”

“Oh.”

“Anthony says sometimes he thinks his heart is going to burst like a milkweed.”

“A milkweed pod?”

“You know when they send out all those little seeds on white parachutes.”

“Yes. Anthony is very poetic. But a milkweed pod may also suffer blight.”

“What’s blight?”

“Disease. It molds and dies before it ripens.”

Bobby looked at Bryce-Jones and then away at the window again.

Suddenly he wanted to be outside. The sun was out. He wanted to run.

"That isn't the way it is."

"I'm afraid it is, Bobby. That's why I am talking to you as I am. The world is not made of the colors in your trunk. It is a greyer place."

"It doesn't have to be."

He felt defiant. He wanted to look Michael in the eyes but there were tears in his own. It angered him. The ugliness was behind. He didn't want it again. He felt an unaccountable sadness for his left sneaker. The lace was broken.

"Not if you are properly prepared. Not if you are armed against the darkness...."

But the darkness was good too. You could know someone without your eyes. You could know Anthony. His breath, the softness of his hair against your shoulder, all the smells and tastes of him. And then the light would come, sometimes soft and pale, now and then bright and warm in the early morning. And you dared look and by a miracle he was there where you had left him, and your heart burst like a milkweed pod and filled the room with soft dust.

"People are not as nice as they should be, not as nice as you are inclined to think them. Especially not here. The microbes, Bobby. Remember the microbes."

"I don't want to talk about this, Michael."

"I'm sure you don't. It's foreign to your nature. And I wish it were not my duty to persist. But I must."

"Why?"

"Because I am fond of you."

"I'm doing OK now."

He made the mistake of looking up. He forgot about the tears. He looked down again feeling like a little boy. Bryce-Jones put his hand on his shoulder. He pulled away.

"I can help you, Bobby."

"I don't need it."

"What about Porter?"

"I don't know. What about him?"

"You know."

"No I don't."

“Tell me, Bobby. I can see it in your eyes. Get the ugly thing out so that we can slay it.”

He took Bobby by both shoulders and held him, harder than he had meant to, hard enough so that Bobby winced.

“Let me alone.”

“It’s a beast, Bobby. The beast of the darkness. Together we can slay it.”

“Is that what you want too?”

“To slay the beast?”

“No, what he wanted!”

“Who?”

“Porter!”

“Oh my God!”

Bobby started to the door. Bryce-Jones gripped his arm. He pulled away and stood, his back against the wall, ready to defend himself. His eyes were wide and frightened. Bryce-Jones stopped, his mouth agape.

“You’re all sick. The whole school is sick.”

“No, Bobby. Not that. It’s not that.”

“Yes it is.”

Bryce Jones turned away and let out a low groan. The door closed behind him. He listened to the quick creaking of the stairs, then the outer door, then silence.

## 11. A Geography Lesson

I will not try the reader's patience with a rendering of the conversation which occurred that evening in Hector Skelton's study. Circumspection abounded. Skelton inferred as much as was directly told him, comforted where comfort was needed, reassured where his protege wanted reassurance, heard of the indelicacies on the part of Rodney Porter and concluded in behalf of poor Bryce-Jones that Bobby Ames had been traumatized into a state of paranoia. How else could such noble intentions be misconstrued to their opposite? It was a great comfort to St. Michael to have the matter so clearly interpreted. There is nothing like an enemy when it comes to sorting through complex matters. How much better simply to put the evil over there, the good here close at hand and get on with the work of putting the world right!

Skelton agreed with great circumspection that Porter must be punished. Not within the codes of the school lest the notoriety draw compromising attention to our hero. It would have to be unofficial and even out of sight but one which would leave no doubt in the mind of the offender as to its origin. The reader will appreciate the labor of indirection which such a conversation required. It took them well into the evening hours and cost the expenditure of some coal and a little sherry.

If Bryce-Jones was inclined to brood, our young hero was not. At least not for long and not over such an encounter as we recently witnessed in Bryce-Jones study. Yes, perhaps he had been unfair to his would-be benefactor. He had flirted. That was true. But Bryce-Jones had changed the rules. It had been a tiresome lesson and had touched finally upon things which he did not wish to share, certainly not with Bryce-Jones. The reader surely can recall occasions upon which he has embraced a ready pretext for ending a game, an argument, a conversation simply because the labor of decorous conclusion seemed burdensome. Such was Bobby's choice.

If it seems unfair that so finely wrought an architecture of purpose as Michael's should collapse in such a young and petulant breath, then so be it. Bobby is in this the innocent which Michael would have him. Such are the ironies in which life abounds.

While the coal fire flickered that evening on third Sprinkles another more



ardent flame burned on the floor beneath. The two boys lay on the rug beside their bed, their geographies open, copying out on side by side maps the major natural resources of the African continent. That Anthony was left handed allowed them to work more closely than otherwise they might have. Their feet, oblivious to the cerebation occurring above, behaved shamelessly. Anthony made a noise of perturbation, flipped to the index, then back to the map and observed.

“There’s nothing here for Lesotho.”

“Probably they don’t have one.”

“They have to have one. It’s this stupid book. Lesotho isn’t even in the index. I think this book came over with William the Conqueror.”

“It would have to be written in French then.”

“Probably it’s that gold colored country, there in the middle of South Africa.”

“Anthony?”

“Huh?”

“What is an entitlement?”

“Well, an entitlement is something that’s going to happen to a fellow. It could be good or bad. Like a weekend holiday or a trip to Tuppington-on-Smart. Or it could be a punishment. Like candy-sticking. You can buy and sell them at market like the seats and stuff.”

“I found this note crumpled in the chapel that said some boy’s name and that they had the entitlement.”

“Who is they?”

“Whoever wrote it, I guess.”

“What was the boy’s name?”

“It was Wells.”

“Oh.”

“Well?”

“Wells has a candy-sticking coming and someone has bought the right to do it.”

“What’s a candy-sticking?”

“A caning.”

“They still do that here?”

“Not officially. But everyone knows about it. It’s part of the code.”

“I don’t think I like the code.”

“My father says it’s like the real world. He says there are codes in business that don’t have anything to do with the law at all. And in society too.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Like who talks to whom and who can join the club and who can’t and how you do things in business. I mean you don’t turn a friend in. Do you? Even out there. That’s what my father says. Englishmen have to stick together.”

“Well I’m not English.”

“I wish I knew who wrote it. Poor Wells. He’s had a rotten time of it.”

Bobby kept it to himself that when Mason threw the note on the ground he had been crying. He also kept it to himself that he had gotten the note from Naismith. There was something in all of this that he wanted to follow on his own. Maybe he could help. Somehow. And if he could then he might have two more friends. And if in the process he made Anthony proud of him... It was still vague, but there was the glimmer of an idea.”

“How come Wells has this candy-striping coming?”

“Candy-sticking.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you said candy-striping. It’s what your bum looks like afterwards. That’s why it’s called that.”

“Like a candy cane?”

“Right.”

“Sick.”

“Wells carved his name in the copper beech over by the pond and Codwiller found it. So he got put down for the punishment.”

“Why didn’t Codwiller just do it.”

“That would be against the code. Codwiller has the entitlement but he can’t exercise it for two weeks. Sometimes it’s months. Sometimes never.

Once a senior boy got walloped for something he did as a prep. The entitlement can stay in the market for as long as a boy is at the school. But usually an expert will buy a candy-sticking.”

“What’s an expert?”

“Someone who gets off on it. Someone like Porter.”

“Porter is really sick, isn’t he?”

“You said it. Anyway, that’s why it’s called what it’s called. An expert is

someone who lays the cane on perfectly so that the kid looks like he sat on a hot grill. People actually come to watch when an expert does it, if you can believe it.”

“Do you think Porter bought Wells?”

“The note sounds like someone wants to sell the entitlement. What did it say?”

“It said we own the entitlement.”

“We. Hmmm. I don’t know. Maybe someone’s formed a company. They do it sometimes. Once a company bought up almost the whole pawn row in market. They couldn’t get queen’s pawn or King’s rook’s pawn and the thing fell apart.”

“Why would they want it?”

“The people who sit in the board chairs run things. You know that. Look at Bryce-Jones.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I wouldn’t mind having a friend like Bryce-Jones with all that’s going on around here.”

“You remember you asked me about Porter the other morning?”

“Yeah.”

“I think he almost got me?”

“What!?”

“We went to the observatory and he started beating off. He wanted me to do it too.”

“Did you?”

“Anthony!”

“Sorry. Well, what happened?”

“I threw a fit. I started yelling and he beat it out of there like I’d turned into a werewolf.”

“You should never have gone there.”

“Tell me more about the stokers.”

“They’re a group of fifth formers. Porter’s one of them. And Naismith, Blake, Summers. You know. You always see them together.”

“Why are they called that?”

“Because they all smoke and spend a lot of time in the basement of Trump House where the coal stoker is. That’s the smoking place.”

“Oh.”

“Well, there’s this tradition. Every year the uppers try to score on the preps. It goes way back. They catch you and pants you and then write something on your bum. Usually the year they go on to university. It is in this indelible dye that takes forever to get off. So when you take a shower everyone knows you’ve been scored on and gives you a hard time.”

“It sounds pretty stupid.”

“Stupid but innocent enough. Enter the Stokers. The game changes.”

“How?”

“They’re really scoring.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.”

“You mean...?”

“Yup.”

“Wait a minute.”

“It’s true, Bobby. They’ve scored on about twelve of us. They got Wells.”

“Wells!?”

“All five of them. Mason told me. Wells won’t talk about it.”

“Jesus!”

“That’s why I was worried about Porter.”

“How come he told Mason?”

“They’re best friends.”

“Like us?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll bet they are. Poor Wells.”

“So that’s why it’s a good thing to have a friend like Bryce- Jones. I don’t think they’d dare touch you. Even Porter. He was probably trying to see how far you’d go.”

“That’s probably what Bryce-Jones was trying to tell me today. Poor Bryce-Jones.”

“Do you think he knows?”

“About the stokers? I don’t know. I can’t believe he would. He’s so... I don’t know. I don’t think he could know that kind of thing. I think if he knew what we did he’d have a nervous breakdown. He’s weird that way.”

“What did he say?”

“Stuff about germs and hothouses and rare plants. I think it was a lecture

on self-abuse.”

“Well at least you’re not guilty of that.”

Bobby studied the profile which had become his favorite text. There was a flush of color in the cheeks. Anthony blinked.

“Once I was.”

“When.”

“During gymnastics class, watching you on the parallel bars. You know, you’re really good.”

“Thanks.”

“Anyway, every time you’d swing your legs I could see your underpants. You know I have this underpants thing.”

“I just hope I’m the only one who knows.”

“OK. Well, you’d swing and I’d lay into the railing and pretty soon the gun went off and I had to hightail it to the locker room and change my shorts.”

“You never told me that.”

“Well, it’s not the kind of thing you tell people.”

“But I’m not people.”

“Well, now I told you. Anyway, who are you to talk about telling people things?”

“I tell you everything.”

“Not about the stokers you didn’t.”

“That’s different.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s ugly.”

“And I’m a hothouse plant that has to be protected from ugly things?”

“Huh?”

“The League for the Protection of American Hothouse Plants.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, the lecture St. Michael gave me on rare and exotic plants. Like I’m some sort of night-blooming cereus.”

“That’s great.”

“It is not. It’s patronizing. It stinks.”

“No, I mean about the night blooming cereus.”

“Huh?”

“You know, coming into bloom in the middle of the night.”

“Oh. Look, I’m trying to be serious.”

“OK.”

“Look, Anthony, I’ve seen stuff before. I mean really bad stuff. Really sick stuff. And I survived. See? Here I am. I can take it.”

“What awful stuff?”

“You’re too young.”

“What?!”

“Your ears are too tender.”

“No, tell me.”

“There, I got you.”

“Huh?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“What’s what you mean?”

“That’s what you and Bryce-Jones are doing to me. And I’m saying, no, tell me. And you’re saying, No, you’re a hothouse plant.”

“I never called you a hothouse plant. Anyway, they’re called glass houses.”

“Well, people who live in them shouldn’t throw stones.”

“I didn’t tell you because of us, not because of you. Maybe I didn’t tell you because of me.”

“Why because of you?”

“Well because if they hurt you I’d have to kill all of them and I’m not big enough to do it.”

“That’s a non sequitur.”

“What’s a non sequitur?”

“It’s one of St. Michael’s favorite expressions. It means it isn’t logical. It doesn’t follow.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Look, not telling me doesn’t protect me. I mean if I’d known then I wouldn’t have ended up with Porter in the observatory.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I could have gotten you know what.”

“Buggered.”

“Buggered.”

“Do you think you’d ever want to. I mean with someone else.”

“What, get buggered?”

“Well, not that word, but you know...”

“Screwed, cornholed.”

“Cornholed?”

“That’s what they called it in one school. It was in Tunis. The older boys did it to the younger boys. All the time. I mean it was a national pastime. I guess they got used to it.”

“Maybe they liked it.”

“I don’t think so. And in case you’re wondering, the answer is no, I didn’t. And I don’t think it would be fun.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Well, you asked.”

“I know.”

“There’s some secret.”

“Not now, Anthony. I love you.”

“I know.”

“I say it like a prayer all day long.”

“So do I.”

“Really?”

“Cross my heart.”

Anthony turned and they entwined in the way that had become natural for them, as natural as it can for anyone on a thin rug on a hard floor and with that extra arm in the way.

“Let’s go to bed.”

“What about Lesotho?”

“Screw Lesotho.”

“What about *The Mayor of Casterbridge*?”

“Tomorrow.”

“When tomorrow? It’s first class.”

“Anthony, how can you talk about *The Mayor of Casterbridge* at a time like this?”

“OK, let’s do it and then we can read to one another.”

“OK.”

But when they got into the bed Bobby couldn’t do it, try as Anthony might to arouse him. Ghosts, he said. So he did Anthony instead and that satisfied both of them. Then he snuggled close, his head on Anthony’s chest and,

instead of the *Mayor of Casterbridge* Anthony read from his beloved Keats:

...who of men can tell  
That flowers would bloom, or that green fruit would swell  
To melting pulp, that fish would have bright mail,  
The earth its dower of river, wood and vale,  
The meadows runnels, runnels pebble-stones,  
The seed its harvest, or the lute its tones,  
Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet  
If human souls did never kiss and greet?



## 12. The Substitute

At chapel the next morning Bobby was vigilant. His seat was near enough to Mason's so that he could keep an eye peeled. The exit for both of them led in front of Naismith and he was sure that it would be at this intersection that the next note would be passed. He was right. He saw Mason stop, look at Naismith, then at his hand and walk out. Once free of the throng. Mason unrolled the note and read it. He stood there for a while staring at it and then, as before, crumpled it and dropped it on the cinder path. Again he made for the woods.

Bobby knew why and thought this time not to intrude on his privacy. It touched him now to think of lovers and it pained him to think of Mason's suffering. He was going to take the candy- sticking instead of Wells. That was what it was all about. Because he loved him.

Once Mason was out of sight Bobby walked over casually and retrieved the note.

### HIM OR YOU 7:00 THE OBSERVATORY

Yes, that was it. Or was it? Bobby felt a chill at the back of his head and an ache. Oh God! Of course! They had had Wells. Anthony said so. They wanted Mason. And they knew they could get Mason through Wells. But how would they know a thing like that? It offended Bobby's sensibility to think that they should have such intimate knowledge, that love itself should not be immune from their smutty politics. Might they not also know of Anthony? But it wasn't even the knowing: it was the turning of that knowledge to account. It was their cynical assurance that Mason would sacrifice himself. Would he? Quiet little Mason with the birthmark on his neck and the pigeon-toed walk. Would he be so noble?

He felt a chill at the thought of it. The poking and the pawing. His helplessness. The hands bigger than his own small hands. Maybe someday he would tell Anthony. But you couldn't tell that on your mother, not even on his mother. How she fussed over his looks, dressed him up, showed him off and then presented him as an entertainment to her rapacious guests. A little boy doll to have on a lap, to caress, to kiss with beer-stale breath, to

fondle. And when he would resist, would push the hands away, or even make so much as a whimper she would take him to her cabin and shake him until the teeth rattled in his mouth. And if then he was intractable, would not be a good boy, would not treat her guests politely, then he could go below.

Below was a place you could sit but not stand, where the small auxiliary engine was, where it was dark and things that you couldn't see scurried in the damp air. And so he would dry his tears and she would be nice to him, tell him yet again how she depended on the friendship of these people. And what was really so bad in what they did? She would never let them really hurt him. Surely he knew that.

And it was true. Everything she said was inscrutably true. Even sending him below was true because there was no place else. Not on a boat. When there were guests even her cabin became a public place. And his small place was really no more than a couple of low bunks in the bow which guests retired to for more intimate conversation. And at a party there couldn't be a sulker. How could there in such a small place where a frown was like a fog?

And it was true about her protecting him as well. She didn't let them do what they sometimes wanted to do and tried to do but was very hard to do on a small boat. She didn't let them do what the stokers did to Wells and now were going to do to Mason.

He would have liked to tell Anthony; it would have cleared it up somehow to have told Anthony. It would have gotten it on a shelf or in a trunk. But he could not bring himself to an indictment. There was more at stake, even now.

Something he had missed. A failure on his part to understand why she had allowed them to do it, why there had been so little love and it had cost so much. Now it was the stokers. It was the same thing. Poor Mason. It made him mad.

He walked to the bridge where he and Anthony had sat and watched the dark water. The idea had formed itself in his mind even as he thought about other things. It had begun to take on its own life and he observed with a mixture of excitement and fear. Would he really do it? Really offer himself for Mason? That was what he contemplated. But why? That was what eluded him. For Wells and Mason? For their friendship? For the friendship of the other boys? Or for something just beyond his reach in the past?

He had thought at first that he might tell Bryce-Jones. But that would be the worst thing he could do. Then he would have broken the code and he

would be forever an outsider. And he had thought of talking to Mason, of offering to help somehow. Maybe the two of them together. Could what?

But Mason shared the opinion of the others – maybe the right opinion – that Bobby Ames was to be avoided. No, if he was going to act, it would be alone. If.

He put the note in his pocket and walked back toward the school.

Bobby spent a troubled and restless afternoon. The worst of it was that he was rude to Mr. Truebooth, his maths teacher, and made to spend the hour when he had hoped to take a walk with Anthony, doing extra problems. It was not in character for Bobby to be rude and in another boy the indiscretion might have been excused. But Bobby Ames was a favorite of Hector Skelton, and Henry Truebooth as we have learned was quite ready to find Skelton or any of his entourage at fault. The only good of it was that Martin and Wells were both in the class and reported to the gang later that it was unfair. Anthony, hearing their expression of sympathy, felt hopeful. Bobby, of course, did not hear it and sat for the hour in a dark stuffy carrel trying to imagine heroism but remembering down below.

The math problems were simple and he did them quickly. Then he set to doodling in the margins of his geometry. He lay his head beside the paper and peered over the landscape of his designs. As the margins filled with dark lines and his curlicues devoured their interstices, he slipped slowly into his own dark. His eyes closed and the pencil fell loose between his fingers.

He was someone else. A boy still but not a familiar boy nor in a familiar place. The strangeness was in everyone and everything. He walked among others who had business and purpose. They moved from place to place. He meandered or stood still. There was a great deal of noise. He wanted to find a door and began to walk around the periphery of the room. Soon he realized that the scene was repeating itself. He had already made the circuit. There were no doors.

It must have been that his panic became apparent, although he had been at pains to hide it, for another boy came up to him and spoke. He couldn't hear what he said and leaned closer. This time their faces nearly touched. Still he could not hear what the boy said nor did he care to. He leaned closer and kissed the boy's upper lip. He could not believe that he had done it and drew back at once. The boy did as well. Then he recognized him. It was Anthony.

He was at pains to explain that he had not meant to draw back. It was his first time, he said. Anthony insisted that it was he who had drawn back and begged that he not be misunderstood. He had liked being kissed. But that was not enough. Bobby – now clearly it was he and had been all the time – was sure Anthony disbelieved. How could he persuade him? Yet he was persuaded.

He awoke. He felt a strange exhilaration which belied the stuffiness of the room and the drone of whispers in the carrel behind him. But why hadn't they kissed then in the dream? Why had they talked? He felt cheated.

He had overslept the hour and was already late for the next class. When Mr. Phillips asked for his reason he simply told the truth. It was so disarmingly simple and the poor lad so clearly unraveled that Mr. Phillips simply handed him the exercise and went on with his explanation. It would not, in any case, have required much of an explanation for Mr. Phillips to forgive Bobby.

Anthony had a cello lesson on Thursdays and then usually had dinner with Signor Ceci along with the other pupils. Bobby had forgotten and when he returned to the room so in need of his friend, it was a shock to see the cello case gone and to be reminded that he would be alone for even longer. He went downstairs and sat in a chair, looking out the window. Mrs. Grundle who was prescient about moods, saw him there and asked him to help her in the kitchen. He knew it was a ruse, but he was grateful. Adam Spooner was playing a game of solitaire in the game room and he joined them. Adam was Bobby's favorite mouse. In point of fact he looked a little like one. Bobby smiled at him with approval and Adam who melted for a smile took his hand.

Well, he had two friends anyway. And if one was only ten and still peed his pants, well so what.

They made welsh cookies which were really griddle fried scones with currants. But Mrs. Grundle came from Swansea and wanted the boys to know that other good things came from there as well.

When they were done they stacked the cookies on a platter and took them out to the game room for tea. It was nearly four o'clock. Many of the other boys were back and the cookies briefly became the center of attention.

"Nice cookies, Clara," a boy said. Other boys extended the compliment, their mouths full. She said that Ames and Spooner made them. Small took one out of his mouth, grabbed his throat and fell to the floor in a death agony.

The boys laughed.

“Well done, Ames.” Swann said. “But what if one of US had gotten it!”

That got a laugh. The mice were more appreciative, of course. It would have been better if they hadn’t been. Justin Pilgrim asked Bobby when he was going to finish reading them the Land of Oz and he said maybe tomorrow. He had to do something tonight.

He went to the room and looked out the window. He could see the top of the old observatory past the infirmary. It gave him a start. He was actually going to do it. But what? Just go there? “Ok you guys. That’s it. Drop your guns and put your hands on your heads.” He shook his head.

The boys tolerated him at dinner now, more for Anthony than himself. He went to the table where Martin and Wells sat and poked at his potatoes. Wells put down his glass of mysterious pink juice and looked at him.

“Truebooth didn’t play fair today. Ames. It was a bum rap. We were all talking.”

“What did he have you copy out?”

“Eight of the extra work problems. It was easy.”

That was probably the wrong thing to say. Most things that occurred to him were the wrong things to say.

“Yeah, well it was still unfair. I think he’s out for you.”

“I hope not.”

“He’s like that. He gets on a fellow.”

“Yeah.”

And that was the extent of the conversation. Wells and Martin talked about the game with Pulhaven and then about the weekend. Wells said he was going out to Haltmere Hall with Mason. Say “Hi” to Uncle Ned for me, Martin said. Why don’t you come out, Wells said. Can’t, game, he said. Oh, of course. Wells said. Bobby had heard Anthony speak of Uncle Ned. He wondered if they would ever be invited there. Some kind of castle away from the school. Parties, croquet, costumes. It was all a muddle in his head right now. There were other things. Like taking Mason’s place. Could he really do that? Suddenly he had to pee.

He finished his meal and, after stopping at the toilet, walked outside. He still hadn’t decided for sure. Perhaps there was another way. He walked down by the pond and skipped the few stones he could find along the edge.

He would bluff, he decided. He would just walk in on them and say the

game was over. He would say he was going to leave the school anyway and didn't care what happened. As a last gesture he was going to turn the stokers in. As a service to society. He was on his way to Algeria. His mother had planned a caravan into the desert. He was needed to keep the camel-boys in line. Of course if they swore on a bible to reform their ways, then he might reconsider. They would also have to give him the entitlement on Wells.

He looked at his watch, the one that the astronaut had given him when he and his Dad were guests at the Kennedy space center. Or was it the one Lester gave him if he would keep his mouth shut about the Portugese blond. It said six thirty. He got up. His seat was wet from the grass. How could you do a rescue with a wet seat? Oh no. he said. It was an audible whine. It startled him. He was scared. He tried to think of the other times he had been scared and how everything had turned out all right.

It was a gamble. He would still have Anthony. All that could happen was that they would.... But Anthony said they wouldn't dare with Bryce-Jones looking out for him. But he had told Bryce-Jones to take a flying leap. Oh dear. He flipped another stone at the water. It skipped four times. Four times was pretty good. With these stones it was. He dug among the pebbles with his toe. A really flat one might do six or seven.

Language is remarkable for its power to inspire, inform, persuade, delight, dismay, for its richness of ambiguity and its subtlety of nuance, for its sheer beauty. And yet occasionally it is without any of these virtues, as bald and bleak as a flattened landscape. The four words on that first note, passed to him but days before in chapel, had left Drew Mason without will or hope.

They might as well have pushed him from a precipice. His sense of imminent ruin could not have been greater. Nor the sense of weightlessness which he felt.

Three weeks earlier Tommy Wells had admitted under interrogation by Codwiller to having carved his name on the trunk of the copper beech. In fact as everyone knew, that was a lie. It was Mason who had carved the name, not to desecrate the tree but to honor his beloved friend. There was nothing for it but that Wells should take the rap. Nor at first were they worried. Together they could buy the entitlement and be done with it. None, but none could wish Tommy Wells ill. Mason was sure of that. The senior boys favored him. He was ball boy for the tennis team. All who knew him loved him. There was no gentler boy in the prep class. But somehow the

entitlement had gotten lost at market and Mason hadn't been able to unearth it. Until now.

Mason had stayed up with Wells all night the time the Stokers had done him. It had been an awful time. Wells wouldn't talk. He just whimpered.

He didn't want to be touched. It was awful, and even then, sitting there, helpless, he had known that he would be next. It was as certain as anything.

And now here it was. There was no way out. He would have to go with them. He would take anything before allowing them to hurt his friend again.

But some day he would kill them, too.

As he had expected, the second note came. He was to pay the price.

Wells wouldn't have let him, of course. He would have taken the candy sticking, horrible as Porter would have made it.

At exactly six o'clock he opened the door of the observatory and walked in. They were sitting there: Naismith, Porter. Cardin, Staples and Blake.

Summers was absent. Porter looked very bad indeed. His mouth was black and blue, there were stitches in his lip and he had a black eye. It gave Mason some pleasure to observe this. He had heard that Porter had had a run-in with some farm lads. Obviously it hadn't slowed him down very much though.

Here he was, grinning even under the mess that was his face. There was a little Indian rug laid out and incense was burning. A tear formed in the corner of Mason's eye and ran down his cheek.

No words were exchanged. There weren't any which he would give them.

Nor any more tears if he could help it. It was eerie that none spoke. It made it the more frightening. Porter started to undo his belt and he pushed him away. He undressed himself. They took off their pants as well. He tried to look away from fear and embarrassment. He was still a little boy and they were definitely not. Once he had seen another prep named Brierly in the shower with a boner and that was the picture his memory had called upon in trying to understand what it might have been like for Wells. But now he knew different and, try as he might, he could not stop the tears. He looked down at the floor.

Blake pointed to the rug and he froze. No, he couldn't do it. How had he gotten this far? He started to scream but they had anticipated this and quickly stuffed his underpants in his mouth. It was at that moment the door opened and Bobby Ames walked in.

He didn't look fierce or even very threatening. In fact he appeared to be

quite frightened, as well he might. He looked around at the group and cleared his throat.

"I'm the substitute."

"You're the what?"

"Are you on drugs, Ames."

"Jesus, what's up with this kid?"

"What the hell are you doing here, Ames."

"I know about the tradition. About the tatooing the numbers. You can do me instead of Mason."

"Tatooing numbers? Come on Ames."

"Shut up. Cardin."

"What do you mean?"

"Just shut-up."

It was Porter who got things quieted down. Ames looked at him. The look on Porter's face was different from the others. It was neither confident nor challenging. Ames thought he saw what it was and so he gambled.

"Tell them. Porter."

"Tell them what."

"Tell them it's a good deal. Me for Mason. I'm a prep too."

"Not me, Porter. Count me out."

"Me too."

"Look. Ames. You're messing up a nice party. How about taking your pretty little ass back to Mrs. Grundle."

"Tell them, Porter."

"What is this, Porter. You and Ames got something going?"

"Shut up, Cardin."

"Why should I shut up?"

"Who bought the entitlement?"

"You did."

"Then shut up. OK, Mason, get out of here."

Mason pulled his pants on, spit out the underpants that were still in his mouth and ran out the door. Bobby was a little disappointed. He might have protested, or said thanks or something.

"Do you mean we get to do Ames instead, Porter? I thought you said he was off limits. After what happened to you. Look I don't want any part..."

"Just shut up, Cardin! OK. what's the deal, Ames?"



"I want the entitlement."

"It costs more than some purple dye."

"What does it cost?"

"Twelve of the best."

"Porter!"

"The fellows said it was never more than six."

"The fellows were wrong."

He had to clear his throat. It had broken on "fellows". Naismith and Staples laughed. He turned on them and glared. Then he looked back at Porter.

"All right."

"You think that's fair, Ames? Twelve."

"Yes."

"You'll tell St. Michael it was fair."

"Yes."

"Staples, can you get into the gymnasium?"

"Anytime."

"OK. now."

"Porter, you're bonkers."

"Just stay here Ames." Porter took the others outside and, though he could not hear their conversation, he could tell it was heated.

Bobby was right in assuming that Porter's black eye was a consequence of the last episode in this same building. In fact Porter could not have sworn to an absolute connection. He had been mugged by a group of townies. But he had not provoked them and it was clearly a setup. They had been waiting for him. Had Porter guessed that Bryce-Jones arranged the encounter, he would not have been far off the mark. Now the question that the stokers discussed heatedly was the question of Bobby Ames. Cardin and Blake were looking forward to sticking Mason. He was a good looking boy and Blake had had a thing for him for some time now. It was a bad trade, they said. There was no question of sticking Ames. He was crown property, as Naismith put it. But candy-sticking him they could get away with. After all, he was the one making the deal. The argument was whether it should be done now or advertised. As Blake put it, "It could be the event of the decade. We could make a fortune."

Porter thought not. Too many people would get in the way. A bird in the

hand, he argued.

Naismith countered, “A hand on the bird is worth two in the bush.”

Porter said what had been on his mind. “I didn’t get my face rearranged for wearing a green silk scarf.” – the pretext the townies had offered – “It was Ames. I owe him. We’ll get Mason later.”

The others assented. They easily agreed on the gymnasium. It was the traditional place. They led. Ames followed.

There are times when a reader’s judgment as well as an author’s dictates restraint. Such is the moment at hand. Let us spare our valiant young hero attentions which might strike him in his present state of mind as insufficiently outraged, perhaps even prurient. He would not have us see him shamed, for he is proud. He would not have us hear, for surely he will cry out against the pain and the humiliation of his torment. Boys are not given twelve of the best. It isn’t done. Four or six perhaps. In the most extreme case, eight. But never twelve.

So let us retire to a distance, perhaps to that quiet place beside the pond where happier things began and where surely we will again discover our hero, for where else might he go after such travail, but to this quiet and hidden place and there sleep and dream beneath the pain of his bravery of his beloved Anthony.

## 13. A Plan is Hatched

At the same time as our young hero walked into the observatory and set poor Drew Mason free, the rest of Martin's crowd gathered to discuss the most recent events in the saga of the stokers and the preps. Muggeridge, O'Leary and Tully were the latest casualties. The stories they told were quite different. Tully, who was best liked, was most believed; but in fact he said little, for it was an experience he would sooner forget than cast in the annals of St. Matthews legend. The few things he did say were to his friend Anthony Parker and some of those were in tearful confidence. Anthony told what he thought his friend would not mind having told and summarized the rest where that seemed the best narrative device.

Swann brought up the subject of Porter's accident. It was known that he had had a run-in with several farm lads from Tuppington-on-Smart but not why. Small, whose sources of information were his only social credential, remarked that it was a setup, a very well covered one. Bryce-Jones' name was mentioned but without certainty.

Martin, Wells and Parker were there as well. Wells sat on the window seat gazing across the lawn for a sign of Mason. His friend had behaved mysteriously for the last two days and he was worried that some fault of his own lay at the root of Mason's mood.

Swann sewed a rugger patch on the sleeve of a new shirt. The stitches were very long and amateurish. It was his first experience of sewing.

Small picked his nose.

Martin shined his shoes for the next day's honors exercises, being the only one in the room with aspirations that those shoes might be publicly observed walking to the podium. Across from him, sitting on Wells' bed, Anthony sketched one of Martin's shirts hanging on the back of a chair.

"I wish they'd broken a few of Porter's scorching ribs, as well." said Swann.

"It doesn't change much."

"What do you mean, Martin?"

"I mean it's anonymous. Anyone can have his own guess as to who and why. It's not like a public denunciation of the whole filthy thing, is it?"

"Well, it's something. I'll bet it's a while before Porter messes around

with another prep.” Swann had hoped they might have a little victory gloat before getting so rudely back to reality.

Wells was not outspoken on the subject of the stokers. His own experience had left him more ashamed than outraged and that discovery perplexed him. But Mason had told him he must not feel that way, and so from time to time he tried to get angry.

“I wish they had killed him.... I do.”

“We know, Wells.”

“No you don’t.... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. I mean that it has to be a message, Martin. It has to be!”

“That’s what I think. It’s like the scorching Mafia when they hit someone. No one knows who does the hitting but the guy who gets hit gets the message.”

“I’ll wager they aren’t wearing party hats and popping favors in the butt room right now,” Wells said. “Bloody morgue ...”

“Hope they choke on their scorching cigars...”

“They’ve got something to think about...”

“I say we’ve got a day. Maybe two or three. Then, kathump!”

They looked at Martin. He was determined, it seemed, to be pessimistic.

“What’s kathump?” asked Wells. “Kathump is not bang.”

“It’s the sound an elephant makes falling from a cherry tree into a vat of honey.”

“Very funny, Small.”

“Well what is it,” Wells insisted.

“It’s something big and quiet. An underwater volcano maybe, no one notices except the fish.”

“And we’re the fish?”

“Damned right!”

“Well if I’m a fish I’m a bloody killer shark. They mess with me and get some blood with their kathump!”

“Right, Swann. Yours.”

Wells got up from the window seat and picked up Martin’s cricket bat.

“I think Martin’s right. I don’t think they frighten very well. I think it will just make them mad.”

“Mad?”

“I mean about losing face.”

“Porter just lost part of his, didn’t he?”

“You can make a joke of it, Swann, but what I say is true.” It was the combination of Wells’ experience, his reserve on the subject and his deep, dark eyes and the soft intensity of his voice that allowed him the privilege of this sobriety.

“I don’t feel like a shark,” Anthony said. “I feel like ... I don’t know, a sole or something.” He looked back at his drawing. It was pretty good, but the shadows seemed to come out rather than go back. He was sorry Bobby wasn’t there.

“Why do they say that fish swim in schools? Why not companies or flocks or something?”

“Because only schools are stupid enough. A nice big old barracuda comes up alongside and bang!” Swann clapped his hands for emphasis. “The other fish blink their fishy eyes and swim along. Just like us.”

“Well we’re good at talking.”

“I, friend, think Parker could tell us a few things if he wanted to.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Small.”

“That’s not the way I heard it.”

“Heard what?”

“I’ve heard it said by them as knows that Porter undid a few buttons.”

“Yeah, his own.”

“Do you know about this Parker?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.”

“Oh, come on Parker, don’t be coy. This is scorching serious business.”

“Well, Ames told me something about a run-in with Porter. But not like Small says. Your mind is putrid, Small. He never touched Bobby.”

“Bobby?”

“Ames. You know who I mean.”

“Bobby?”

Wells turned from the window.

“Stuff it, Small. Just because you don’t have a friend in the whole school. Go on, Parker. What happened?”

“Porter took him to the observatory. It was a tour of the school. Then he took down his trousers and started to. You know.”

“Beat off!”

“Yes. And he said things to Bo... to Ames and Ames scared him so that

he ran away.”

“How did he scare him?”

“It doesn’t matter. And don’t make any jokes, Small.”

“Why can’t you tell us, Parker?”

“Because you don’t like Ames.”

“I don’t dislike him all that much.”

“Let’s just drop it. He scared him. that’s all. But I don’t know how anybody would know about it. And what it has to do with Porter’s face getting smashed up.”

“Elementary my dear Parker. Bryce-Jones found out about it and decided that Porter needed a lesson. Bryce-Jones doesn’t like people messing about with his little baseball player.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Don’t. It doesn’t really make any difference, does it!”

“Yes, it does.” Martin put his shoe-shine kit away in its fawn-colored string bag and stuffed it into the bottom of his pajamas drawer. “If Ames is protected others can be protected as well.”

“I’ve never noticed Bryce-Jones stretching his gabardine over you, Martin. Or any of the rest of us, for that matter.”

“You know what I mean. There are umbrellas under umbrellas.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve never seen an umbrella under an umbrella.”

“Say what you mean, Martin.”

“I know what he means and I vote no.”

“Pig teats! What’s going on here? What the hell are we voting for?”

“Martin wants to bring Ames into the group as protection. Right Martin?”

“Well, in a manner of speaking.”

“You don’t like him but you’ll use him!” Parker felt tears rush to his eyes and it made him all the angrier. “You know, Martin, when you start sounding like an MP it makes me nauseous. You can’t diddle people around like that. It stinks.”

Wells, who had returned his attention to the stretch of lawn below the window hoping for the appearance of his friend, turned now and looked at Anthony. He felt a new sympathy. ‘I would feel that way about Drew as well, he thought!’

“OK.” Martin said, “but we need a plan of some sort. Tell us about the chart again, Wells.”

“It’s on the back of Blue Boy, in Summers’ room. They have everyone’s name on it. Even yours, Small.”

“And stars.”

“Yes.”

“One star for each ...”

“Jesus, Small. Sorry Wells.”

“It’s OK. Yes, Small, one star for each. And a polaroid for the record.”

“You’re kidding of course.”

“No.”

“Are you serious, Wells?”

“I’m serious. They showed me the picture.”

“Well, that’s it.”

“What’s it, Martin?”

“The evidence. The fatal flaw. The Achilles heel. We have to get the polaroids.”

“You might as well break into the Tower of London as get into Trump House as a prep. And then into Summers’ room? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’ve got a plan.” All eyes turned to Swann.

“My mother always said to be careful of small boy with big plans.”

“Shut up, Small.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Someone goes up to Summers room and talks with him about something. We could decide on something. That’s not important. Then when he’s not looking, the guy filches the scorching polaroids and makes his getaway.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that.”

“That’s not a plan, Swann, it’s a TV show.”

“How do we get someone in without his risking his ass?”

“Very funny, Small.”

“He does risk his ass. That’s what gets him in. He lets Summers think he’s pulled it off himself. You know. Come on up and see my etchings. That sort of thing. Then we create a diversion.”

“Someone could deliver a package.”

“Yeah, a bomb!”

“Will someone put Small in his cage.”

“You don’t just walk up to the second floor of Trump House. You wouldn’t make it across the front hall. That place is a bleeding fortress!”

There was a silence. Then Martin stood up and stroked his chin in a way he had and which he knew annoyed his friends. He paced to the door and back.

“Well, Sherlock?”

“I think I’ve got it. We set off the fire alarm! There has to be a master system somewhere.”

“There is. It’s in the Rector’s pantry. I saw the fire department messing with it one day during prep tea.”

“So we pull it off on a Tuesday during tea. Mason is a bloody genius on electric stuff. He could do that.”

“But we don’t even know what doing it means. You’ve probably got to cut wires and throw switches and stuff like that. You don’t just walk in and say. Oh, a model 3000. Just the thing. Let’s see now, here’s the perambulator...”

“Shut up, Small. If you can’t be helpful, then play with yourself or something.”

“He’s right, though. How does Mason get to study the thing first?”

“Did you say Small was right?”

“I lost my head.”

“We get someone to take a picture. This Tuesday he slips into the loo just off the pantry and then does a lateral fianchetto to the pantry and click.”

“There might be a diagram even. He could snap that too.”

“It’s worth a try.”

“What happens to the poor sucker who sets the bloody thing off! It’s a capital offense. Tierney-White got packed off to Borstal.”

“He did not, he’s going to Winchencroft.”

“Well, you’ll have a nice time convincing Mason that he ought to go to Winchencroft.”

“Why don’t we put it to him anyway?”

“Gentlemen, we are dealing with desperate criminals.”

“Mason’s our man.”

“Who’s our photographer?”



“Small. You’ve got a polaroid. Right, Small?”

“Right, Martin.”

“Who’s our boy?”

“It will have to be a volunteer.”

“Pig teats! Don’t look at me. My mother told me to keep clear of scorching Christians. Count me out.”

“No thanks. I get nauseous just at the sight of Summers.”

“He has the same problem with you, Small.”

“Pack it in, Martin. How about you? You’re our leader!”

“I’m too chicken if you want to know the truth, Small.”

“Hey, here comes Mason.” Wells was standing at the window. “He’s running like the devil’s after him.”

“Or the Stokers.”

Wells opened the sash. “What’s wrong? Mason, what’s wrong?” Mason shook his head and kept running. They heard the door slam downstairs and waited.

When at last he arrived, it was not the friend they knew but a ghost that stood before them. Mason was as white as chalk. Even his lips seemed pale. His face was dirty and tear-stained. He looked at each of them in turn and then at the floor.

“I’m such an awful coward,” he said. Then he looked at Anthony. “I’m sorry, Parker. Oh hell!”

“Sorry for what? What is it Mason?”

“Ames. They’ve got Ames.”

“Who’s got Ames?” But he knew that even before he asked. It struck him in another part of his mind that it was crazy to ask that. Everyone knew. He could tell by the feel in the room. He started to the door. Mason stopped him.

“Wait. It may not be bad. I don’t know, he may be all right.” And he told them the story. That part which he knew.

## 14. The Storming of Trump House

At the end of Mason's brief tale there was a silence. It could fairly be called a shocked silence. It was also the sort of silence in which things are transformed by unseen spirits into what, at best, they might become. All of this happened in one beat of a caterpillar's heart and was in fact the work of that same benevolent fairy who, only a few weeks back, had put our young and tender heroes into one another's arms. Now he imbued the room with that generous impulse which overtakes us in the midst of strife and joins our hands and souls in common endeavor.

The first thing that happened was that Tommy Wells, his heart too full for common discourse, crossed the room, stood for a moment mystified by the brave love of his friend and then embraced him as perhaps no boy had publicly embraced another at St. Matthews School for six hundred years.

At almost the same moment Donald Swann, seeing Anthony whiten and drop suddenly back upon the window seat, jumped from the floor and caught him as his head was about to shatter a two hundred year old light of glass.

Having caught him in his near faint and feeling the weight of him against his arm, observing at that same moment Mason and Wells, he felt something new. The combination of shock, pain, fear and love which overtook poor Parker passed through his rescuer's flesh as well, transfixing him with an unfamiliar and startling sympathy. (Later, as he lies in bed, it will come back to him and he will feel an unwanted sadness for his own life, for its loneliness. Then he will go to Keith Martin's bed and climb beneath the covers where he will chastely spend the rest of the school year.)

Imagine that Bill Small, observing these events, seeing these hearts laid bare, knowing it for a cynic's treasure, felt no desire whatsoever to apply his wit but instead was suddenly filled with an intimation of what might be. It was that vague sort of sense that one has upon waking from a pleasant dream, knowing with an impossible certainty that there is something good and beautiful just beyond the door, hidden in the day ahead. He could have said no more than this, nor would have. The thought that Anthony and Bobby might be his friends, must be his friends, exhilarated him.

Who can say what Anthony felt! What do lovers feel when their beloved is in peril? When their hearts are even fuller with love from the noble cause

for such peril? When others share that admiration? When all disharmony, denial and dishonest feeling suddenly dissolve in a group of friends and a suddenly strong arm supports you? When you know that you need no longer hide your love?

“Oh God,” he said, when the voice re-entered his body.

“We have to get him out of there,” said Small, to everyone’s surprise including his own.

“We can’t stand around here,” said Martin, and headed for the door with the others behind him.

They must have looked to Mrs. Grundle like a very serious group, for she remarked upon it a little while later to Mr. Skelton, calling it “very serious business indeed”. And so it was not coincidence after all that Hector Skelton encountered our entourage returning unsuccessfully from their mission of rescue. But that is getting ahead of our story.

Finding the observatory empty except for Mason’s underpants, they went to the bell loft of the chapel, remembering the tale of poor Bret Tully.

Unsuccessful there, they were led by Wells to Trump house and, from the sheer audacity and determination of their purpose, dared enter that forbidden domain, search the butt room, knock on the doors of each of the stokers and then leave, unscathed. More than one callow upper, observing their transit through the building, had, upon observing Anthony’s tears, swallowed his own caustic. Boys did not cry at St. Matthews. Certainly they did not cry in public. Certainly not at Trump house. It caught them off guard. It also inspired some of the more civilized among them to speculate upon the sort of event which might inspire such audacity, such passion, such tears, to imagine its magnitude and to wonder what general repercussion it might forbode in the socially fragile world of Trump House.

But all of our heroes’ good intentions came to nothing, and so they redirected their steps to Sprinkles House, all the while debating a next step, and attempting, not very convincingly, to reassure Anthony. Their camaraderie was strong still. Their expressions of it however were more awkward than they had been in those few magic moments in Martin’s room.

Though Swann and Mason both wanted to take Anthony’s hand, neither now could do that. Small, whose passage through Trump House was the most difficult, who inspired the cruelest passing remarks, had fallen back on brittle repartee. Now as they walked back it curled his lip and hardened his heart

and had Timmy Wells not seen that, even in the midst of greater perplexities, had he not linked his elbow with Small's and suggested to him in particular rather than to the crowd in general that maybe it was time to break the code – had these things not occurred at that precise moment, Bill Small's life might not have changed. But they did and he did and Anthony and Bobby would become his friends and the others as well. And all from so simple a thing as Tommy Wells' arm and being the one asked, not the one ignored.

It was the boldest suggestion that one might make at St. Matthews. One didn't even discuss the code. It was the society itself. Outside the code was anarchy, ostracism.

But the question was asked right there on the cinder path where it branched to the rectory on the right and Sprinkles House on the left. And Bill Small stopped to consider it and the others stopped as well. Even a casual observer would have recognized them as a revolution in the making. They burned with indignation.

Small was not practiced in the serious offering of opinion. It was virtually a first time for him and so he stroked his chin and shook his head. Then he composed a serious countenance and resisted the almost overpowering need to break wind.

"I don't know, Wells. It's the whole wicket, isn't it? The code. It isn't just Ames or just us or even just the bloody stokers. I'll say this, though. Nobody's ever done anything as brave as Ames and that makes things different."

"How different?" It was Martin who asked. Methodically, purposefully as was his habit.

"I don't know. But the code isn't noble. What Bobby did was. It can't just disappear."

"I know Small. I don't want it to disappear either but I don't know how it connects to the code. I mean we have to find Ames, don't we, before we can know what we have to do?"

"But we haven't."

"We're missing something. There's something just beyond our grasp. Some place that we would never think of."

"Maybe he got away from them. I mean he might even be back at the room," Mason said, not very confidently.

"I don't think so." Martin said. "It's not very likely, is it? I mean, five of

them and one of him and if he was the sort of kid to run away he wouldn't have been there in the first place, would he?"

Mason looked at the ground. Wells took his hand and squeezed it.

"I didn't mean that, Mason. What you were doing for Wells was better than anything I would have done. So don't feel bad. None of us can judge you."

"He needed to do it. That's all."

It was the first time Parker had spoken. He felt a piteous wreck and was at pains not to burden his friends with that. In truth, he was a little embarrassed at his tears and vaguely uncomfortable with having made such an obvious show of his affection for Bobby. He was glad for the friendship around him but careful of its limits.

"What do you mean, Parker."

"He wanted to show us he was worth having as a friend."

"Not us, Parker. Not you. For my part I feel pretty bloody awful."

"I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I'm sorry. I meant that Mason had to leave or else it wouldn't have mattered what Bobby did. That was the way it had to be."

"But it's still true we were pretty awful."

"That's past."

"I wish he were here now."

"Look, I say we go to Bryce-Jones and tell him the whole thing. Blow the lids off the scorching stokers."

"I think we should tell the rector and be done with it."

"I think we should tell Helter Skelter."

And it was at that moment that a crunch of gravel drew their attention to the approach of that very person, not, it appeared from the purposefulness of his stride, out for the evening air.

"Good evening, Mr. Skelton," they said in five rather than six voices.

Anthony's silence focused Skelton's, attention. His tear-ravaged face focused his sympathy.

"Good evening, boys. Anthony? Is something wrong?"

"They're hurting Bobby."

Isn't it remarkable how simple honesty confounds purpose and deflects design! There it was. All of it in a phrase: the love, the pain, the politics, the fact. And Skelton heard it for what it was or at least heard the love for what

it was and was hard pressed momentarily to retain his composure. But when he did, it was to effect. If there was anyone at St. Matthews most expert in the careful strategies of successful revolution it was Hector Skelton.

“We were discussing the code, sir.” Martin observed in what to anyone but Hector Skelton might have seemed an impossible non-sequitur. But Skelton nodded, pursed his lips and stroked his chin. Of course they would be discussing the code and it was a very good thing he had arrived when he had.

“What more can you tell me?”

“Not much more, sir. It’s the stokers. I mean sir it’s the fifth formers. Some of them that give us a hard time.”

“The traditional tatoo.”

Wells blushed, understanding how far from the mark Skelton was. He felt suddenly exposed and looked away.

“Yes sir. The tatoo.”

“And something more.”

“Please, sir.”

“Very well. And you’ve been out looking for him?”

“Yes sir. And no sign of him anywhere. And Parker sort of looks out for him because they’re roommates. And you know Ames has had a hard time of it. And so Parker...”

“Is understandably upset.”

“Yes sir.”

“If more boys shed a few tears for one another this would be a far better school. Don’t you he ashamed, Parker. Not as a Sprinkles House boy don’t you ever apologize for tear shed for another boy.”

“No sir.”

Swann, despite the desperate seriousness of the moment, could not suppress a grin, thinking how consistent it was of Helter Skeller to hold an opinion of tears so close to his opinion on other body liquids.

“But what about Ames, sir?” Martin felt it was his responsibility as titular leader of the group, to get away from philosophy and back to the problem at hand. Also Martin would not have wanted to be himself the subject of a disquisition on tears. He was embarrassed for Parker and wished he had a little stiffer upper lip than he was now exhibiting.

Mason realized that they would have to tell Mr. Skelton more than they

had so far if he was going to be of any help to them. It was in searching for an appropriate partial truth that he stumbled upon the real one, and so, what he said was not at all what he had intended to say.

“Oh, my God!”

“Mason, what is it?”

“Sorry. I mean about the swearing sir, but I think I know where Ames is.” He turned to Anthony. “Sorry about being so stupid, Parker. But I missed it. You see, it was the entitlement. That’s what got the whole thing going. He bought me out.”

“You mean they’re...?”

“It could be.”

“I’ll kill them”

Small, observing the look of total confusion on Mr. Skelton’s face, decided to attempt a clarification.

“Sir. Ames did a very brave thing and that’s one of the reason we’re upset. A very brave thing, sir.”

“I gather he volunteered to take Mason’s caning.”

“Well, actually Wells’ sir; but that’s too complicated.”

“Did you do a brave thing too, Mason?”

Mason blushed. “Not tonight, sir. Tonight I ran away and left Ames in my place.”

“I sometimes wish this were a different world and a different school.” Skelton said wistfully. “A better place for good boys like you. You are all brave, I think, and I am proud of you. But it is the place it is and we will have to ponder carefully. As I understand it, everything that has happened is according to the code. If Ames is getting a caning it is because he chose to stand in for Mason. Is that right?”

The boys looked at one another. Skelton saw them look at one another and knew the probable subject of this silent discourse. Yes, there was more afoot than a caning. But it was just as well they kept it to themselves. He had his own way of finding things out. It would be better that way.

“Yes sir.” Martin said.

“And when was it that you left Ames, Mason?”

Mason looked at his watch. It was a Mickey Mouse watch and seemed the wrong thing to have just then. Still, it told him the time. “It was a little over an hour ago, sir.”

“Then what was going to happen has happened and I suspect that Ames wants to be alone right now and will be back at Sprinkles by lights out. And if he isn’t then you must tell me.”

“Yes sir.”

”I mean that, Martin.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good evening, boys.”

“Good evening sir.”

“I know where he is,” Anthony said.

“In the gymnasium?”

“Not if it’s over. If he’s alone, I know where he would go.”

“Do you want us to go with you?”

“No. But thanks. Really, thanks. Look here. I wanted to say something while things are like this. I mean, there’s going to be more, isn’t there? It’s not all over. And really we don’t know what happened to Bobby. Not yet. I mean I think we ought to stick together like this. You know?”

“We were pretty wrong about Ames, I guess,” Small said.

“I wonder what he thinks of us,” Swann said.

“I guess we have some things to work out,” Martin said, as one might have announced the beginning of summit negotiations or the signing of a treaty.

He felt the need to put the conversation back on a loftier and more substantial footing. Friendship was one thing but tears and love and all of that could lead to real trouble. Perhaps some time he would talk to Parker about that. It might even be his duty to as a friend. A very close friend. He liked Parker the most. That would make it the more difficult. Well, there would be time

Anthony did find Bobby asleep on the grass by the pond. One of his trouser legs had hiked up above his sock and revealed the lowest stripe.

Though Anthony Parker was perhaps the gentlest boy in the entire school, he did at that moment feel those things which lead even the most mild tempered of human beings to acts of violence. He closed his eyes and made a vow.

Then calmed, he leaned and kissed the ugly red line. Then he lay by his friend, his arm across his back, breathed his breath and kissed his dry and troubled lips.

A tremor went through St. Matthews school that night. It had started in



the observatory, spread to Trump House, interrupted the prefects' berry hour with ugly speculation which later reverberated in Skelton's study as Bryce-Jones next to worst fears were confirmed, and shook the entire edifice as Clara Grundle ascended the stairs with a jar of soothing ointment, her face a cataclysm of resolution.

There were things subterranean which were about to find light and air. Not all at once. But there was a beginning and the sense of it took from the pleasure Rodney Porter and his friends tried to conjure that night in the butt room. Their tales of conquest fell flat. The silences were too long. And the looks they received from their dormmates were not unequivocal in their approval of this latest escapade. The yank had some friends in Trump House.

It was Martin who persuaded Ames to abjure modesty and in the name of the revolution which was to come, show his scars. By the end of the second day every boy in Sprinkles Hall had seen the twelve angry red welts, perfectly, brutally, painfully placed. There were few who did not wince. Three of the mice cried and Adam Spooner wet his pants.

Small, Swann, and Wells attended him like wives or nurses, bringing him news, treats, comic books and making frightening plans for revenge. Wells spent an hour one afternoon when they were alone discussing Anthony and Drew Mason. It was the greatest of the gifts Bobby received in his two day convalescence – the gift of sharing with another human being the thing which had changed his life and of seeing in that other boy's eyes the same glow which had brightened his own.

## 15. A Path in the Forest

There was no such think in the world of Hector Skelton as original sin. It was something taught and learned, as algebra and geography were taught and learned. It was a by-product of civilization and sometimes a very dire one. In the case of Rodney Porter for example. Something would have to be done about Rodney.

Skelton had once upon a time believed that boys over the age of innocence might be saved, that their stained slates might be wiped clean. But he believed this no longer and the fatalism which he now reluctantly accepted was a hard lesson learned.

He had learned it years before from a boy very much like Porter whom the rector had determined to send down from the school. The lad, Demian Cuthait, was of high though certainly not noble birth and would some day have been heir to a great fortune. His father, Lord Wimsell Cuthait, had been one of Skelton's boys years before and it was perhaps for these reasons that Skelton intervened in the boy's behalf and asked that his sentence be commuted from exile to service.

Demian's offenses, though many and varied, all derived from the fact that he was an intractable and un-repentant bully. Skelton believed – and made public his belief – that the boy might be redeemed. His recipe for salvation was to place the boy in a position of responsibility on Sprinkles three. Here Skelton believed, in the presence of the innocent, the guileless, the vulnerable, the pickled, young Cuthait might discover an earlier and better part of himself. Alas!

It was, as Henry Truebooth much enjoyed saying, a matter of putting a fox to watch the chickens. One day Cuthait decided to punish a lad. The boy had apparently dripped honey on Demian's jacket. According to Demian, not for the first time. To the great amusement of his friends, he had taken the boy out to the pasture, tied his wrists behind his back, poured the remains of that same offending jar of honey into the lad's underpants and forced him to kneel upon a very industrious community of ants.

Cuthait might very well have gotten away with this cruelty as he had countless others. The boy would not have told. The problem was that he became hysterical and Demian could do nothing to return him to a normal

state.

It all came out. Not just the anthill but all the other little amusements he had contrived over the past weeks and which the boys on Sprinkles three, terrified, had kept to themselves.

The episode did little to enhance Skelton's reputation among the other masters. If Sprinkles House had been a place apart previously, now it was a world unto itself.

Now there was the problem of Rodney Porter, another boy gone bad. Skelton could remember Rodney as a nine-year old, a difficult case even then. He was impossibly polite and obsessively clean. One could bounce a coin upon the blanket of his bed and see the lightbulb in the ceiling reflected in his shoes.

He was absolutely continent. Skelton did not hold this against him, yet neither did it raise the boy in his estimation.

He collected everything that came to hand: matchboxes, playing cards, stamps, small bars of soap and bottle caps. These he kept neatly displayed and carefully catalogued and occasionally allowed another boy to view. usually for the sake of a trade, for his primary social activity was swapping these ephemera.

It was not difficult for Skelton to envisage Rodney Porter at the other end of the cant: which had so neatly striped Bobhy Ames. Nor was it difficult for him to imagine other things concerning which rumors had begun to spread and which had to do with altering the outrageous but relatively harmless practice of tattooing the preps on their posteriors with a laundry pen.

Skelton was not prepared to risk that the rumors – which he had no way of confirming – were false. Ten Rodney Porters weren't worth one Bobby Ames or Anthony Parker or, bless his heart, Tommy Wells. No. He would have to do the only thing that would put a stop to this business if it was a business. And if it wasn't? Well the candy-sticking itself was enough to condemn the boy. And there had been the episode in the observatory before that.

He would act. Damn the code. That Ames had willingly sacrificed himself was noble. But that must not stop justice from being done. He would report the offense to the head master and demand that Rodney Porter be sent down. He would be of course. Twelve of the best were never given. Never.

He thought it best, however, to have Bobby Ames away from Sprinkles House. Mrs. Grundlc could confirm his report of the candy-sticking if a confirmation were necessary. In fact he might just let her be the one to describe it. She would not let Rodney Porter off so easily as to simply send him down. She would insist on at least a stripe for a stripe, if she could not have him drawn and quartered. But having young Ames around would not be good. It must be clear to everyone that it was he, Hector Skelton, and not Bobby Ames who broke the code. Ames, of course, would not have approved. But there were bigger things at risk now than schoolboy honor.

The firing aside, Ames could use a couple of days of convalescence, and where better than at Hallmere Hall? Maybe Parker could take him. They seemed to get along pretty well now as roommates, and Parker had been there before. Yes, that would be just the thing. An idyll in the country away from books and the commerce of the school. He would call Ned and make arrangements.

Skelton suggested the idea to Anthony as something to divert Ames' thoughts from recent events. And in truth Bobby was in need of such diversion. Though the welts no longer stung, the humiliation did, and Bobby had been out of sorts now for several days. The flush of celebrity had paled.

He was happy now to have friends and to be honestly admired but he felt strangely outside of himself. There was no joy in things. Even loving Anthony was less sublime and he was saddened to be less companionable.

Observing his friend around their room, noting his mannerisms, his positions, the way he curled his side hair with his finger – these things gave him the greatest pleasure. But it was a desultory and careless pleasure, not the exotic, exciting, climactic sort of pleasure they had known only a week before. He told Anthony he felt raped. It was that they had made him cry, that he had begged them to stop, that he had felt so naked. Not just body naked but soul-naked, heart-naked. He couldn't get it out of his mind.

With Helter Skelter's blessing, our young heroes put in for an extended weekend and left Sprinkles House with a backpack after lunch that Friday.

Their route took them past Llewellyn House and Crawford Hall, down the path behind the chapel, beyond the cricket pitch and into a woods. It surprised Bobby to find a part of the school which he had not previously explored, especially so beautiful and inviting a part. The woods were cool and fragrant, filled with the sounds of birds and the covert rustlings of its

unseen denizens. Ring doves cooed their plaintive song. Now and then a thrush or linnet burst forth in merry song.

In several places Anthony pointed out the remains of a moat, short arcs of lily-strewn water with willows arching overhead. And here and there a bit of ruin, all but lost in rhododendron and wild roses. Boys occasionally used them for picnics, Anthony said, or to spend the night under the stars. They reminded him of Endymion, he said, and smiled. They stopped at one, so overgrown with vines that the ancient rock could hardly be seen at all.

Then they continued along the path to Haltmerc Hall, the home of Edward Clendennon, fifth baronet of Haltmere, philanthropist, magician, teller of tales, host, benefactor of St. Matthews and a friend to its scholars.

Uncle Ned, as he was known, was a generous man. Much that came to St. Matthews came from the hand of this gentle baronet and yet he attached his name to neither edifice nor chair. When a name was wanted for the new infirmary or the painting studios or the outdoor theater which Uncle Ned had paid for lock, stock and barrel, he would choose, instead of his own, the name of some dear boy, called prematurely to his reward.

If a debt needed paying, Uncle Ned could be counted upon. If the stable needed a yearling or two, or a pony for the smaller boys, Uncle Ned and the groom, always accompanied by a happy carom of toeheads, would take a day's trip to the auction at Carbunkle-on-Cline.

One would not have guessed that a man of such fearsome countenance and great proportion should inspire confidence in the young. One might have predicted instead that the great gothic pile that was Haltmere and its ogre master would have been the stuff of nightmares and tales told at night to frighten little boys into their beds. But children will see past such things if given the chance and know better than adults the many faces of enchantment.

Well, better than most adults. For there were some whom Uncle Ned had come to know over the years, and who had come to know of him and of Haltmere, who were altogether in favor of enchantments. These were men of the world who yet were not of the commonplace world in which they lived their public lives. For them Haltmere was a kind of Never-Never Land where the lost boys of their own childhoods lived in perpetual rounds of mischief and merriment.

In all the rooms of Haltmere Hall scarcely a bed went untenanted on a

holiday or Saturday night. And on holidays boys who had no comfy home and loving parents to hug them off the 5:15 to London, found here a place to snuggle. The governors of St. Mallhews knew Haltmere well and could not have wished for a better retreat for boy or man. They knew, the younger among them, the magic of this place in the woods, for Uncle Ned was not a young man and they could recall still the fire in the great hall banked high on a Saturday night, the chestnuts, the ribbon candy, the stories before bed and the companionability of Uncle Ned's guests.

There was one rule at Haltmcre, and only one. The path was magic. On one end of the path was the school; on the other Haltmere Hall. Uncle Ned would explain to a new visitor as he took his small, often dirty, hand in his great paw, that it was an enchanted path and that in walking it one forgot.

One forgot maths and gymnastics and latin and even one's problems.

Likewise, what one remembered walking back along the magic path was only that there was a place in another land where one had been and would surely go again.

This was a wise rule; for Uncle Ned knew well that the affairs of the school were not his affairs and did not want to become either adversary or advocate in the relations between students and staff. In its turn the school was also circumspect.

It was upon the powers of Uncle Ned's enchantment that Anthony based his hopes for his friend's recovery of spirit. There was no better place, he knew, where he might take his beloved or where they might rediscover what had become lost between them, where in a tranquil moment their now frightened love might blossom once more.

And because the path was enchanted the desultory sadness which Bobby had felt fell from him like an old skin. With each step he felt the tendrils of discontent and lethargy shrivel among his sinews. The air seemed cleaner and the fragrances of the wood refreshed his troubled soul. Anthony delighted in the reformation. His mind filled with visions of the Hall, of introducing Bobby to Uncle Ned, of the society of the place. He most especially wanted to hold Bohby's hand, as in the real world of the school he never could. Our hearts dote on such small things as this and treasure the anticipation as if it were love itself.

"There are costumes you can wear." he said.

"Like what?"

“Just about anything you can think of. Knights, cowboys, royalty, clowns, just about anything. You pick a room and it’s all made up that way. The pictures, the furniture, everything.”

“What will we be?”

“What would you like to be?”

“I asked you first.”

“Well, we could be Patroclus and Achilles.”

“How about Arthur and Lancelot?”

“Sure.”

“Or Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Or the Walrus and the Carpenter?”

“I’ve never seen anyone dressed as a walrus. I don’t know about a carpenter.”

“Or Antony and Cleopatra.”

“You can be Cleopatra.”

“Me?! Are you kidding? You think with emerald eyes and eyelashes like yours that you could get away with not being Cleopatra?”

“My eyelashes are perfectly normal.”

“Normal?! Here, let me look.... No, you’re right. Definitely not Cleopatra. Glinda the Good maybe, or the Lady of the Lake.”

Grateful for the provocation, Anthony tackled his friend and they rolled on the soft mossy ground. Then Bobby pinned him and, having him there, leaned and kissed him directly on the lips, a thing they had not done before. Anthony’s eyes went wide.

It took a few tries to get the breathing to go with the rest of it. Once Anthony choked. But he was soon back at the lesson with fervor. Had the experiment stirred only their fascination they might have carried on for some time. But soon it became evident that in all of this playing Mother Nature had a purpose, and that purpose would have to be avowed and accepted or their lips must part. They decided, without speaking it, to delay other delights and brushing the leaves from one another’s backs, and agreeing that they would much rather be themselves than any “dusty duos from dusty books” – as Bobby put it – they continued down the woodland path, hand in hand, to Haltmere Hall.





## 16. Haltmere Hall

If you have ever had that remarkable experience of coming to a turning in the road beyond which the world was so unutterably different that you caught yourself glancing back to be sure it was the same road or blinking your eyes for the assurance that it was the same you, then you will understand the amazement that Bobby Ames felt as he stepped from the forest into the park of Haltmere Hall. The great edifice itself was still at a distance and more apparent in its mass than its detail. His immediate prospect was of trees: imponderably great beeches and oaks, spectral conifers and rambling hedges. It was a warm April day and the promise of new fragrance was in the air already. Here and there snow-drops, aconites, daffodils and anemones brightened the wintered ground and everywhere were gardens, hoed brown and neat awaiting the warming sun. A stream meandered from the woods, across the meadow and through the carpet of the lawn, its bank set here with a gazebo, there with benches and bordered by dark green-leaved creeper. In the gazebo five or six boys and as many men were having a late tea and looked very much like a cricket team. As they gained the top of the arching bridge he could see beyond sculpted hedges and paths to a grey-green rectangle upon which people moved. A croquet court, he wondered. Yes, it was, Anthony told him.

From out of the copse rode a knight and two squires whom he recognized from Sprinkles House. They were two of the little boys whose greetings he had ceased returning. He felt ashamed. They stopped to let the riders approach.

"Hello, Anthony," said the man pleasantly. He reined up his black steed. The boys did the same. One of them smiled good-naturedly at him and let his horse drink from the stream. "Who's your friend?"

"Bobby Ames. Bobby, this is Sir Reginald." And impulsively he took Bobby's hand. "This is Bobby's first time here."

"And not his last, I hope. I think the cat has your friend's tongue."

Bobby blushed. "Good afternoon, Sir Reginald. Thank you. (He hadn't any idea what he was thanking him for but he had learned that in this country one nearly always said thank you or excuse me, and excuse me didn't fit.) "It's very beautiful." He indicated the park with his free hand.

“And you as well.”

“Thank you.”

“I trust we’ll see you for dinner, Anthony.”

“You certainly will. I could eat a horse!”

Sir Reginald laughed. “We’d better be on our way, boys. I think our steeds are in peril.” And they rode off at a canter.

“He said I was beautiful and I said thank you. I don’t believe it!”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little strange?”

“Someplace else I guess it would be. You *are* beautiful. Especially when you blush.”

They walked across the lawn to the hedges and a cinderpath. Gardens stretched to the hall and on each side to a great glass house.

“One is half artichokes and half orchids,” Anthony said, following Bobby’s gaze. “The other is citrus.”

The Hall was now before them, looming grey and spired as if dripped from a quintessential candle. Gargoyles peered from the heights and here and there balconies sported busts worn indistinct with age. Over the massive doors rose an expanse of stained glass with a single figure. From outside Bobby could not make it out. He stared at it. “It’s a dragon,” Anthony said.

“A friendly one, like Uncle Ned. You’ll see. You need the light on the other side. This time we’ll ring:” Anthony reached for a chain beside the door. Bobby heard a sound from within.

“What do you mean this time?” he asked.

“You only use this door the first time you come. It’s so Uncle Ned will meet you. Afterwards you use that door over there.” He pointed to a small green door at the extreme end of the facade which looked as if it might have led to a scullery. “Or one of the rear doors. Or one of the french doors onto the patio. There are lots of doors.”

“You just walk in?”

“After you have arrived the first time. That’s what we’re doing now.”

And so saying, they did. The large oak door swung open and Bobby saw a giant. The man must have been seven feet at the least and made like a bear.

His beard and hair accentuated his size even more, appearing, in their immensity, detached from the face itself. But in the face peering through were two pale blue eyes nestled in a bed of wrinkles and they smiled.

“Hi, Uncle Ned!” Anthony said and extended his hand.

The ogre took it in his great paw and covered it with the other. He shook his head from side to side as if in disbelief and then as you might pick up a plump tomcat, lifted Anthony by his waist and held him in merry scrutiny.

“What’s this? A new boy? Yes, I believe it is. Found your way here all alone, did you? No. Wait. Those eyes, leopard eyes. Look at those eyes! Once there was a boy who came here with eyes like that. Anthony his name was. Oh, the hearts he broke! And then he disappeared. Vanished. Never heard from again.”

“I’ve been busy with work. Anyway it isn’t that long. This is my friend, Bobby.”

As a mother might with a child he shifted his left arm beneath Anthony’s bottom and kissed him on his cheek. Anthony hugged as much of the man as he could compass and said, “He’s my friend from America.”

The ogre extended his free hand and Bobby took it, not sure what might follow, amazed still to see his friend perched above him.

“Hello, sir.”

“Well it’s about time I should meet Bobby Ames. I think your friend is jealous of you, Bobby.”

“Is he, sir?”

“I’m sure of it. He’s afraid I’ll put you in my glass case.”

“Oh.”

It was plain that Bobby had lost, for the moment, whatever social graces fourteen years had taught him. Uncle Ned laughed good-heartcdly and set Anthony back on the ground. Bobby tried a smile. It wasn’t very confident.

“You should have told your friend Uncle Ned was an ogre, Anthony. It’s not fair to spring me on fellows this way. Well boys, come in. Come in. There’s tea just put out.”

He opened the door and ushered the boys in. Bobby turned and looked at the dragon. It was magnificent and, as Anthony had said, friendly. Then he turned and followed Anthony and Uncle Ned into the great hall.

What surprised Bobby as much as anything about Uncle Ned was his voice. It wasn’t as big as he. Neither was it smaller. It was like the face behind the beard. And the great paw that swallowed his hand did so gently. Even his laugh was comfortable where he had expected it to be loud and

boisterous. Now as they sat on a window seat with Uncle Ned on the floor before them pouring tea from a delicate white porcelain pot, Bobby managed to smile.

“That’s the one I was waiting for,” Uncle Ned said. “I once had a young friend who smiled like that. He’s in parliament now. You see what the right smile can do! And a peerage, of course.”

“Will there be a crowd tonight, Uncle Ned?”

“A table full. No less. No more. Just the right number.”

“Will there be a fire?”

“I should think so. Would you like that, Bohhy?”

Bobby looked over at the fireplace set like a loggia in the stone wall. He could very nearly have stood in it.

“Yes. I would. It must take enormous logs.”

“It does. But we save those until the holidays. It will work just as well with everyday logs and be just as cheery.”

Uncle Ned poured tea in the library and he and Anthony talked about times past the way that friends do who meet only now and then in circumstances which set their everyday lives apart. Bobby walked to the window and looked out on the grounds. There was a game of football out past the glass houses which seemed in slow motion. The sound hardly reached him, as if it were from a dream. Then he heard Uncle Ned’s voice and turned.

“I’d suggest that you unpack your pack, put on some shorts and sneakers and get a little exercise before supper.” Uncle Ned walked to the window and looked over Bobby’s shoulder. “I should think they could use you out there. Now let’s see. I’ve put you in The Prince of Cathay. That’s just up the main staircase and down the hall to the left.”

“The rooms are all named for ships.” Anthony said. “Uncle Ned’s great great grandfather was a ship owner.”

“Great great great uncle!”

“Oh.”

“The Prince of Cathay was one of his grandest. There’s a painting of her on the wall. Lost in a typhoon in the Indian sea with a cargo of Ming porcelain and the King’s regent. I see Anthony has told you about our architectural nomenclature.”

"I couldn't remember the names very well."

"They aren't quite household words. Well, in most households anyway. Hmmm. I hadn't thought of that. Well, I think you'll find it satisfactory. There is a very big tub which was put in by my grandfather for his mother in law, Lady Bundle. I think you'll like it. So, up the staircase and to the left and don't get lost. If the room wants anything find Mary, or help yourselves to the linen store. And I will superintend the boar."

"A whole boar, sir?"

"Indeed. Would you like to see him?"

"Yes I would."

"Come down after you have settled in and you can have a look."

Bobby picked up the pack they had brought along and followed Anthony up the wide staircase.

The Prince of Cathay was actually a suite of two rooms, the second being the bathroom and dressing room, replete with makeup table and a wide mirror of the sort Bobby had seen in films of movie stars. He made a face.

"I'm not putting stuff on."

"It's just there for people who want to. I don't use it. Some kids do. The mice like to."

"Anyway, you really couldn't improve on my complexion." He twisted his head and examined a place below his right ear where he thought a zit might be coming. It wasn't.

"With all that grease the makeup wouldn't stick anyway."

"I will ignore that remark for the moment, but it goes down in the book. Jesus look at this tub! You could have a party in it!"

Anthony giggled. Bobby explored the rest of the room, opened and shut the closets, the drawers, bounced on the bed and then looked out the window. He could see the croquet game below. The mallets went pock, pock. It was slow motion. There was a man holding a straw hat in one hand and leaning on his mallet. He had red hair. Bobby watched to see when he would play. The man must have felt his eyes for he turned and looked up. When he saw Bobby he waved. Bobby blushed and waved back. The man looked like Terrence Buckingham who played for Manchester. It *was* Terrence Buckingham. Bobby turned from the window.

"Jehosaphat! Do you know who's out there?"

Anthony had only his underpants on. His skin was dark. It gave Bobby a

rush.

“Let’s see, is it the prime minister”

“Terrence Buckingham!”

“Really?” He came over and joined Bobby at the sill. The redheaded man was taking his turn. “How can you tell?”

“Wait, you’ll see.” Completing two wickets, the man turned again and smiled. Bobby gave him a thumbs up.

“It is. I haven’t seen him here before. But there are always new people showing up. That’s what makes it nice.”

“Hey! This place is OK!”

“I told you.” Anthony turned away and started toward the closet.

“Wait, I want to check something.”

He turned back, puzzled. Bobby walked over and pulling the elastic of Anthony’s underpants out, looked inside.

“What are you doing?!”

“I just wanted to make sure you hadn’t left anything behind.”

“You idiot!” Anthony pushed him away, laughing. Bobby pursued and they tumbled to the floor. “Stop,” Anthony said. “Not now. Its, a waste.”

“Why?”

“Later it can be special. There’s the tub and the bed. Please, Bobby, I want it to be like an explosion.”

“I’m in love with your underpants. Anthony, I have to confess. It’s not you at all. I’m cotton queer.”

“Bobby!”

“When I see them against your brown back, so soft and white, and your spine like there’s a dragon inside, curved that way, I think I might just die.”

“Don’t do that Bobby. Not yet.”

“OK. Just a kiss. Like before.”

“OK. But take your hand away.”

An older man with a white collar passed the still open door and then took three steps back. He watched for some time. It was difficult to tell where one boy began and the other left off. “Praise God,” he whispered to the bust of Homer beside the door and, as the boys parted for air, resumed his perambulation.

## 17. A Game of Croquet

Anthony gave Robby the quick tour, it being already five o'clock, and ended it in the kitchens with a viewing of the boar which was being turned over a large open fire. Bobby said the mechanism looked like a clock-works and Uncle Ned confirmed it was indeed just that.

While Uncle Ned was surely master of Haltmere Hall, it appeared that Mrs. Pucker was mistress of the kitchen and had limited patience with spectators, whether Greek heroes or, as with the case of Justin Pilgrim and his older friend, Spanish grandees. An almost imperceptible but definite tip of her head in Uncle Ned's direction sufficed to move the expedition back in the direction of the dining room which had been set, Bobby counted quickly, for 32 guests.

One of them, the Spanish grandee, was named Percival Pratt and knew a great deal about racing bicycles.

Bobby's uncle had biked. But they knew too little of aluminum alloys and the Sorrento Classic to offer much else in conversation and gradually drifted out into the gardens and over to the croquet court where teams were being made up for a round of hare-and-all-after. Two mice named Duncan and Andrew were elves. A man called Jimmy was a general and two very quiet young men were bohemians. The other guests, boys and men alike, appeared much as they might have on any other day, dressed in either school or leisure clothes.

Terrence Buckingham wore a simple white suit, his only adornment being a pair of spats. Bobby thought him strikingly attractive. He whispered as much to Anthony who looked to see if anyone was present he knew. There was, as it turned out. How had he failed to notice from the room? The fourth in the game was Christian. Anthony felt the blood rush to his face.

Christian was a photographer. They had met the year before, here at Haltmere. The man had been very nice to him, caring for his drawings, helping him with some tips on shading. They had taken walks together, holding hands, the way people did at Haltmere Hall. It had been a perplexing time for Anthony; so many things were new to him and so many of his feelings random and contradictory. He remembered the time they had gone to pick cherries and he had ridden Christian's shoulders. Even now he

could recall the giddy sensations: of his toes curled into the older man's back, of the strong hands holding his shins, the mild fragrance of the man's hair, the feel of the neck between his legs.

He had been shy the next day when Christian suggested that they join another group for a picnic. Instead, he had stayed behind and played whist with Uncle Ned and two fourth formers whose attentions to one another embarrassed him and ruined his concentration. After lunch he left with Bret Tully whose companion had been called back to the city. He felt had about not even saying goodbye to Christian.

Now there he was again. Their eyes met and Christian smiled. He did not wave. Anthony returned the smile and turned away. Terrence Buckingham called to them. Would they like to be a team? Anthony deferred. Bobby and Buckingham could be a team. He said he preferred to watch. He felt wistful.

The bees buzzed and there was a sound of pans from the kitchen. Summers, Naismith, poor hurt Bret Tully were far away and yet only on the other end of the path. There was a battle coming and yet it was so quiet and idyllic here. He thought of Endymion.

There were too many moods to things, more than he could manage all at once. How could you think of Endymion and Christian and Naismith and Bobby's soft hair in your face and his sweet sleeping breath and the safe quiet of nighttime? Suddenly he felt restless. The camaraderie on the court didn't include him. Bobby was on stage. He was being cool. Anthony saw the tension in his frame; he knew every muscle by heart. Now they were being held to a walk when he wanted to run, cartwheel, canter. He looked up to where Anthony sat and waved. He waved back.

It was all totally crazy. He thought of writing a letter home and grinned at the prospect. 'Dear Mummy: School is fine. I got elected to the Prep Commons and dissected a fetal pig with my new friend, Bobby Ames. He's an American but he's very nice anyway. Hastings left with a rash and Bobby moved in. Our room has a bay window where the sun comes in mornings. We are very fortunate to have it.

'Let's see: what other news is there? Mrs. Grundle's cat had kittens but we aren't allowed to have them in the rooms so they stay in her apartment. Sometimes we have them anyway. One which is a tiger kitten spent the night in our room and peed on the rug, so we won't do that again.

'I had my first wet dream just after coming back and thought I had peed



my bed. I don't have any hairs yet but Bobby says when they come they will be black because of my eyebrows. It's true about Bobby. His eyebrows are fair and he's fair in the other place too. It's like sunlight. It gets in my nose and tickles.

'Everything Uncle Billy said about public schools is true. In fact this year it's worse than ever before because there is a crowd of fifth-formers who have set themselves the goal of bugging every prep in the school. They have scored with twelve that we know about. There are probably others who keep it to themselves. It's got us more than a little upset, I can tell you.

'Everything has changed for me because of Bobby. I am no longer just me. It's hard to tell where I stop and he begins. Especially when we do heads and tails which is pretty often. You probably can't imagine being a Mummy instead of a boy what its like. Bobby's penis is so beautiful it makes me shiver to think of it. Nestled in its lovely golden nest, a little tip of dew on the end. When I kiss it I feel what he feels and when he presses for me to go faster I know why because I am pushing at him the same way. We have gotten much better at slowing down now and sometimes go on like this until we are pretty well exhausted and can't even finish our lessons.

'Well, this is probably embarrassing you so I won't go on and on: I just wanted you to know that I am happy.

'Oh, one other thing. You remember how Daddy was always talking about spreading out pleasures, like with presents or a box of candy? Well, we're being pretty good about that. There are some things we've talked about and haven't done yet; and I'm sure that there are hundreds of things we haven't even dreamed of. Oh, speaking of the box of candies, you 'll love this! The time I told Bobby about the box of candies was when I had an exam and refused to play, fell asleep over my book and woke up because Bobby was doing me. It was really pretty exciting because it was between a wet dream and the real thing. Anyway, after I popped he licked his lips and said, "Hey, this one has a creamy center." Isn't that great?! He's always saying things like that.

'I hope Haltmere will cheer him up; he's been down a little lately because he got candy-sticked. I think Bobby has a thing about his bum that he won't tell me. Some secret thing from the past. Because once when I started playing around he said to stop. I have my fingers crossed for tonight. This place is like that. Nice things happen all the time.

‘Well you must be getting weary of my rattling on like this. I’ll let you know how tonight comes out.

‘All my love,

‘Your faithful and devoted.

‘Anthony

‘PS. There is this man named Christian who is very attractive. Like Bobby, he is fair, and slender and has a very gentle manner. I would like to be his friend but I have a problem. I think that he would like to do with me what Bobby and I do. I can’t pretend I don’t know about such things anymore. I’m sure he’d see through me if I tried to be naive. And you can’t have a friend anyway if you aren’t honest. But I don’t want to do those things with him. So he might think I was just a tease. Is it possible to have a friend who is just a friend? Please give me your advice.

‘Signed,

‘Perplexed’

Anthony walked to the library and found, in its accustomed place, Uncle Ned’s copy of Keats. Enfolding himself in one of the great leather chairs, he opened it to Endymion and within five stanzas had fallen fast asleep.

When the first bell for dinner rang, Bobby thanked Buckingham for the game – which, incidentally, they had won handily – and searched the gardens for Anthony. Not finding him, he returned to their suite, then retraced the route they had taken together through the house. In due course he found his way to the library and espied his beloved curled up, his hand resting upon a page of the book he had been reading, his head inclined on the fat arm of the chair. Bobby paused to close the door before advancing and then tiptoed up to the chair. He knelt and studied his friend’s face. It was a different face in sleep; it pouted. The lips did. The eyes disappeared behind imponderably long and soft lashes which, if you watched them closely, beat like the pulse of a hummingbird. He brushed the down at the back of Anthony’s neck where the curls left off and the plain white neck of the jerkin began, and then he kissed him on the cheek.

He looked at where Anthony’s hand rested upon the text and moved it slightly so that he might read.

...wherefore may I not

Be ever in these arms? in this sweet spot  
Pillow my chin forever? ever press  
These toying hands and kiss their smooth excess?  
Why not forever and forever feel  
That breath about my eyes?

Anthony stirred and blinked his eyes, then opened them. Seeing Bobby he smiled and leaned his face into the hand that stroked his neck, kissing the palm. He turned again to meet Bobby's lips and as a boy explores the soft, dangerous flame of a candle with his finger brushed them with his own. Then he yawned and wiped his eyes.

Bobby watched him, amazed and perhaps a little frightened at the depth of the love he felt, for it was still very new and there were places he was drawn to explore and yet in which he feared to lose his breath.

"They've rung the bell for dinner," he said.

"I didn't hear it."

"You were sleeping."

"I know."

"You were reading and you fell asleep."

"I guess I didn't read very much."

"Anthony?"

"Hmmm?"

"This place... Uncle Ned... The people out there in the dining room. It's all very odd, isn't it?"

"I guess so. Don't you like it?"

"All these men are... Well. I mean, they come here because they like boys, don't they?"

"I guess so."

"Would you ever... I mean if one of them was nice and you liked him and he wanted to... You know. Do things. Would you?"

"No."

"Even if he was very nice and very strong and very handsome?"

"Even if he played sweep for Manchester."

"I was an awful flirt."

"You better watch it."

"I won't do it any more. I've never met a famous person before. Was I

obvious?”

“To me you were.”

“Were you jealous?”

“Are you serious? Jealous of a muscle head like that?”

“Then why’d you leave in such a hurry?”

“I didn’t leave in a hurry. There was someone I wanted to avoid.”

“An old lover?”

“Yes.”

“OK. You win. You weren’t jealous.”

“His name is Christian. He’s a photographer.”

“Who?”

“The man at the edge of the court. The tall fair-haired man. You were too preoccupied with your admirer to notice, probably.”

“You know that guy?”

“I just told you I did.”

“What do you mean, lover?”

“What do people usually mean?”

“Don’t be coy.”

“Well, don’t play Sherlock Holmes.”

“Ok, you win.”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous!”

“I’m jealous if you were jealous.”

“OK.”

“You were jealous?”

“Of course. Why do you think I left?”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m hungry too.”

As mischief would have it, Uncle Ned had seated Anthony next to Terrence Buckingham and Bobby next to Christian. He had also seated Bobby in the place of honor at his own right. At the other end of the table from Uncle Ned sat a man whom people addressed as “your grace”. He was a man with very little grace indeed, Anthony thought, who spoke more loudly than necessary, displayed appalling table manners and had a nose the color of a pomegranate. That he had a slight accent relieved Anthony of the concern that he might be English royalty. He had a high opinion of the royal family and especially felt a need to protect their good name in Bobby’s presence.

The two boys, even in this rare company, stood out. Bobby appreciated the attentions immediately, a fact which did not escape Anthony and earned him a silent and stony rebuke. The company was jolly, however and even Anthony batted an eyelash and flashed a smile from time to time.

Uncle Ned was a genial host and the wine flowed plentifully. Anthony talked of nothing but Bobby throughout the meal and Bobby of nothing but Anthony. Had it been their intentions to divert attention from the object of their affection they might have found a better way to achieve this. But their hearts were too full for prudence, and their companions too receptive.

The ardor of their conversation turned, as the company rose to take cakes and cheese in the library, to an ardor of a different kind. Anthony had no mind for whist and played badly. Bobby, prone on his belly before the fireplace, barely heard the story Uncle Ned was telling, so intent was he on thoughts of Anthony. The two bohemian gentlemen studied the blue ribbing of Bobby's shorts when they twitched.

The boys were among the first to bid the company adieu, receiving a hug from Uncle Ned and departing the room amidst a chorus of good wishes. Mischievously hand in hand, they ascended the grand staircase.

No sooner had they cleared the landing than Bobby stopped, pulled Anthony to him, knelt and buried his face in the front of his trousers.

"Bobby! What are you doing! Not here. The room is just down the hall."

Bobby sat back on his heels and looked up with a leer. He might have been a gargoyle. Anthony laughed despite himself.

"Have you ever made love to an oriental rug?"

"Is it nice?"

"It smells of dogs and cats."

"Do you think I am depraved? Seriously. I think maybe I am. Do you think it's because I am an American?" In this chatty, serious way, he took Anthony's hand again in his and walked leisurely down the hall.

When they reached the room he jumped on the bed to approve its resilience. "It's terrific!" he said. He measured it with his body, first one way, then the other.

Anthony went into the bathroom and turned on the taps.

"I wanted it to be ready for later. It's a smashing tub, Bob!"

"You've never called me Bob before."

"You've never called me Antonio either."

“Yes, but I didn’t call you Antonio.”

“That’s what I said.”

“But you did call me Bob.”

“I know.”

“But you never did before.”

“I just thought I would. Don’t you like it?”

“Sure. My Dad calls me Bob. Oh my god!”

“What?”

“I have a Dad.”

“So have I. Most people do at one time or another.”

“Anthony, how can we have dads and be here with all these strange men?”

“Well, you wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have one.”

“And a mother. Oh, my God!”

Anthony checked the tub and returned. “Do you like it hot?”

“Yes! Here, get my pullover, will you?”

Anthony pulled it up over his friend’s head as he had countless times and stopped halfway as he also had countless times, and looked at the headless boy in front of him. “I like to look at you when you can’t see me looking at you,” he had said once. And Bobby had liked to be looked at. It was one of the ways they had of getting ready.

“I’m suffocating!”

Anthony pushed him back onto the bed and pulled off his shorts.

“You’re soft.”

“It’s because I can’t breathe.”

He pulled the jersey over his friend’s head and tossed it onto the floor and then undid his own trousers and kicked them away.

“So are you.”

“Not as soft as you.”

Anthony looked at his underpants. “I don’t see any difference.”

“Do you think we’re nervous?”

“Probably.”

“I love, you, Anthony.”

“I love you, Bobby.”

“Anthony?”

“Yes?”

“Will the tub run over?”

“Oh, my God!” He ran to the other room. Bobby lay across the bed. It was just his width. “It’s OK. There’s even an emergency outlet.”

“Good. Is it hot?”

“Pretty hot.”

“You can lie on this bed across, it’s so big.”

Anthony tried it. It was true. He touched his forehead to Anthony’s toes and still could not reach the end of the bed.

“If you scooted this way and I scooted that way we might get into some mischief.” They scooted, at the same time tossing their underpants to the floor. He snuggled his face between Anthony’s thighs and felt his heart begin to count: One, two, three four... He felt Bobby’s hand on his bottom and the hard wet end of his tongue. A shiver went down his back. five... six... seven... eight. He slid Bobby’s cock into his mouth, and felt Anthony’s lips on his own. Nine... ten... eleven. He paused. They were one now. There was no more he wanted ever than this. The subtlest nuances of change were the touch of a fingertip upon a chambered nautilus, or a soul, or some celestial instrument. Each was an impresario and each the instrument upon which the melody was played. They were a duet. Now *andante pianissimo*, now *pizzicato*, now *forte*, vibrating, resonating. And as the tempo grew and it seemed the tune would leap forth, suddenly a softness came from within the crescendo itself, a dampening. Then a *largo*. Felt so deeply. Taken so deeply inside. A diminution, a falling away to the discovery of a new melody. Then a progression, a move to the minor key, a recapitulation, building, building to the climax, now, ringing in their ears, flooding their senses, now and now and now... until the last sound, then quiet.

But not entire quiet. The sound of a sigh, a breath, then quiet.

Anthony would not move now for a few minutes. Bobby always moved first, changing his position, caressing his dark-eyed friend, kissing his forehead, licking the perspiration there, trying to remember the words that seemed to come to him in that moment that now had tied like a flock of swallows, and saying instead his one perfect word, Anthony, Anthony. Then, covering him with the bedspread, he walked to the bathroom.

He tested the water and stepped in. He knew that Anthony would come when he was ready and that he must not coax. It was a mystery to him. Anthony always withdrew to some far off place, for some reason that wasn’t

pain and wasn't joy but was of a different world. He savored in memory the moment when a part of Anthony's soul had entered his own, a hot hard spurt against the tender roof of his mouth. He lay back in the water, suffused with warmth and more contented than he had been for many days.

When finally he saw Anthony it was as if in a dream. The heat and fragrance of the sunken tub had lulled him into a reverie. He could not tell, for the moment, where he stopped and the world began, or where the world stopped and he began. Was Anthony in his dream or in the room, separated by the haze from the steaming pool? The other boy smiled at him and then looked away. He tested the water with his toe and then lowered himself to sit on the edge, dangling his legs. He put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands and studied the water.

Bobby closed his eyes and leaned the small of his back against the side of the tub. He opened them and looked again. The apparition was still there.

He was afraid to speak lest it go away. He wanted to say things that didn't have words anyway, so it mattered little. There might have been a shout, a pure volume, a chord, but not words. He had said love and it wasn't enough. Tears came to his eyes and ran into the bath water.

Anthony saw the tears and crossed to him through the mist. He kissed him. He didn't have to ask about the tears; he knew them. They were salty on his tongue. He felt Bobby hard against his leg and held him close. Bobby reached under his knees and lifted them until his calves rested on the tiles at his side. His matter-of-fact side was suddenly engaged with the observation that this tub was made in such a way that what was about to happen had to happen. Standing before Anthony, now seated, he would be perfectly matched. He kissed his friend on the lips, a long tender kiss and then gentled him back onto the warm tiles, lifting and parting his legs. Had he ever been this hard before? It didn't seem so. Was it looking at Anthony from this view? Anthony was soft. So vulnerable, so lovely. He kissed him there and then kissed the other place and wetted it with his tongue. Anthony sighed into the mist. Yes this was the thing he had been frightened to think about and yet, now he drew Anthony a little nearer and then put the end of himself there where the pink rose would blossom. He thought of it blossoming as in a time-lapse film and as the petals unfolded he fell into them, fragrantly, softly falling until a voice said his name and he felt the pain of Anthony's fingernails in his arms. But the voice called him in and the pain sparkled in



his head. He drew back a little and then in and the effervescence bubbled through him and again like that and again.

He pushed through. Now and forever, and forever and forever. Anthony was suddenly hard against his balls. He came back and then in again. That was it. Of course. And again and again and then... He cried out loud, “Oh God!” and burst like a profanity and a prayer into the sanctuary of his beloved.

Some time later, after their spirits had returned to their bodies and even a sense of humor to their lips, they talked about it all. They could not get enough of the savoring, the etching into their history of the event and, agreeing that something must be saved for another night, fell into a deep sleep, their arms still entwined, Anthony’s lips pressed upon Bobby’s neck.

## 18. A Foreclosed Flirtation

Weather permitting, breakfast was served at Haltmere Hall in the garden. There were tables there for the purpose. The staff served from a buffet table. This Saturday morning it was baked gammon with a mushroom souffle, a variety of fresh fruits and toast. The oranges were from the orangerie.

When Bobby and Anthony arrived most had already completed the repast. Their tardiness was observed and approved with a number of smiles, nodded greetings and even a smirk. They smiled at the company. Anthony blushed.

One could deduce, and most did. Their two dinner partners of the evening before conversed over a third coffee. They acknowledged the boys' arrival with a nearly simultaneous nod. Their own experience of the intervening hours appeared not to have diminished their appreciation of Haltmere Hall.

Anthony fingered a croissant to which, having buttered it, he felt an absent-minded obligation.

"I wonder what it will be like to be their age."

"Not so bad. I wouldn't mind looking like Christian."

"I thought you liked Terrence."

"Well, him too."

"What do you suppose they're talking about?"

"Us."

"Bobby! That's conceited."

"What do you think they're talking about?"

"Gardening."

"Gardening as in plowing and planting seeds?"

"Gardening as in roses!"

"Like the one you're sitting on?" Mischievously Bobby turned his head and smiled at the two men. Anthony stared at his souffle.

"I'm embarrassing you."

"No. I was just thinking of last night."

"What about last night? What a terrific hot-shot lover I am?"

"I was thinking about your rosebud."

"Oh." Now Bobby blushed. When it had been Anthony's turn that morning, Bobby had been frightened. There was something he hadn't talked about, as Anthony had guessed. And still hadn't. His shyness and his fear

had touched Anthony deeply, tenderly. But all of his reassurances had not been enough.

"I think you're right. I think we'll have to have a plan."

"I don't follow."

"Well, when they amble over and ask if we'd like to take a walk."

"You think they will?"

"Don't you?"

"Hmmm."

"I think we should make it plain that we're together."

"That's probably pretty clear already."

"You know what I mean."

"That it would be impossible for anyone in the world..."

"Anyone..."

"...to ..."

"Come between us."

"Precisely." He giggled. Bobby rarely giggled. It was not in his character. Anthony was somewhat startled. He conveyed this surprise. Bobby looked up from the fly he had been drowning in the last of the cream from his strawberries. "It's just that I was thinking of how I liked coming between you." He blushed again.

"We could tell them we come as a team."

"But only with one another."

"What if they get fresh?"

"They won't. They're gentlemen."

"Right."

"Anthony, do you think sex is addictive?"

"I think it's possible to be a whore."

"Not if you're a boy."

"Especially if you're a boy, around here. A girl could run around in her birthday suit and never get more than a request for fresh coffee."

"It's a shame though. You can see that they're lonely. And we do have some sort of obligation to Uncle Ned."

"I suppose so. I suppose we could just play around a little, just be friendly. My mother always says you don't have to do everything as if there were no tomorrow."

"Oh hell."

“What’s the matter?”

“Tomorrow.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“School. The stokers. I had almost forgotten.”

“I’ll tell you. Let’s just act normal and if they say Hi, we say Hi back and then decide along the way.”

“Did you ever read *The Time Machine*,” Anthony asked, as if from a sudden lazy curiosity.

“What is this about the time machine?!”

“What do you mean, what is it? It’s a book.”

“I mean is it book of the year or something?”

“Why?”

“Bryce-Jones talked about it in his microbes lecture.”

“Oh yeah, you told me. Well, there’s this other part about this garden of delights. Fruit dropping into your lap from the trees. That sort of stuff.”

“I don’t see any falling fruit.”

“It’s manner of speaking.”

“Well?”

“Well, they didn’t know what was in store for them, did they?”

“They got made into meat pies.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Anthony, is there something you haven’t told me, something about Uncle Ned, something about this delicious baked ham?”

“Be serious, Bobby.”

“I don’t think I want to be. I think you’re going morose on me. God, you don’t feel guilty do you?”

“No.”

“And there aren’t any moorlocks here.”

“That’s it. I couldn’t think of the name. Which ones were they?”

“I don’t remember. I think they were the ones with the falling fruit and the laps. Look, we agreed not to think about school and the stokers. Your rule. Remember the magic path?”

“OK. I’ll try. You know, I’ll bet if we told Christian and Terrence about the stokers they’d come in like the cavalry.”

“Oh, hi there, Porter. I’d like you to meet my friend from Manchester whom you may have seen on television now and then. He’s come to finish

your dental work.”

No sooner had they left the table and wandered sociably to the croquet court, however, then Uncle Ned arrived to tell them that there had been a call from the school. It was for Bobby. He was to return to the school on a personal matter. A visitor, it seemed. Someone who wanted to see him. More than that Uncle Ned didn't know, except that the caller had not seemed upset or concerned. That, in any case, was good news.

Anthony decided that he would accompany his friend. Bobby insisted that he would not. He wanted him here at Haltmere Hall, waiting. It would be something to look forward to when he returned. Whatever it was wouldn't take long. The only visitor he could possibly have was his mother and she could hardly tolerate his company for half an hour. He said it more matter-of-factly than bitterly. Still, it made Anthony sad. In any case, he agreed, but not without misgivings. Something troubled his heart.

Seeing Bobby dressed again in his long trousers and jacket gave Anthony a sense of unease. The tranquility of the weekend was, for the moment, gone.

They kissed quickly and, after a promise to Uncle Ned to return as soon as possible and a memorable bear hug from the comfortable giant, Bobby set out along the magic path and into the forest of Haltmere.

Anthony played a game of croquet with a boy named Jurgen whose father was at Whitehall and whose mother wrote advice to the lovelorn.

Then he wandered to the stables to say hello to a friend who was a horse. It was a black named Lightning. The horse was sympathetic to his loneliness and allowed his nose to be stroked, snuffling his contentment. Two boys worked at the other end of the stable – one a year or two older than he, the other a year or two younger. He knew it was no good speaking with them; the boys who worked at Haltmere Hall were from another world than his own. These spoke with an Irish accent. They might have been brothers, he thought.

Once when he and Christian had walked in the garden and two boys had been edging a bed, he had wondered aloud about them: where they came from, who their families were; and Christian had said that they were wards of the County, whom Uncle Ned had taken in. They lived together in the thatched cottage below the vegetable gardens. They rarely came to the hall.

The younger boy came towards him with a pail of oats. He was very dirty and not just from the day's work. It saddened Anthony unaccountably to see

him so. There should have been someone to look after him, he thought. Here was yet another of Haltmere's worlds but it was not a world of pretend. The boy might have been himself; the resemblance was startling. He poured a part of the bucket in the trough two stalls away and then moved to the one adjacent. Anthony stood dumbly, stroking Lightning's muzzle, watching. Then the boy was standing there next to him, waiting. He was in the way.

"Sorry," he said, and stepped back. But he did not step far back: he wanted to be near the boy. Furtively he glanced to the end of the barn and saw that the older boy was no longer in sight. He felt an unaccountable desire to engage the boy in conversation.

"This one's called Lightning, isn't he?" he said, knowing it had been too enthusiastic.

"Aye."

"Do you like taking care of the horses?"

"It's OK." The boy closed the gate and prepared to leave. Anthony felt an urgency to hold him there.

"Please...!" was all he could think of to say.

"Aye?"

"Will you talk with me?"

The boy looked over his shoulder to where the elder had been and then turned back. He looked squarely at Anthony. "Talk, then."

"What's your name?"

"Cyril."

"Mine's Anthony."

The boy picked up a piece of wire from the floor and bent it into a shape so that he could pocket it. He wore denim overalls like the ones that farmers wore and had neither shoes nor a shirt. His wardrobe was as scant as his conversation.

"Do you like living here?"

Again the boy looked at him. He seemed quite sure of himself. Anthony felt studied. He looked away.

"Look, I don't intend any harm."

"Don't you?"

"I don't understand. Did I say something wrong?"

"You're an odd one."

"Why?"

“The boys don’t usually talk to us.”

“Why not? Is it against the rules?”

“Look, I have to get back to work.”

He picked up the pail and walked down away. Near the end of the stable, he turned and looked back. Then turned the corner out of sight.

Anthony watched after him for a moment and then walked back outside. The smell of horse piss had made him light-headed. Why had he sought the boy’s friendship? Was it that he was already lonely for his friend? So soon? The way the boy had looked at him gave him a shiver. Was there something he should have known?

He started running toward the riding ring. It was as if he were running away from a sadness that had suddenly enveloped him like a cold mist. But he could not outrun it. He passed the ring and headed toward the woods. Even before he reached the shelter of the trees the tears were coursing down his cheeks and heavy sobs caught his breath. Then he fell to the ground and wept disconsolately. He had never felt so lonely, so frightened to be alone, so filled with terminal despair. He was sure that he would never see Bobby again, sure beyond a doubt. It was unreasoning, he knew, but nonetheless he wept. He searched for consolation, some thought to fasten upon, some obvious hope he had missed, and finding none, he slept.

It was nothing dire. That was what Uncle Ned had said. But what could it be? By the time he had cleared the grounds of the estate and was entering the wood, Bobby’s heart had begun to pound. He wasn’t even running. It was a family matter, wasn’t that what Uncle Ned had said? Family? What family? He tried to smile sardonically, as he had read that particularly hardened and cynical people do: for if it was a matter of his mother he was determined to be just that – distant, bafflingly self-possessed. He wished he smoked. It could be done better with a cigarette. He had seen Humphrey Bogart do it in one of those ancient black and white movies. Nothing dire. He wasn’t being pulled out of school. His mother hadn’t been arrested for smuggling.

Discovering that he was running, he stopped and caught his breath. He clenched his fists and swore under his breath. Of course it was his mother. It was one of her whirlwind visits between the Riviera and God knows where.

She just wanted to see her dear boy whom she missed so much. Well, she could bloody wait. She would be having a coffee with the headmaster in his

study. She would have her legs crossed, keeping impatient time with her toe, the heel of her shoe falling free, seeming that it might smack her heel with the beat but never actually doing it. The hem of her dress would be at her knee, her hand carelessly at her necklace as if it were a game that someone put a necklace on her every day and she had to discover without looking in a mirror, which one it was.

He would be trying, delicately, discreetly, to bring up the matter of the overdue fees. Once at another school Bobby had actually been in the room when the conversation took place. It had not been genteel. It was a Swiss school owned by a woman upon whom his mother's charms had the effect of lemon on an abrasion. It had been very unpleasant.

But not at St. Matthews. Not until the end of term anyway. It was a known fact that boys were forgiven, up to a point, the sins of their elders. So it was just a visit. What was it then that made him so anxious? Some intimation. Some feel of the thing. Perhaps it was just the disappointment of leaving Anthony. But if it was a visit, he could return by the evening. Better then to get it over with. He quickened his pace.



## 19. An Impulse in the Vernal Woods

How mistaken we are when we rhapsodize on the careless innocence of childhood! How much we have forgotten! And not without reason, for which of us could have carried the burden of *all* our memories across those parched lands of our youth and still have found a freshet of hope?

Only moments ago we left our hero resolved in his purpose and with firm foot upon the path to St. Matthews; now he is sitting with his head in his hands upon a cold and mossy stone in the kind of rustic ruin that might have inspired Anthony's beloved poet. Let us call it a chapel, for it seems now to serve the same purpose of refuge as for a wandering knight upon a troubled quest during the Dark Age of England. And indeed our hero might be such a knight except for his clothes. For is not his age the proper age? Are we not touched the more that one so beautiful should seem so despondent? Do we not catch our breath to see a beam of sunlight break through a chink in the ruin and touch that golden head?

It was a voice which was not the doves but was like the doves, the disconsolate cry perhaps of a peacock which had called as he walked.

"Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!" it had cried till he had to stop and listen. What spirit should call so compellingly but the spirit of Anthony his beloved, weeping himself to sleep upon the soft floor of that same forest? Among those who love deeply such things can and do happen. He saw Anthony in his mind's eye, recalled their parting kiss, remembered the unspoken sadness in his eyes, the unvoiced forebodings he had felt.

Do I have to leave all of this because she tells me again I have to? he asked the once again silent glade. "You make such a fuss!" his mother had said as he cried his heart out, leaving yet another school. "One school is like another. You'll make new friends." No! No! No! Not again. Not this time!

He was different now. Anthony had made him different; and he had a mission, a duty in the name of justice. A mission against the tyranny that Wells and Tully and the others had suffered. It did matter that he stay. This time he would not yield. He would throw himself on the mercy of the Rector.

He would work in the kitchen. He would become rich and dedicate a building.

He would return to Haltmere Hall and phone her from there. He had been away from the Hall, he would say, and had only now gotten the message. He would be offhand and cheery. Did she really want him to make the long walk when he was enjoying himself so much there? She would be by again in any case very soon. That was what she always said between the three- or four-month intervals. And she would feel relief. He would hear it in her voice; she would protest disappointment but there would be a lightness, a kidding, in it. How sensitive of him, she might almost be saying, to appreciate how difficult it was for her to see him, deal with him, carry the responsibility for his life when so preoccupied with her own. And that he should be self-sufficient, un-needing, even happy! Why what better reward for the trouble of her visit?

Anthony loves me, he thought.

But now his reverie was interrupted, for he heard voices coming from the direction of the path. They were indistinct still, being at a distance. He listened for a familiar resonance or a rhythm which would reveal their identity or what they were about, but could distinguish nothing. He listened again to find out where they were coming from. Were they on their way to Haltmere he might join them and be glad of the company. He could use a little cheer. But try as he might he could not tell whether they were coming or going. The path being so close, he should have heard them distinctly. Instead the sound was muffled. No, not muffled. Hushed. Whispered. It sounded, he decided, almost conspiratorial. Some deep plot perhaps, that only the woods might be trusted to overhear.

Curiosity getting the best of him he studied the wall to discover a chink through which he might observe them. He soon thought better of that prospect, however. He could see from where he stood that the entrance was a good three feet thick, consisting not of one but of two layers of mortared rock. The top of the wall adjacent to the path was only about three times his own height, though. From there he would have an ideal view.

Climbing the wall was not an easy matter. The rocks were worn and mossy. After two unsuccessful attempts he decided to try it barefoot. He removed his sneakers, stuffed the socks inside and put them at the side of the altar. This time he had better luck, finding purchases for his toes and using the corner the way he had seen climbers in movies use a rock chimney.

The top of the wall was like the forest floor itself, soft with mosses, tufted

with bracken, a comfortable bed – though hardly ideal for spying. It was too exposed and too narrow. Still, if one was not expected to be there in all likelihood one would not be spotted.

Bobby's sense of adventure was very short-lived, however, and the exhilaration he had felt in achieving the summit turned suddenly to terror.

For there at the side of the path, hidden among the bracken like a guerrilla combat troupe were Cardin and Blake. Naismith and Staples were walking to the chapel, one carrying a rolled carpet and the other with a pack slung on his back. One minute more and they would have had him. He caught his breath and tried to control the anarchy which suddenly possessed his bowels.

Naismith and Staples went to the altar and unrolled the carpet. It was an oriental which had seen better days. But what else had it seen? Bobby stifled a sob. Then Staples removed the contents of the backpack: a brass dish, two brass candle holders and candles, a thing that looked like Aladdin's lamp, also of brass, and four grotesque figurines with too many appendages. These last Naismith arranged carefully on a rock which he placed at one end of the carpet between the candle-holders. At the other end the brass dish and the lamp. Finally he took a box of incense from his pocket, placed a stick in the brass dish and lit it.

They did all of this humorlessly, which made the spectacle all the more terrifying to our young observer. Nothing like this had been described by Wells or the others, but there was no doubt in Bobby's mind as to the purpose of these preparations. Neither had there been any doubt in his mind now for the last several minutes as to the identity of the "caller". How could he have been so stupid? It was all so obvious now. Why couldn't he have seen it an hour before? But at Haltmere he had lost his wits. His mother indeed!

That was almost worse. That he had thought she might come, had played out the thing in such detail in his imagination! He felt exposed. There was only one thought which gave him solace. Anthony was safe.

Staples took out a joint and lit it. He took a deep drag and passed it to Naismith. The smell rose to where Bobby lay and seemed to make all the more palpable and inevitable for its sickly pungency, his inevitable fate.

Were they only to look up. Should he cough. Should the sob that sat so heavily near his heart force itself to his lips.

Naismith looked at his watch, walked to the entrance, peered out and returned to the altar, this time sitting on its edge. Had he reached his hand

into the grass at his side he would have discovered a pair of size eight sneakers stuffed with an unmistakably colorful pair of knee socks.

## 20. The Tables Turned

“Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well when our deep plots do pall.” Had Anthony been twenty-four instead of barely fourteen he might have dissimulated more effectively when he returned to the hall. He might simply have appeared pre-occupied, sad at the absence of his lover, out of sorts. But in these things he was inexperienced. He wore his distress plainly. When Christian and Terrence sought to distract him from his mood by leading over three horses saddled for a ride in the fields, he could not even get through a polite “no thank you” but burst into tears.

They saw at once this wasn’t just some passing lover’s mood. These weren’t tears of self-pity; they were the deep and wrenching sobs of a frightened child. They implored him to share the cause. He choked out phrases about the magic path, about rules, that “one mustn’t,” about “the other world” and then in the midst of this rambling he stopped, wiped the tears away on the back of a dirty hand and, with regained self-possession, looked them in the eyes and said, “I’ll never see him again. I know it.”

This at last was something to which they could bring common sense, not to say experience. For who among us who has more or less survived adolescence, hardened, alas by experience, has not learned that partings are rarely absolute. But this is not an understanding which a fourteen-year-old lover could or even ought to have. Children are, after all, empiricists. And so Terrence made the obvious and welcome suggestion that they ask Uncle Ned to ring up the headmaster and inquire as to the circumstances of the unexpected telephone call.

This Uncle Ned did willingly. His brows gave the first clue. Then his question: “Could it have been anyone else? Might his house-master have called?” It appeared not. The headmaster would look into it and call back.

“I should have asked at the time,” Uncle Ned said, replacing the receiver. But Anthony heard nothing except the beating of his heart and a cry of pain.

“We have to help him,” he said.

“The headmaster said he would find out and call back. I’m sure there’s some sensible explanation.”

“There is, Uncle Ned. I missed it. We both missed it. Oh God!”

“What is it, Anthony?” Terrence knew little about schools but a great deal

about action. The athlete in him sensed the readiness that had in an instant changed the boy standing before him.

"I need your help. If we run. Maybe. Oh God!"

"Tell us what it is, Anthony."

"There's not time. Please." And he took Terrence's hand, pulling him toward the door. "We have to help him."

"I'll come too," Christian said.

"Yes. Please."

"I'm not much of a rider," Uncle Ned apologized. "Can I do anything?"

But Anthony was out the door with Terrence still in tow. Christian looked puzzled, smiled.

"We can probably handle it," he said and followed behind.

Uncle Ned stood in the doorway, shaking his head, watching them disappear across the lawn, then went back to wait by the phone for the headmaster's call.

There was no escape route. Not even James Bond could have found one, Bobby thought. He could jump and he might even do it without spraining his ankle. But then what? They were taller and faster and he would be barefoot.

It was hopeless, unless by a miracle they never looked up and by an even greater miracle Naismith failed to see the shoes which were, even from where he lay, in plain sight.

It wouldn't be death, he thought. Wells was still alive and the others. There were four of them. Would they do it more than once? Would he pass out? Would they tie him down? And why? Why now? Hadn't they just had their fun with him? Hadn't he been a hero? What was it all worth? He thought of the night with Anthony. It was so gentle with Anthony. It was a holy thing. But in the morning he had been afraid.

Naismith and Staples were getting impatient. Staples paced. The incense burned out. He lit another.

"They'll smell it," Naismith said.

"I want them to. But not soon enough. They won't smell it till they've been spotted. Then when they're squirming and kicking and on their way to the sacrifice – then it will register. I love it."

"You're sick. Staples."

"You said it should be more of a ritual. It was your idea."

“Yeah, but not this Indian temple stuff. And olive oil.”

“Olive oil’s good. The Greeks used it.”

“Where the hell are they? What did Blake say?”

“I told you.”

“Tell me again.”

“He said something had come up at school. A family thing.”

“He didn’t say a family thing.”

“Something like that. I can’t remember.”

“Something’s wrong. They should have been here.”

Of course, Bobby thought, they would have expected Anthony too. Thank God he had dissuaded him. He could take it knowing that Anthony was safe. He would tell, too. He had had enough of their code. It was insane. The empire be damned. And when he told, Anthony would be safe forever. He could call to them right now. Tell them what he’d do, then see if they’d still go through with it.

But he couldn’t move. The thing was impossible. All he could do was wait.

Staples busied himself rearranging the altar. He didn’t like the rock the figures were on. He pitched it aside and began looking for another. He picked up one from the ground near the wall and rejected it. He probed at the grass around the altar with his toe. There was a long flat rock at the back of the altar; he couldn’t move it. He became annoyed. He began to search more methodically. Bobby prayed for a stone, somewhere between where Staples stood now and the side of the altar where his shoes nestled insecurely in the grass.

Then both things happened at once. There was a whistle from down the path. Cardin’s signal. Someone was coming. Cardin and Blake crouched lower in the bracken. Naismith sneaked around the outside of the chapel and crouched just below him behind a rotted stump. When he turned from watching Naismith he saw that Staples had the sneakers. At first he looked puzzled. He examined the grass in search of some other clue. He pulled out one of the socks and smiled. It was diabolical. He started toward the entrance and then stopped and looked up. Their eyes met.

But there was noise on the path. It was impossible but it sounded like horses. No it wasn’t impossible, the sound was unmistakable. He strained to see. Staples opened his mouth to yell and stopped. Then Bobby saw them

and his heart leapt. The cavalry. It really was the cavalry. He yelled.

“Anthony! Here! I’m here!” And he stood, precarious though his perch was, like Horatius defending the pass.

Reigning up, Anthony saw only Bobby. Terrence Buckingham, however, from his lofty perch upon Bucephalous, saw two very surprised youths among the bracken and Christian Starr espied a third and forth, one standing amazed by the wall of the chapel, staring at Bobby and a fourth rushing headlong into the forest clutching a pack.

Cardin stood among the bracken, pointed to Terrence and started to say, “My God, you’re...” But just then Bucephalous reared upon his hind legs in a most menacing way and Cardin took for the woods with Blake at his heels, Naismith close behind.

Anthony rode Lightning to the wall of the chapel where Naismith had stood but a moment before and stood in the saddle to help his beloved down from his perch.

“My shoes are inside,” Bobby said matter-of-factly, and so returned cataclysm to manageable reality. Then, still standing in the saddle, they embraced.

“I brought the troops,” Anthony said.

“Just in the nick of time,” Bobby said.

They all dismounted and heard the story of Bobby’s near fall. Christian and Terrence shook their heads. It had seemed impossible as Anthony had telegraphically related the bare facts during their ride. To see evidence with their own eyes left them astonished and outraged.

“They have to be apprehended and punished,” Christian asserted.

“They ought to be incarcerated!” Terrence said.

But Anthony prevailed. “We have already broken the rules of Haltmere Hall,” he said. “That is bad enough. We can’t take you any farther into our adventure than that. We have a plan and we will triumph. But you have been the best cavalry ever and we will always love you.”

And so saying he threw his arms around Christian and kissed him firmly on the lips. Then he did the same with Terrence and Bobby followed his lead. Their heroes could have asked for no finer reward. At last they rolled up the carpet for a souvenir (and perhaps for some later purpose), remounted their horses, Bobby at the front of Lightning, and cantered back to Haltmere Hall.



Anthony's fears had indeed been well-founded, Terrence told Uncle Ned when they returned. The call had been a ruse to lure him from Haltmere Hall and into a trap, where certain rituals of hazing were to be accomplished by older boys. It was an old game but with some new twists which were, he added without embellishment and in respect to the boys' wishes, in bad taste. The boy had been terribly frightened. As to the culprits, well, they had been frightened off and were not likely to try anything like it for a while. The boys were right; Haltmere Hall did not have its cardinal rule without cause. The path must once again be the magic path and life in the Hall must go on as before. Whatever else Uncle Ned learned was not from our heroes or their accomplices. The reader may be sure, however, that Uncle Ned had not lived these many years without having developed a resourceful and experienced imagination. His sympathy for the boys was both appreciative and generous. He announced a party.

Of course every night at Haltmere Hall was a party, but this one was special. Uncle Ned had planned some entertainment for the fair on Sunday and happily most of the entertainers had arrived that afternoon. There was a magician, a juggler, two acrobats and a small ensemble of medieval musicians. The costume attic was opened and marvelous discoveries made therein. Contests were held and prizes given. Balloons festooned the great room and Mrs. Pucker made a flaming dessert. There was singing, a great deal of laughter and more than a few of the guests sat closer than they had the night before.

That the party was for Bobby and Anthony was known to all, but as to why, that was a matter left to speculation. It was enough for most that they should be lovers, for of this fact no doubt remained once Uncle Ned had toasted them over frozen coconut frappees and they had, to everyone's delight, kissed.

Terrence and Christian, not being bound by the rule of ignorance concerning matters at St. Matthews and being understandably curious, were told the whole story bit by bit as the evening went on. They heard and approved the plan and wished our heroes well. Terrence hoped they would come to a game as his guest on the next holiday; Christian just hoped they would come back to Haltmere Hall. The four of them were the last to retire and only after long and wonderful talk about love, friendship and life. Their older friends of course had more to say about life and it was gladly heard,

even if the boys felt they had more to say about love. Bobby and Anthony imagined themselves some day like these good men, and the thought somehow eased the burden of the present.

They parted at last from their handsome rescuers before the door to their bedroom suite and in a friendly but more restrained manner than on the field of battle gave again their thanks.

There are some moments which must be enjoyed alone and during which even the most appreciative and sympathetic reader would feel an intruder.

And so, like Terrence and Christian, we will stand just for a moment outside the door to their pleasant abode, thankful for our good friends, happy to see them reunited, knowing all is quiet, safe and secure for the moment, and then we will take our evening's leave from Haltmere Hall.

## 21. A Tale of Three Troubled Hearts

It is remarkable how quickly our sensibilities change course in the face of altered circumstance. We move from the sublime to the commonplace, from fear to safety, from romance to business in a twinkling. Surely it is some remnant feature of our brain which allows us to survive, even at so young an age as our heroes, the caprices of fortune.

Just a moment ago. it seemed, we watched as they parted from their friends in a land and time apart, snuggled beneath the great down comforter of the canopied bed and into one another's arms. But already two days have passed at St. Matthews school and the lives of our lovers and their friends have taken some very new turns.

No sooner did they return than Martin and the others gathered in their room to tell the news: Porter had been sent down! Summarily! Small's information was that he had been called to the rector's office on Friday evening, that his guardian had been there to pick him up and that he was not even given an opportunity to pack his trunk. Of course it was the caning.

Everyone knew that. The rector had made no secret of it. The boys were ecstatic. "Hurrah for Ames," Wells said. "Hip, Hip..." they chimed.

But Bobby held up his hand, shook his head and sat heavily on the bed. The cheer fell to a bewildered silence. Then Bobby and Anthony told them the story. They didn't leave out the rescue by the adult cavalry and there was certainly cause for a moment's awed admiration on that score; but the clear message was that the stokers were mad as a ruptured hill of ants and out for revenge. Of course they would believe that Ames had turned Porter in and that would amount to breaking the code. After all, Ames had agreed to the terms. It was a bad situation. Public sympathy, which had been so clearly on their side but two days before, now appeared to be divided.

They would have to put the plan into action; now it was more important than ever. If they could get the photographs they would have bought their safety. It was a scheme properly within the etiquette of the code, involving no adults, having the quality of a proper caper and which would finally end the stokers' reign of terror. Swann compared the escapade to a game of capture the flag. The others liked the analogy; it put the thing in proportions nearer their size and age.

It will not surprise the reader that Bobby Ames was the one who stepped forward when they again took up the question of the "bait". It was something he and Anthony had discussed the night before among the kisses, caresses and pleasant cataclysms in which they passed the night. Anthony had been categorically opposed to it at first. After all, Bobby had already done his part. He was the hero; no more was required of him. But Bobby argued his honor. The humiliation of the candy-sticking had been rekindled as he lay atop the wall of the woodland chapel and as his eyes met those of Staples.

He knew the terror which had been in his eyes and recalled with a combination of self-disgust, shame and impotence, his utter loss of control during the candy-sticking. His friends took him for a hero; Staples and his comrades knew him for the coward he really was.

He explained this to Anthony as best he could. Anyway, he reasoned, the plan was a good one and the risk was minimal. But if he got the photos, then he could look the butt-room gang in their collective face without blinking. It would be a caper even they would have to admire.

And so he announced to the boys that afternoon, as he sat there on the edge of his bed, that he and Anthony had agreed: he would be that bait.

There were protests, of course: it was someone else's turn. But heroism is not so much a trophy won as a way of life. It is perceived to be that by one's peers and accepted without public complaint in one's heart. Bobby was indeed a hero though he may little have thought of himself as such.

It was an easy matter for Small to take the photographs at Tuesday tea. First he took one of the Rector and his wife seated on the chesterfield with Flanders and Swan, their Pomeranians. Next one of the Rector's diorama of the battle of Hastings and finally several of his friends. Having established himself as a camera bug, he became invisible. Alert to the moment when the jam would expire and Mrs. Soames-Winthrop would make her weekly remark on the sweetness of boys teeth, he quickly offered his services as pantry boy and was commissioned to bring a fresh jar of Wiley's best plum jam from the second shelf back by the dried fruits.

There was no one at all in the kitchen and so he took his time. He opened three different switch boxes and photographed their contents. Then seeing that the designation of switches was penciled on the inside of each door he photographed those as well. Hiding the jar of plum jam behind the canned soups on another shelf, he picked up a jar of strawberry and returned to the

room.

“Sorry to be so long, Mrs. Soames-Winthrop,” he said with perfect aplomb, “but I couldn’t find the plum. Will this be alright?”

Mrs. Soames-Winthrop had been so sure about the plum, but if the boys were happy with strawberry that would be fine too. The fact that the jar remained untouched was not because the boys didn’t like strawberry preserves fully as much, if not more than plum, but because they had so quickly and conspiratorially consumed the first jar that the very sight of the sweet red compote gave them a queazy feeling.

Mason studied the photos with a magnifying glass, while the boys paced Marten’s room in hushed conversation, and then announced with a flourish that phase one of Operation Blue Boy was completed. He showed them where he had circled in red marker the notation on one of the box doors.

TRUMP HOUSE. Three cheers were given to Small, who blushed, and to Bobby several handshakes, sober nods, and encouraging words. He looked thoughtful. Anthony, who had half hoped the photos would be a flop, sat in the corner and looked intensely at a copy of Queen, his poor heart too weak at that moment to have supported a greater exertion.

The date was set for the following Tuesday.

It was not surprising that in the days following Bobby should have become preoccupied, but it made the thing all that much harder for Anthony, to whom a caress, a long comfortable hug, a tranquil snuggle under the covers would have meant everything. It wasn’t that Bobby failed, as he had once before, as a responsive lover, but that he did not linger as they had loved to at Haltmere Hall. He rushed heads and tails, for example, and Anthony was helpless but to follow. It was more like falling down a well, he complained, than floating.

And when, afterwards he would want to prolong their love-making, Bobby would be impatient.

“I dunno, Anthony. I just don’t feel like it,” he explained. “I have this little ball of fur in my tummy. It makes me impatient.”

It made Anthony all the sadder. He couldn’t concentrate. He felt sad the way he had felt as a child when his arm got broken and he grieved for it. He feared for his beloved who was now as much a part of him.

Bobby’s preoccupation was certainly in large measure a matter of simple fear. But he was also preoccupied with strategies. He was not unknown among the fifth-formers. There were those who had been solicitous when he

was still an outsider and with whom he had recently had little to do. Now it was necessary to rebuild. That would be complicated of course by the affair of the candy-sticking, by Porter's firing and the debacle in the forest. Bobby Ames was certainly not any longer a private figure, though there were few, if indeed any, who knew him as Anthony did – who knew for example that the luxury yacht had been more a prison and that the mother with the grey pearls was not much of a mother at all.

He was certainly talked about. And in large measure approved. Word had gotten around finally – Helter Skelter had made sure of that – concerning the Porter affair and because of that Bobby had been pretty well indemnified.

With all but the stokers, that is. Their grudge went back to that moment when he had appeared at the observatory and Porter, because of his own grudge, had allowed Mason to slip through their fingers. The matter of Anthony Parker's tears during the storming of Trump House had added to the mystery of Bobby Ames. Anyone who paid any attention at all to such things now knew that they were lovers.

It was both coincidence and a certain reserve on Summers' part which accounted for his absence on both the occasion of the candy-sticking and the affair in the chapel. He had missed the former because of a detention.

Afterwards he had commiserated with Ames, disavowing any connection with Porter. He detested him, he said. Bobby only partly believed this. On the occasion of the ambush. Summers had made up an excuse. He didn't want to be a part of it. Not from any scruple but because he hoped for more than a ceremonial deflowering in the case of Bobby Ames and thought he might just have a chance of getting it on his own. He had seen something in Ames' eyes. Something. It was worth a try.

He was right. There was something. And it bothered Bobby Ames more than anything in his young life bothered him, for there was a complication to his bravery. He thought Neville Summers was a very handsome, if diabolical, character and it was this contradiction which perplexed him and made him impatient. He had told Anthony truly. There was a furry knot in his tummy; but it was not an altogether uncomfortable one. He did not doubt Summers' sins; certainly Wells was to be believed, and Tully and Smart, and Mason. Summers was evil; he had a heart of stone, a perverse nature and an obsession. But it was sometimes difficult for Bobby to take a full breath or to sit still when he watched Summers play cricket. It made the whole thing

impossible. He could not contemplate his own capture without feeling a terrible excitement. Was this why he had volunteered? He hoped not. He felt unworthy of Anthony and deeply saddened to have seen this reflection of himself.

On the next day Bobby made his first move.

Well, not precisely his first. Lacking any other strategy he had sought out Summers eyes several times at meals on Monday and Tuesday and smiled. It seemed a stupid thing to do but his instincts told him it was probably effective. And of course it was.

Following chapel on that Thursday – and having again exchanged a glance with Summers – he made his way slowly and as if contemplatively to the grassy bank of the pond, behind the oaks to a place where good boys were advised not to go.

Shortly behind him came Neville Summers carrying a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* and appearing for all the world a most sober young man. He found Bobby apparently dozing, lying upon his back in what the butt-room gang had dubbed the sacrificial position: knees raised, hands behind his head. *Great Expectations* lay opened beside him. Summers took a few moments to contemplate this pastoral scene; and it must be said in fairness that his eyes lingered more briefly than we might have expected on the view which Bobby's position provided. Unlike our hero, Neville Summers was not "underpants crazy". He found it more appealing to contemplate those parts of Ames with which nature had endowed him and which, though generally on view, did not admit of such study as his repose now allowed.

His arms, for example, his elbows. The soft and unmarred quality of his skin, the vulnerability of the hollows beneath his arms, the lie of his hair upon his brow, the slightly snubbed and sensual look of his nose, the fullness of his lips. All of this he took in with the eye of a connoisseur. But with something more as well. He could not have given it a name.

This is not to say that his aesthetic apprehension of the sleeping lad disarmed him completely. He surveyed their surroundings methodically enough, discovered them to be quite alone and wrestled momentarily with the possibility of rape. He set this thought aside, however, as he had before, in recognition of the possibility which had recently preoccupied him: that Bobby Ames might be complicit in his own ruin.

He seated himself about four feet away, alongside Bobby, and opened

Jane Austen. He had read the first page the fourth time when Bobby stretched, blinked his lovely lashes and turned to find his book. Instead he discovered Neville Summers, apparently absorbed in Jane Austen.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," Neville replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world to have chosen this twelve square meters of earth above all others on the grounds of St. Matthews School.

"I guess this must be a favorite spot of yours."

"No. As a matter of fact the ground is a little damp. I don't think I've ever sat here before."

"Around here, I mean."

"No."

"Oh. Well, I come here."

"So I see. It's a little dangerous, isn't it?"

"Dangerous?"

"I mean it's pretty isolated."

"Oh. Well, if you want to read..."

"Is that why you came here?"

"I brought my book."

"Yes. People usually bring their books."

"You brought yours, too."

"So I did."

"Well, there you are."

"And there you are."

"Here I am."

"How are you getting on?"

"Pretty well."

"You like bunking with Parker?"

"What!?"

"He's your roommate. Isn't Anthony Parker your roommate?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Lucky boy."

"He's a nice person."

"I wouldn't throw him out of bed."

"We don't sleep in the same bunk."

"Why not?"



"I don't want to talk about Anthony."

"Anthony?"

"I mean Parker. We call one another by our first names. I can't get used to this last name thing. Anthony, I mean Parker doesn't mind."

"I can believe it."

"Well, that's the way it is."

"And there's Bryce-Jones. He's a pretty powerful friend."

"He's very nice to me."

"Well, he put his seal of ownership on you pretty fast."

"Nobody owns me."

"Sorry! We are touchy, aren't we?"

"Well, it's true. I can have as many friends as I choose."

"I should think you'd have more friends than you could manage."

"Well, I have prep friends; but they're... younger. They're nice and all that..."

"But just kids."

"You're laughing at me, aren't you? I guess I'll go on back now." Bobby stood up to leave.

"I wasn't making fun. I think English boys are apt to be less mature than Americans. That's probably the problem." He lay back in a methodical pose; in fact the same pose in which earlier he had discovered Bobby. Since Bobby was now standing, it provided the greater inspiration. He might have to rape him after all, he thought. He couldn't stand much more of this. Bobby had taken two steps and stood beside him.

"I don't really know. I've never had any American friends. German boys are pretty mature, I think. Italian boys are."

For all his experience of one kind, Neville Summers had very little of the other. The experience, for example, of affection. It confused him no small amount right now, as a case in point, that he liked Bobby Ames and that he really cared less about raping him than being with him. As if to put such thoughts away from himself he put his hand on Bobby's ankle.

"French boys are pretty young. At least the ones at the school in Switzerland were."

He stroked his calf.

"I really do have to get going."

"You'll never make friends that way." Neville sat up, taking his hand

away.

"I really have to."

"I'm disappointed."

"Why?"

"I thought we might be friends."

"Oh."

"I guess not."

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it."

It was a totally unlikely thing for anyone to say; it was not how Summers had imagined the conversation might go. Quite simply, Ames' remark had touched him and suddenly brought into flower some nearly frosted bud in his nearly frosted heart. For some insane reason he recalled an incident from childhood. He had gone to the circus and stayed awake all night recreating the excitement for himself. The next morning he had arisen at dawn and run all the way back to the field only to find it empty of everything but paper cups and small heaps of manure. The grass was trampled where the tent had been. While he had lain awake creating the circus, at that very same time the circus had been disappearing. It seemed impossible.

"I can produce references."

"Oh, I'll decide for myself. You were nice to talk with me though. I liked it better than sitting here reading *Great Expectations*."

"Prep English."

"Yes."

"I remember it fondly."

Bobby took a few steps away and paused. "I'll tell Mr. Booker you liked Prep English."

"He's not one of my references."

"Bye, Summers."

"Bye, Ames."

Summers watched him until he disappeared. He had a problem. It was that Bobby had not moved his ankle and he had not tensed up. With the other boys things had been different. He was not in the mood for these complications. He must get it back to normal. He closed his eyes and looked again up that brown leg – where that firm brown thigh became pale and then... He reached into his right pocket and closed his eyes. He had no more than to touch himself. Then he sighed.

It must be said in Bobby's defense that the performance cost him more than he had imagined it would. For truth and beauty were, in this young frame, alloyed. He had been deceitful, flirtatious and successful. It was the success that most frightened him, for he had not thought of his beauty as so powerful an instrument in the camp of the enemy. That he was attractive Anthony had told him and he was prepared to believe it. He liked being attractive. But Summers had been too easily seduced. Of course that was what he had set out to do. But it was supposed to be harder. It gave him an ache at the bottom of his stomach. It gave him something else there as well, something that didn't take reasoning with. When Neville touched his ankle it had started. It was disturbing. He wanted to be with Anthony. He wanted to confess it all to Anthony, every detail. Anthony would say that it was all OK, that he was not a harlot. That was Anthony's word for everyone who did sex with more than one person. Not his mother, though. Anthony said that she was just lonely. And Summers? Was he lonely too?

He thought of poor Wells and Tully and the others. How Wells had cried once and run into the other room so no one would see him. How he was so ashamed and it wasn't even his fault.

He felt better. It was in a good cause. He was doing his duty. But what would happen when the alarm went off? Then whatever had happened would be over and he would be the enemy. Neville Summers would look at him and know he was the enemy. And it was a shame because the hand on his ankle had been very strong. Strong but evil. Evil but...

He suddenly craved Anthony's body. All of it. Anthony's tenderness. But more than tenderness. Now he wanted Anthony to come into him and was no longer afraid. He could feel the wish of it in a place where he had not felt wishes before. If not with Anthony then surely something horrible would happen to him. He felt as he sometimes did at the top of a building, fearful to look down, not because he might fall, but because he might leap.

## 22. An Afternoon with Charles Dickens

On Monday Neville Summers finished the fish and chips hurriedly, drank off a glass of milk and, forsaking yet another postmortem on what Naismith had dubbed the Terrence Buckingham affair, stepped out into the fresh afternoon air. He was not himself. His appetite had improved, the normal lethargy which he felt was momentarily gone, and he actually spoke a pleasant word to Adam Spooner without calling him pee-brain. He almost whistled.

He would have accounted for this mood, had anyone been in the position to exact an accounting, by explaining that he was in commando readiness.

Summers was a great fan of James Bond, or for that matter of most any good adventure tale in which the hero's preparation of devices and strategies took on the obsessive quality of masturbatory make-believe. His head was full of such stratagems for the conquest of young Bobby Ames. He had spent the better part of the night rehearsing them, changing them, refining them; always short of the point of actual consummation however, for the real thing, he felt, was just moments away.

Few human sentiments are pure and unalloyed though we may pretend for a moment, by isolating our attention, that they are. In fact there was something else nagging at Neville Summers' imagination, something which was unwelcome and unpleasant. He wanted Bobby Ames to like him. No, he wanted Bobby Ames to love him. There was the Neville Summers who wanted to bugger the lad all the way from hysterics to insensibility; and there was the Neville Summers who wanted to protect him against such brutality.

The adventurer in his fantasies was free from such womanly scruples; but the sixteen-year-old boy who had touched the lad's ankle was confused.

He was optimistic even in the presence of these vague misgivings that things would work out, that his pleasure, whatever form it might eventually take, would be as much as one might hope for. After all, luck was with him.

He might easily have been a member of the reception party in the forest. It was on more a hunch than a plan that he had demurred. And not easily. For he had been uncomfortably confident that the plan would succeed and that he would have missed out. But it had not and his absence from that group now served as evidence of his reformation. And that Ames had not only escaped

but with such wonderful style, and with his virginity intact, now made him all the more desirable.

To consider Ames' escape in this way, at the expense of his comrades, gave Summers not the smallest scruple, for loyalty was not to be numbered among his virtues.

Now he reconsidered these things with an epicurean care, sitting just out of sight of the door to the refectory, behind a copper beech. He had brought a book and pretended to read it. In fact he awaited the appearance of Bobby Ames.

Bobby emerged at last from the building by himself, exchanged a few words with Tommy Wells and started in the direction of the pond.

Tommy Wells! Why him of all people? Of course Ames would know. He would have to know. And yet there he was, walking to that same spot, knowing he would not be alone for long, perhaps even waiting. The boy was complicit. He had to be. The thought gave him a momentary sense of weightlessness. A small bubble of gas rose to the bottom of his throat and stayed there. He took a deep breath and forced himself to walk to the library and back before making his way to the pond. It would not be well to appear too eager.

He found Ames lying on his stomach with his Dickens open and his chin on his hands. He stopped to catch his breath and approached.

"Hi."

"Oh, hi, Summers."

Summers lay on his back and shaded his eyes from the sun.

"I think Blackwell should be sacked," Summers volunteered. "He teaches sciences, doesn't he?" Bobby asked.

"He pretends to."

"We don't get him till next year."

"If you're lucky, you'll get Spurgeon instead. Blackwell is an egregious ass."

"What did he do?"

"He tossed my bloody magnetism report in the dust bin because my footnotes weren't separated from the text by a bloody line. Can you believe that?"

"It isn't fair."

"There's no fair with adults, Ames. There's just power."

"I guess so."

Summers rolled on his side facing Ames.

"Well, have you thought about it?"

"About what?"

"You know. What we talked about last time."

"About being your friend?"

"That's it."

"Some."

"What's that on your T-shirt?"

Bobby pulled it away from his chest to see and made a half grin.  
Summers took heart.

"I didn't know I had that one on."

"KISS A WINNER HUG A LOSER. What does that mean?"

"A friend of my mother's gave it to me."

"Which are you?"

"I don't know. Neither, I guess."

"How's Dickens?"

"Tom?"

"No, Charles. Your book."

"Oh, it's OK, I guess. I wasn't thinking about it."

"What were you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"I'll bet I know."

"What?"

"Whether you can trust me."

"Maybe."

"What have you decided?"

"I don't know."

"I'm not going to rape you, Ames."

"Don't talk like that."

"Well, that's what you're thinking about. You think I'm just like Naismith and Blake. I'm not."

"I don't want to talk about this."

"You know what happens to girls that get raped?"

"What?"

"They go frigid. If anyone touches them they go catatonic. They become

old maids or schoolteachers.”

“So what?”

“I don’t think you’re like that.”

“Like an old maid?”

“You know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do.”

“Tell me then.”

For an answer he put his hand on the back of Bobby’s right leg just below the hem of his shorts.

“Don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t like it.”

“I don’t believe you. Why are you so up-tight, Ames?”

“I’m not up-tight.”

“Yes you are. In a minute you’re going to get up and leave, just like last week.”

“I am not.”

“You aren’t?”

“I mean I didn’t either last week. I had to get to class. Anyway, why should I or not?”

“Do you want me to go away?”

Bobby didn’t answer. He became interested in a piece of grass just below his nose. Summers moved his hand under Bobby’s shorts and ran a finger along the leg of his underpants.

“Summers! What are you doing!”

“I think probably I’m giving you a boner.”

“You are not.”

“I’ll bet I am.”

Summers reached between Bobby’s legs and up under his front, at the same time rolling him on his side.

“Cut it out. Summers.”

“I told you.”

“It’s because I’m ticklish.”

“Oh, you should never admit that!”

He tickled him beneath his shirt. Ames squirmed from beneath and

Summers straddled him, kneeling at the sides of his chest. Then he sat back slightly on Bobby's middle and for a split second the game stopped. It was long enough for Summers to untuck Bobby's T-shirt and pull it up to his chest.

"What are you doing?"

"Tan check."

"Huh?"

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Like what?"

"Your tan. You must use a sun lamp."

"Sometimes."

"Here, lift your arms."

He complied and Summers pulled the shirt over his head; it happened without thought on his part. Summers smiled. Bobby frowned back; he had been tricked.

Summers grasped Bobby's wrists. Then he held them to the ground beside Bobby's head and leaned over, taking Bobby's right nipple between his lips and tonguing it. Bobby squirmed; he had meant to speak but instead he made a sound. It surprised him. It inspired Summers to harsher attentions and Bobby to an exclamation of pain. Summers turned his attention to the other nipple and the more Bobby moaned his protest the more inspired Summers became. Then he finished and sat back, releasing Bobby's wrists.

Bobby covered the tender places and winced. Summers leaned and ran his tongue over the back of Bobby's hand, running it between the fingers and probing back to the tender tip.

"No more. Please, Summers."

But Neville Summers probed and Bobby's hand slid aside of its own will and then moved to the back of Summers' head. He was very gentle now and Bobby sighed.

Then Summers moved his mouth lower along Bobby's breastbone and down, until his tongue probed Bobby's belly button, and at the same time he pulled Bobby's shorts and underpants down below his rump. Bobby reached for them, but automatically, not with any real insistence. Summers took Bobby's irresolute hands and placed them back on his chest. Then he removed Bobby's shorts. Bobby thought, "I am naked." He closed his eyes. He did not want to see what Summers was seeing. He felt Summers take his



ankles and push them toward his ass, so that his knees were raised. He could not bring himself to open his eyes. He waited.

He let the sensations guide him. He reached for Summers' arms and gripped them. There was hair on them. He waited.

He opened his eyes. Summers was staring at him, smiling. It made him ashamed to see his cock rearing up like that. Drops of wetness were at the end of it. He made a whimpering noise. He gripped Summers arms more tightly and closed his eyes again. He felt the brush of Summers' lips and he cried out, lifting himself toward them. They withdrew. He cried again. He pressed as far as he could press and fell back. Then he felt the touch again, but he would not go after it again. The end of him was in Summers mouth.

His body tensed. It ached in a different way. The mouth withdrew, just the tip of a tongue now, He sought for the mouth, he pushed and heaved his body up.

"God, Summers, for God sake! Please!" He took his hand from Summers arm and reached for his cock. But Summers caught his hand and pressed it back. He cried from frustration.

"Goddamn you, Summers! I hate you! I hate you, you fucker, you bastard!"

Then the mouth was there again and took him all at once. He felt the back of Summers mouth, his tongue on his balls, his hands rubbing his nipples. He pressed. He wrapped his legs around Summers' chest and squeezed till he thought he would crush him. And then it came. He floated in the air; he was dizzy. He shot a gallon, two gallons; it came and came and when he thought it was over he came again. Then he fell back, exhausted.

He was aware of Summers rearranging his own clothing and then sitting in the grass beside him. Finally aware of his nakedness, Bobby sat up. He looked away.

He felt Summers staring at him. He pulled on his shorts and turned to him. Summers held the T-shirt out and smiled.

"You are definitely a winner, Ames," he said and held the T-shirt as a mother might for a young child. Ames lifted his arms to receive it. When his head popped through the opening, Neville Summers kissed his forehead.

"Definitely a winner!"

## 23. The Man with the Half-Crook Pipe

That night as they prepared for bed Bobby told Anthony of the encounter with Neville Summers. He told much more than Anthony might have chosen to hear, but hear it he did for he knew the burden in his dear friend's heart.

Bobby fidgeted, paced, wandered, shivered, and once for the length of thirty-seven seconds stared at the wall while Anthony listened. When he had gotten the last of it, like a leprous venom, out of his soul, he let out a great sigh and sat on the floor by the edge of the bed, his head against Anthony's knee.

He felt relief in the confession, but realized that Anthony could understand it only from outside. That was just as well, for he would not have wished upon Anthony the ugly confusion which he now felt. Summers was no longer merely the name of a common enemy: he was that surely, but he was also someone who had shown Bobby the edge of the known world and in whose hands pain and pleasure had become confused.

He told Anthony that he felt like a whore. Perhaps it was genetic, he said. Anthony demurred.

"You are certainly not a whore!"

"Well, there was Terrence."

"What?"

"No, I don't mean that. I mean I flirted with him."

"Well, I flirted with Christian."

"Not the same way."

"What way?"

"You'd have to be a whore to understand."

"That's not a fair argument."

"Oh, Anthony, I feel so sad. I can't tell you how sad. Way down deep like something died."

Anthony knew nothing he might say and so he said nothing. Instead he stroked Bobby's head as it lay upon against his knee and then leaned and kissed it.

"I don't deserve you."

"Don't say things like that."

"It's adultery."

"What is?"

“What I did with Summers.”

“It can’t be adultery until you’re married.”

“I think we’re as married as I will ever be with anyone. That’s why it’s so awful. I love you so much.”

Anthony moved his hand to Bobby’s chest and gently covered his right nipple.

“Careful.”

“I know.”

“I think Summers was pretending I was a girl.”

“You mean the nipple rape?”

“Uh huh.”

“They’re really red.”

“They’re really sore.”

“Bobby?”

“Uh huh.”

“What if you hadn’t told me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if you had kept it to yourself about Summers. That scares me more than anything else.”

“How come?”

“I don’t even like to think about it. It gives me the shivers.”

“Not telling you?”

“Keeping it a secret. Having it here in the room watching.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t say it better. We just always have to be honest with one another, Bobby. That’s the most important thing. Because if we aren’t then it will die.”

“I know.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Sure.”

“You didn’t say so.”

“I was going to. You seemed so sad.”

“I think I’ve said it all now. I didn’t like liking it, Anthony. That’s most of it. It was bad stuff.”

“Did you like the candy-striping?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Really.”

“Really! What do you think I am?”

“It’s not what I think that’s the problem. It’s what you think. You think you’re a whore who gets off on being beat up.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes you did.”

“I guess I did. Well, I didn’t like the candy-sticking one bit; and my nipples hurt like hell. And my pump aches and I don’t like it and if anyone does that again to me I’ll smash his face.”

“Why didn’t you smash Summers’ face?”

“He had my arms pinned. I told you.”

“I thought that was what you liked.”

“I don’t even know what I liked. I don’t want to talk about it any more.”

“You asked if I was angry.”

“And you are.”

“More scared than angry, really.”

“Scared that I really am a whore?”

“Shit.”

“That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“Yes it is.”

“Summers will boast. That’s all.”

“He’ll tell everyone that I’m an easy lay.”

“Something like that.”

“And they’ll line up outside the refectory.”

“Don’t make fun of it, Bobby. I mean he’ll tell people that when you say no you don’t mean it. Then what do you do when you really do mean it?”

“I wish you’d be angry at me instead.”

“I’m so afraid of losing you. Bobby. I don’t know what I’d do. I really don’t.”

“That won’t happen, Anthony. Nothing could make that happen.”

He took Anthony’s hand from where it rested on his shoulder and kissed the palm, tickling it with his tongue. Anthony squirmed. It was one of the tricks lovers learn about one another, a sure-fire fuse. Bobby turned his side to the bed and reached an arm between Anthony’s legs, beneath the cuff of

his shorts and squeezed his hardening penis. Anthony sighed and lay back on the bed, squeezing Bobby's arm between his thighs. That too was a signal which never required to be translated but only acted upon, a signal Anthony had given the first evening at Halmere Hall, sitting on the side of the tub.

The bodies of fourteen-year-old boys, like the bodies of cats, move between the realms of activity and repose in so natural and comfortable a manner that even a careful observer will often miss the moment of passage.

Their lovemaking was as intense as redemption required. What had been two troubled souls, again became one. Lips met, arms held, passions flowed and hearts sighed.

Swept as they had been so suddenly from the world of Latin declensions they had taken no heed of that very proximate world which was called St. Matthews school.

When Bryce-Jones opened the door on a chance evening round, confident that the boys were, as they should have been, attending Mrs. Soames-Winthrop's slide presentation on Hittite art, his heart stopped. It was not the confusion of underpants and running shorts upon the floor that caught his eye, nor the two Latin grammars upon the same desk nor even the two chairs at that same desk, but the two boys upon one bed. Ames and Parker were wrapped as much in one another's arms as it is possible for human beings to be entwined and still breathe. Parker's bottom rested just at the center of the coverlet, upon the school seal which had been somewhat anointed in the process of their love-making. Their legs were still entwined. Bobby's left arm lay upon Anthony's back. The air they breathed was one another's.

The first thing St. Michael did was to cross himself. It was quite unconscious and should not be given any significance. He often crossed himself when confused. The second thing he did was to look away. This too was an unconscious act, inspired no doubt by the Pavlovian primacy of social convention and based on a worst case situation in which the boys might actually be awake. The third thing he did was to notice that they were not. It was only at this point that sentience occurred in his awareness. He felt warm.

Then he felt cold. Then he thought he might faint. Then he felt a kind of paralysis in his lower body which turned out – and it was at this point that his mind actually took charge – to be an erection.

His mind, like a sleeping fireman with a hangover, awoke to the emergency unprepared. First it disapproved of things indiscriminately: of

the fact that the boys were not at the lecture as they should have been; of the clothes thrown in a heap on the floor; of the fact that they had not thought to lock their door. He disapproved also of his own erection which he considered an accidental and incidental physiological response to shock rather than anything else. And at last he disapproved of the shocking scene before him.

Disapproval requires a fairly high level of intellectual functioning, one which calls for a good deal of sorting out. Some things that one notices must be set aside for later consideration. They are noticed but not really noticed, especially if they threaten the equilibrium of sound judgment.

Bobby Ames' pubic hair for example. It was blond. Bryce-Jones, simply as a matter of curiosity, had wondered. The sun had so transformed the rest of Ames body that his eyebrows were not a reliable indicator. And of course there was nothing under his arms. It was something he had noticed quite accidentally one day.

And there was the wet spot. And something not quite dry about Parker's bottom and the legs. It took a moment to sort them out and in the sorting one had to be on guard for genitals which might shock one's sensibility. But there were none to be seen. All buried in flesh. There in the middle.

Bryce-Jones moved a little farther into the room, quietly, carefully and then froze. Bobby changed position in his sleep. Just slightly, seeking a more fetal repose. In so doing he revealed that place in the middle. Bryce-Jones' heart stopped for the second time but not for so long, it being more practiced now in the experience of shock. Reason came on the scene almost immediately and told him what he had known it would tell him. It was perfectly clear what he must do, as clear as it had been on the earlier occasion. He must awaken them. Only then, knowing themselves discovered, would they appreciate the magnitude of their transgression against... Against what? Against... Bryce-Jones closed his eyes and bit hard into his lower lip. It bled. He dabbed at it with his handkerchief. No it wasn't his handkerchief. It was a pair of size-twelve underpants. He held them against his face. It was against social convention. Against morality. Against motherhood. Against mother!

Yes, he would awaken them so that they might see themselves through his eyes, see the enormity of it. Perhaps then...

He didn't finish the thought, for his mind had become distracted by his

hand. It was moving in the direction of Bobby Ames' penis. He watched with a distracted interest as it touched the end. Ames stirred, lay back and parted his legs. 'Like an animal getting its belly rubbed,' said an observer in Bryce-Jones' mind smoking a half-crook pipe and wearing a mackintosh. He had one foot on the rail of a fence and was peering over. He knocked out the tobacco on the post and smiled crookedly. 'He loves it,' the man said. 'Can't get enough of it. Go on.'

Bobby had stiffened quickly and now his hand reached to where Bryce-Jones' was. "Anthony," he said drowsily, "I love you, Anthony."

It must have been this avowal which caused Bryce-Jones to tense his grip, which caused Bobby Ames to awaken, yell and awaken Anthony and for all three of them for one fraction of a second to form a remarkable tableau.

What Bryce-Jones had intended to say was of course hopelessly compromised by the grasp which he still had – but now quickly relinquished – on Bobby Ames' penis. And so instead he simply said, "Sorry." He said it again as he closed the door. Then with complete presence of mind he went to the phone in Skelton's study, called a cab, went to his own room and packed a suitcase and left St. Matthews school without so much as a glance back.

His mind was elsewhere. It was on the man with the half-crook pipe, and wearing the mackintosh. He would understand about this. About everything. And he would find him. It was just a matter of time.

## 24. Ames Becomes an Artist

The next day it was clear that Bryce-Jones was gone. For want of any explanation of that fact, and with concern for keeping the good opinion of Lord Bryce-Jones, the rector let it be known that there was a family emergency and that he would return once that was over. But none really believed it. And Clara Grundle, who had little patience with official versions of things, did little to support this one. It was not what she said but what she didn't say, the way she shook her head and pursed her lips. There were rumors, of course, as there always are. Curiosity detests a vacuum. And in a boys' school the rumors invariably take the same form. He had been caught *in flagrante delicto*. Boys didn't disappear over night unless they were. But with whom? None could or would say. Even Small's network could pick up nothing.

Swann's theory was different. He believed that the scorching stokers had done him. "To set an example," he said and "to clear the decks for the big one." The "big one," he explained, was the grand finale, the *auto da fee*, the twilight of the preps. His theory won little support, however, for Ames and Parker confided in the group that, while they had been doing their Latin, they had seen a cab arrive and Bryce-Jones get in it. Clearly he had left on his own steam. The boys were concerned, however, that someone they had considered might be a staunch ally in a down-and-out fight, was now departed. It gave a greater sense of urgency to the plan.

The official version of Bryce-Jones' disappearance crumbled once and for all two days later when Lord Bryce-Jones arrived with livery, attorney and outrage. Someone, it doesn't matter who, perhaps Small who liked to stop by Mrs. Dimplewhite's desk for a mint now and then – heard Lord Bryce-Jones booming from behind the rector's closed door. Clearly no one knew what had happened to St. Michael.

None, that is, except Helter Skelter who had a suspicion that a strange letter he received in the mail two days later might be from his disciple. He could not be certain and, lacking certainty, chose the path of guarded consideration. The letter, very rambling, oblique, even encoded, spoke of a search for someone the writer referred to as the man with the pipe. The dread spirit, St. Matthew, the Gemini twins, Julius Caesar and the "golden one"



also made appearances in the letter which spoke of a long journey, a descent into the underground and a search for the holy grail. It was signed, "The Watcher".

If it was Bryce-Jones who had authored the epistle then it was a significantly altered Bryce-Jones. Even the handwriting, which Skelton compared carefully to that of his protegee, was different. He decided to wait for a second communication before making a decision.

It was now Saturday. The caper was scheduled for the next Tuesday during prep tea. The boys' sense of urgency about the caper was intensified by news that morning that two preps had been discovered in the boat house by the rowing master, apparently under the influence of some hallucinogenic drug. They were taken to the infirmary and the doctor from Tuppington-on-Smart was called in. He examined them and confirmed the lay diagnosis.

"I'll bet he didn't examine your bloody sphincters!" Swann remarked wryly after breakfast. They had invited the boys over for a debriefing and had let them in on the plan. This was now the second case where drugs had played a part. Bret Tully had also been semi-delirious when he was taken to the infirmary. He had been put on disciplinary warning for it. It was a couple of capsules, he told Anthony afterwards. He had been too stoned to know better.

It was an effective gimmick. Small observed. It completely removed attention from what was really going on and compromised the victim's credibility. Had the boys decided to break the code and tell, none would have believed them. Hallucinations, the rector would have said.

The war was on, that was certain. Nothing except strategies had changed.

Summers was not a part of this latest episode. The boys had confirmed that. He was playing for bigger fish, Martin said, and looked significantly at Bobby. It was true and Bobby knew that better than any of them, except Anthony. He wished Summers had been a part of it. It would have made his mission easier. He asked about the Polaroids. The boys said they couldn't remember. There were too many other lights in their heads.

The plan had matured over the next four days. Ames, realizing he would have to have a way of removing the cardboard on which the Polaroids were mounted, decided to become an artist. He wasn't of course. He had very little talent, in fact. But Anthony was pretty good and had a portfolio of about the right size. If Bobby could get the portfolio into the room and the

cardboard into the portfolio, then the rest would be easy. Anthony covered his own name on the portfolio with a new label and did an elegant illumination of the name Ames, in gold and green.

Bobby carried the portfolio to lunch the next day and, when Summers found him afterwards at their rendezvous, he was painstakingly touching up a portrait of Anthony which, at Martin's suggestion, his friend had done using a mirror. "You are ruthless, Martin," Anthony had said. Martin had shrugged his shoulders. It was a good idea, Bobby had to admit.

"I didn't really think I'd find you here today, Ames."

"Why not?"

"You seemed upset yesterday."

"I was."

"But..."

"But here I am."

"Wearing bluejeans."

Despite himself, Bobby blushed.

"Yes."

"It's actually warmer today. Is there some other reason?"

"What happened yesterday. It was partly me. I flirted."

"That's true. So what?"

"Well, not today. I'm not that kind of person."

"What kind of person?"

"You know."

"A flirt?"

"Someone who plays around."

"How many boys have you done it with. Ames?"

"Two."

"Really?"

"That's what I said."

"He's the other one."

Summers' indelicate allusion to the portrait made Bobby suddenly withdraw. Summers had a way of getting him into positions he didn't like.

"Look Ames, I've done it with half the school and so has everyone else. You don't know what playing around is. By the way. I'm flattered. I do like you, Ames."

He hadn't meant to say that. But he was flattered and something sleeping

in his imagination had awoken for a moment and spoken the words. He sat down at a respectable distance and pulled a blade of grass.

“Can I see the rest of your pictures?”

“There are only a couple here.”

He handed over the two that Anthony had provided and studied the portrait of Anthony with a critical eye, as if contemplating its improvement.

“They’re good. I’d like to see more. Maybe you’d do one of me some day.”

It was a turn in the conversation which Ames had not contemplated and gave him an unpleasant start. But he was quick to recover and pleased with his own wit.

“Maybe some day. You have to know somebody very well before you can do his portrait.”

“Like you know Parker.”

“Like I know so many things about him: things you learn as a roommate. Like how he keeps his room neat, and what kinds of clothes he has and how he walks around while he reads a book. Stuff like that.”

“If you saw my room you’d think I was a dustman.”

“How come?”

“Junk everywhere. I never pick things up. Except my records. I’m very fussy about my records.”

“That’s the kind of thing I mean.”

“Maybe you could come up to my room and bring some pictures and then you could see. And maybe you’d have an idea about drawing me.”

Bobby nearly grinned with satisfaction. Today it was clear who was leading whom and it wasn’t Neville Summers diddling his nipples.

“I don’t think I’d better do that.”

“You mean yesterday? Look, Ames, you said it yourself. You wanted it as much as I did. And today? I’m sitting over here and you’re over there and we’re having a very civilized conversation. I don’t rape people, Ames.”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it.”

“OK, you do that. I’m off to cricket practice.”

He stood and brushed the creases from his trousers.

“And Ames...”

“Yes.”

“It’s much too hot for jeans.”



## 25. The Caper

During their next two meetings Summers behaved impeccably. And, to his credit, so did Bobby. He wore jeans both days and did nothing provocative. Having made his appearance as an artist he decided not to push his luck and so returned to *Great Expectations*. Summers brought his Jane Austin and, for the most part, they read. On Monday Bobby agreed to visit Summers' room and to bring his drawings. He said he could come during prep tea. He didn't think Mrs. Soames-Winthrop would miss him. That worked out for Summers as well.

After lunch the boys synchronized their watches: Mason, who would throw the switch. Martin, who was coordinating the caper, and Bobby.

Anthony, though not at the very center of the action was certainly at the heart of the event and synchronized his as well.

It was with considerable anxiety that when three-thirty arrived Bobby left the security of their room for his rendezvous, clutching Anthony's now somewhat enlarged portfolio. They were to meet outside the library and when Bobby got there he found Summers waiting.

They discussed the headmaster's sermon from that morning's chapel and agreed it was abstruse, all the while advancing in the direction of Trump House. The conversation was brittle rather than witty as it had been by the pond. Bobby sensed some nervousness in his companion, to accompany his own. He looked at his watch. It was three thirty-five. The alarm was to go off in twenty-five minutes. As they crossed the threshold Bobby felt a slight paralysis in his right foot.

"It's bad enough to hear the head when it's his day. But twice in a week is more than one ought to have to bear."

"Yes. It's his day, isn't it? Funny, I'd forgotten."

Bobby heard himself say this in a perfectly normal tone of voice, despite the sirens which suddenly went off in his head and the earthquake which shook the building. Of course! The headmaster always did Tuesdays. How on this Tuesday of all Tuesdays in his life could he have failed to notice! With a conviction bordering on certainty that the headmaster had come down with the mumps and was quarantined against tea parties, he ascended the stairs.

There were no other boys around. He remembered Tully's story, that they dropped in later. But he didn't think they would, as much as it might have eased his burglar's conscience. He was quite sure this would just be between Summers and himself.

The room was not unlike his own, but neater. The two posters were modern, filled with lines and blocks of color, the kind he disliked. There were a few things thrown about but, in large, the room was tidy. Obviously Summers had taken some pains to prepare for his visit. It touched him, but not deeply or profoundly. He knew what Summers wanted, was even sure of it. The only thing of any warmth at all was the *Blue Boy*. How odd, he thought. But also the sight of it made his mouth dry.

After a few minutes of awkward conversation about the modern prints, Summers asked to see his drawings. They knelt over them on the floor. It was 3:50. In ten minutes there would be either a petulant ring from a dust-encrusted clapper or a deafening silence.

Summers liked one of the headmastery done in charcoal. The headmastery, he thought. Odd. Everything depended on the headmastery. Was Mrs. Soames-Winthrop pouring tea or wasn't she?

He had intended the drawings to provide the necessary interlude – now nine minutes – before the alarm went off, if the alarm went off, if there was a tea, if Mr. Soames-Winthrop wasn't already on his way to the hospital with yellow fever. At best there weren't enough drawings for nine minutes and at worst Summers would want to save them for later. The obvious thing that he had not counted on was that the floor should be the best place to view them, that they should have inspected them side by side and that the study of art should in no way encumber Summers's simultaneous study of physiology. Most of the drawings were of their friends; some were figure studies, though, thankfully none were in the nude.

Summers was infinitely resourceful. Examining a drawing of Wells lying on his side, his hand under his head. Summers thought there was something not quite right. So he had Bobby strike the same pose. It took a good deal of adjusting and by the time Summers had him the way he thought he ought to be, his objective had been achieved. His touch was firm and authoritative and Bobby responded as he must.

Remarking next on the quality of line in a sketch of Mason tying a shoe, especially the line of the backbone, he traced Bobby's very gently, pausing

for a moment at the lower end. Concerning his sketch of Martin, Summers remarked matter-of-factly that he should have done him in the nude, thereby including those parts that most gave a boy that combination of strength and vulnerability.

“That the male genitals are exposed is a beautiful thing. Have you ever seen David?”

Bobby said he had not.

“Yours are more beautiful. Really. I’m sorry if it embarrasses you to hear me say it. But you really ought to know.”

The commentary continued as it might have from the floor of the National Gallery before a Botticelli. Certain tremors not unlike those of very mild epilepsy, however, were now apparent in our imposter artist’s young and very vulnerable body. A slight vibrato entered his voice as he displayed next the shading exercise which Anthony had done on that fateful day, of a pair of Martin’s jeans hung on the back of a chair.

Summers’ suggestion that they might compare the rendering to the object itself was made with a studied dispassion bordering on the diabolical. Worse than this, however, was that Summers made no move to advance the project and Bobby realized with a small desperate horror that his own trembling fingers were undoing his own buttons. But even this complicity was not enough for his tormentor who, he realized, fully intended to see the exercise through, for he methodically removed Bobby’s sneakers, held out his hands for the proffered jeans and then arranged them on a chair according to the contours of the drawing. Then he returned to the rendering and, apparently abandoning all interest in his physiological investigations, began a critique.

Bobby recollected, with that same earlier mixture of feeling, the moment by the pond. Terrified that the alarm would not go off on schedule, he was equally concerned that it might. Now as he stood in only his jersey and underpants, aroused to a state of dumb paralysis, stiff as a poker, Summers, in a matter-of-fact voice, encouraged him to return to his kneeling position so that they might study the remaining drawings. Bobby would remember later that he thought of looking at his watch, but did not. In any case he knelt as instructed and listened astonished as Summers continued his commentary.

He might have returned at this point to some more ordinary frame of mind had his aching body been allowed to calm. But Summers was an adept at this

game and in an offhand way sustained that tension which had our poor hero in its thrall. Bobby became vaguely aware that there was a connection between the front of him and the back and that the desperate state of his penis was related to the finger which tickled the rim of his ass. But no sooner would he press himself upon that probing finger than it would appear at his front drawing him in the other the direction.

While all of this was happening on the kinesthetic level, his mind was racing to make sense out of things. It explained that he was really a hero taking a great risk in behalf of his fellow men; it took note of where the *Blue Boy* was hanging and made a quick calculation of the time it would take to turn it, detach the cardboard and place it in his portfolio. It explained to Anthony that he was not enjoying this one bit, that it was a necessary part of the strategy.

Then it all happened at once; he could not say which first and which second. He was on his back, Summers had gripped his ankles and was forcing his legs back by his head until he cried out in pain. Then Summers had his thing out and was on top of him. Then the sound of the bell, the students running in the halls, someone pounding on the door and his escape.

Then a chase, around the room, over the bed, a catch, an escape, Summers swearing, half crying with frustration and finally their collapse, each at an opposite side of the room.

Somehow they dressed. Summers laughed. Bobby managed a shocked smile. Suddenly he was elated. It had worked! He was safe. And when it came right down to it, he knew he had not wanted Summers great big thing anywhere near his back door. That gave him the greatest relief. He had, for a moment, wondered. Opening the door they joined the crowd of departing students. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped, popped his eyes open and dropped his jaw.

“My drawings!” he said.

“It’s not a real fire, stupid!” Summers retorted.

“I’ll get them. You go on.” And he turned and ran back up the stairs.

With a clarity of mind which stopped time, sound and human history, he entered the room, closed the door behind him, took down *Blue Boy*, removed the chart, placed it in his portfolio, returned the picture to its place on the wall, closed the portfolio and descended the stairs.

So great was his feeling of exhilaration as he stood outside, clutching it



securely, that when Summers came up beside him he managed to say, quite coyly, “You promised you wouldn’t do that.”

“I couldn’t help myself. Look Ames...”

“You were going to bugger me.”

“Don’t use that word. I was just doing what I thought you wanted me to do.”

“No you weren’t. You were going to put me on the chart.”

“The what?”

“Goodbye, Summers.”

And as he walked away out of the confusion, the fire truck could be heard down the lane and the headmaster could be seen running down the gravel path trailing most of the prep class behind him.

Ames caught Martin’s eye and patted the portfolio. Then he caught Anthony’s and smiled. Even at a distance he could see the weight fall from those small and beloved shoulders and he felt good. He was not a whore. He would tell Anthony that tonight.

## 26. Where Airy Voices Lead

There was a celebration in Martin's room immediately following the caper. Each of the boys who had played a part told his story, only slightly embellished, for the entertainment of the others. Mason, whose task had been to short-circuit the alarm wires, Swann, who had been given the task of keeping Mrs. Soames-Winthrop out of the kitchen, Small who had the responsibility of Mr. Soames-Winthrop and, of course, our hero whose story was the most eagerly heard and reheard.

Mason had been pleased to discover, on studying the electrical diagram, that nothing more would be required of him than that he momentarily connect two contacts with a wire which he might easily carry in his pocket. The connection would trip the alarm and, once tripped, it would continue to ring until someone who knew what he was doing reset the proper relay.

This time he did not enter the kitchen on an authorized search for the jam, but on the QT, while Swann and Small distracted their hosts: Small with a card trick and Swann thinking that he might just have cracked a tooth. While the one let Soames-Winthrop search unsuccessfully for the ace of diamonds and the other seek for a chipped enamel, Mason slipped into the kitchen, did his work and slipped out. It wasn't until several minutes later that the party became aware of the ruckus across the lawn and trooped over behind the headmaster to discover the fifty fifth form evacuees milling on the lawns of Trump House.

Ames somewhat edited his own story, in consideration of his dear friend, as a reflection of his own modesty and because he could not think how to tell the whole story without sounding a little compromised. He was able to embellish the preliminaries so skillfully and amusingly, however – allowing himself several double-entendres and witticisms which in actuality had occurred to him after the events – that the crowd was well pleased and gave him three cheers.

It was Small who finally suggested that they look at the prize which had remained all of this time still in the portfolio with Anthony's drawings.

Wells jumped to his feet. "No," he said. And then, seeing he had surprised them with the suddenness of his exclamation, he added, "Please." Now, of course they understood.

“You look, Wells,” Martin said, handing him the folder. “See if it’s the real thing. And if it is, then lets just wrap it up and put it in a safe place.”

Everyone was a little disappointed but of course no one could say that. Bobby especially was, regretting now that he had not taken the time to look earlier. He would not have wanted to say why he was disappointed, or even to think about it very much, but he was.

Small was about to suggest that Wells remove his own picture and then let them see the others, but held his tongue.

Wells looked at the cardboard and nodded.

“Yes, this is it,” he said and then folded it in two at the center, taking the plastic tape from Martin’s desk to fasten the edges. “I can’t believe they took these pictures,” he said and then while he was trying to bite the tape where it wouldn’t tear, they noticed he was crying, and that was the last anyone thought about looking at the pictures that afternoon.

“What do we do with the scorching thing?” Swann blurted out. He had not meant to blurt and if there had not suddenly been such a silence it might not have come across as one. But no one minded.

“Number one, we have to get it in a safe place, and fast, before Summers and his buddies pay us a call,” said Martin.

Everyone agreed and everyone had a different suggestion: the belltower of the Market, Mrs. Soames-Winthrop’s pantry, in the stacks of the library, on the back of the picture of Wellington in the refectory, buried in a plastic wrapper in the woods. But it was Anthony who had the best suggestion and carried the day. And he and Ames together undertook the commission.

Hector Skelton was correcting maps of the African continent. Lesotho, Zambia and Chad appeared to have given the boys the most trouble. And, of all places, Morocco. He was making another red X on Bret Tully’s submission when he heard the knock on his study door and looked up.

“Come in... Oh, Parker and Ames. What a pleasant surprise. Back from your weekend in the country, are you?”

“Yes sir. It was weekend before last.”

“Really? I always lose track of things this time of the year. One week flows into the next. But you enjoyed it?”

“Oh yes, we certainly did, sir.”

“And you, Ames?”

“Oh, yes, sir!”

“And are you looking forward to going back?”

“Oh, if we only could, sir.”

“You know what week this is, Parker?”

“The last week of April, sir.”

“And what comes after that?”

“The first week of May. May Day! Of course!”

“What’s that?” Bobby, impatient to get on with their mission, clutching the folded cardboard under his arm, asked more from polite interest than real curiosity. But the warmth with which Anthony answered surprised him.

“It’s also Uncle Ned’s birthday and he has a party. A May Day party. And the juniors do a play. What’s it called, Mr. Skelton?”

“A masque.”

“That’s it. In costumes. And dance. I was a fawn last year. Wells was a woodcutter and Mason was his wife.”

“I spoke with Uncle Ned just yesterday. He said he hoped the two of you would be able to come for the party. I explained that you really didn’t have a weekend coming at this point and he mentioned something about your last visit, something about an unpleasantness?”

“Oh, yes, sir.”

“Well?”

Anthony looked at Bobby and Bobby at Anthony. Finally Bobby spoke.

“I don’t know the rules – I mean the codes, you know...”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well I don’t know them as well as Parker and the others and so maybe I can say something without breaking them. I mean if I don’t know them...”

“Yes, Ames.”

“Well sir, there are a group of fifth formers who are being particularly hard on the prep class.”

“I think we’ve seen the last of the worst, don’t you, Ames?”

“Well, sir, there are others. And it’s not just hazing, sir. I don’t mean that. Worse things than that. Sort of like the tattoo but not exactly.”

“Yes.”

“Well sir, it’s a kind of game. They have been trying to get to each of us so that they could, well... do this thing that is very unpleasant, and...”

“And that’s what happened to Bobby in the woods, sir. One of them called and pretended he was calling for the headmaster and said Bobby had to

come back to the school, and they tried to ambush him.

“Ambush!”

“Well, they tried sir. But we stopped them.”

“You and Ames?”

“Me and two of Uncle Ned’s guests.”

“I see. And now?”

“Well sir, we think we have bested them. We have something here...” – he indicated the parcel Bobby was holding – “...that is very compromising of this group, sir. In fact it’s quite incriminating and...”

“It could get the whole crowd sent down if the headmaster saw it!”

“And how did you come by this...”

“It’s photographs, sir.”

“...by these photographs?”

“Ames pinched them from Summers’ room. Behind the picture of *Blue Boy*.”

“I see. And these pictures are your bargaining chip.”

“Sir?”

“Yes sir. They are our bargaining chip. Knowing we have the pictures the fifth-formers won’t dare bother us any more. And sir?”

“You want me to keep the pictures.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you intend to tell these fifth formers that I have them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And of course I am not to look at the pictures, which is why you have spent half a roll of plastic tape wrapping your package.”

“Nobody has looked at them sir. Only one boy whose picture is here.”

“And he said they are the real thing.”

“The real thing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“This is all very unusual.”

“We know, sir.”

“And you don’t think the thing should be given to the headmaster straight away?”

“Oh *no*, sir! We would all be drummed out. Please, this way, sir. We have them where we want them.”

“Point and match.”

“We hope so, sir.”

“But if my curiosity should get the best of me and I should open your parcel and look at the pictures, then I would have to tell the headmaster?”

“I would rather not say, sir.”

“Of course, Parker. Well, hand it here and I will put it in a very safe place. I won’t tell you where. That’s the way they do it in the movies, isn’t it? In case you’re captured and given a truth drug.”

Ames smiled.

“Right, sir.”

“Well then, about this May Day party. You say you’d like to go back to Haltmere Hall?”

“But we haven’t a weekend, sir.”

“True. But I will need help with the juniors, won’t I, with Bryce-Jones away? And if I were to ask them who they would like to have along, who do you imagine they would nominate?”

Bobby blushed.

“So I would be very grateful if you could arrange your schedule so as to accompany me.”

“But sir...”

“And you’d better pick someone to give you a hand. Someone with a flair for the theatrical would be particularly good, someone who knew what a masque was supposed to be all about, who might even write one.”

“Well, Parker, sir...”

“Good choice. Well then, that’s done. By the way, Uncle Ned says some of the other boys who were in last year’s masque will be there as well. Some of your friends.”

“Oh, thank you, sir.”

“Yes. Well, off with you now. Oh, Ames.”

“Yes sir.”

“Where is Chad?”

“Chad, sir? I don’t think I know a Chad.”

“Never mind. Good afternoon boys.”

“Good afternoon, sir.”

Martin wrote the letter:

To The Stokers:  
Courtesy of N. Summers

Please be advised that we have Blue Boy's back-side in our possession as a means of protecting our own. You are in no danger as long as we aren't. Truce?

Signed,  
Certain members of the prep class.

The next day a small white handkerchief could be observed with its corner secured under the sash of Neville Summers' window, fluttering slightly in the breeze. It was to Summers' credit that, like an honorable general, he commended the enemy on the success of their strategy. It was from Bobby Ames that he wanted some greater assurance than the note that the photographs were safe. They were, Ames said, as long as Summers kept his dogs on a leash. "It was different with you, Ames," Summers said. "But I'm sure you don't believe that."

To his credit Ames didn't reply, but extended his hand, which Summers shook, and that was that.

As it turned out all of the boys except Martin and Swann were planning on going to Haltmere for the festivities. Martin didn't approve of Uncle Ned or Haltmere Hall and Swann was inclined more to an expression of loyalty than by the pursuit of society, but he was sorry not to have both.

Anthony worked with Skelton on the masque. It was based on a line from Keats:

He ne'er is crowned  
With immortality, who fears to follow  
Where airy voices lead...

The airy voices could be the voices in the woods along the magic path to Haltmere, Anthony suggested and made the story his own: the little boys, weary, dispirited, trudging away from the dank halls of St. Matthews, enter the woods, are entertained by wood nymphs, played a tune by Pan, dance with the nyads and emerge on the grounds of Haltmere Hall transported from the world of the ordinary to the world of imagination.

As the week wound down Sprinkles House wound up. The air was filled with anticipation of the May Day festivity. Anthony had assigned parts and was enjoying his role as director. Bobby was in charge of props and scoured the campus in search of a donkey's head which Skelton recalled having once been used in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and had persuaded Anthony ought to have a place in the masque. Anthony wrote the part in but Bobby's search was unsuccessful. He did however, turn up the two parts of a horse which Mrs. Grundle, with some clever alterations, was able to turn into a pony of an appropriate size for Justin Pilgrim and Duncan Purdy. It was given the part written for the donkey.

Adam Spooner was given the leading role on the absolute promise that however nervous he might be he would not wet his pants. It would, Bobby explained, divert the concentration of the audience and take from the overall dramatic effect of the piece.

Swann's uncle George who was a member of the communist party sent him a very large hamper from Harrods in celebration of May Day and he shared it with the gang on Friday night. There were three bottles of champagne and everyone got a little bit foolish, ate a little too much rich food, talked about things that it was forbidden to talk about, and in general had a marvelous time. Bobby had to help Anthony back to their room where they both collapsed on the bed and in trying to remember the second verse of *You Are Old Father William* and still fully clothed, fell soundly asleep.



## 27. Return to Haltmere Hall

It was a remarkable procession indeed which traversed the enchanted way between St. Matthews School and Haltmere Hall that Saturday morning on the first of May. Helter Skelter wore bright yellow trousers, a blue and green striped morning coat, a broad-rimmed hat and carried a gnarled walking stick with a head in the shape of a chimpanzee. It seemed to the older boys that he walked with a more sprightly air than was his ordinary habit, and certainly it was a surprise when he burst into a round of *Scotland's Burning*. But they followed with the rounds as they walked in the procession: first the crocodile of juniors, then a scattering of preps, some side by side where the path would accommodate that and finally a tail of fourth-formers who had themselves once been third Sprinkles boys and wouldn't have missed the May Day celebration for all the gooseberry fool in Tuppington-on-Smart.

Clara Grundle, who had never been to Haltmere Hall and therefore knew nothing of the culinary opulence one found there, had packed a box of Welsh cookies which Wells carried under his arm and which now, in the festivity of the expedition, he opened and passed along the line. Even Helter Skelter had one, humming to himself the whole time and, after the last swallow, starting off a new round with *Old Tom is Cast*.

The juniors, whom Skelton had scrubbed and burnished to a particularly rosy luster, were resplendent in crimson and blue, the school's colors. One rarely saw such a sight at St. Matthews school, it being the custom from the time of Cromwell to deracinate adornments and to express the school's traditions in ways other than the sartorial. But Hector Skelton, pointing to examples in nature and most especially among what he called the windborn kingdom, considered adornment a god-given right of the male species.

And so he had himself designed, and had sewn each year by a tailor in London, a costume – he preferred the word to 'uniform' – for the junior boys.

It consisted of crimson knee-socks, dark blue shorts which came not very near to the knee at all, a white shirt – which was really more of a blouse – and a crimson jacket with gold buttons and the school seal on the breast pocket.

One rarely saw the crimson crocodile, as the school was wont to call it, fully displayed. The costume was more likely to be seen in parts, a jacket on one boy, the shirt on another, the shorts on yet another, each companionably

arrayed with the more mundane articles of dress which comprised an ordinary boy's costume at St. Matthews school. But on this bright and cheery first day of May the Crimson crocodile was as Skelton had intended it should be. Not a knee greened with grass, a sock ungartered or an errant shirt tail marred the tableau.

The older boys were the plainer by comparison, though certainly not unremarkable in their own qualities. Wells and Mason, who had spent their hamper money at the haberdashers in Tuppington-on-Smart, wore matching broad striped rugger shirts, also in the school colors, and Small sported a slightly oversized red blazer which he had picked up at a jumble sale and from which he had removed the crest of a girls' public school.

"It is true," Bobby observed to Anthony as they walked.

"What is true?"

"The play. The masque. You know, the thing you wrote. I mean, it is happening, isn't it? Going to Haltmere Hall."

"Where airy voices lead."

"That's it.

"Do you remember what happened here?"

"I'd rather not."

"No, not the thing with the stokers. That was way back. I mean us."

"Oh. Yes, I remember."

Anthony reached over and took Bobby's hand. If anyone noticed, nothing was said. After all, they were almost at Haltmere and there it was a matter of convention.

The grounds had been set for the performance. There was a grand marquee over the croquet court and colored banners hung from the windows of the Hall. The guests who had already arrived – and there were enough of them to make our friends wonder where they all might sleep – perambulated the grounds in small groups, many with walking sticks or umbrellas with which one might observe them from time to time, accentuating a point of conversation, or investigating some object at their feet.

The arrival of the crimson crocodile with Helter Skelter at its head was, as the reader may imagine, an event which caused heads to turn, salutes of welcome to be given and even, from a group of ten or twelve in the gazebo, a polite pattering of applause and a few shouts of "Here! Here!"

Uncle Ned met them half way across the lawn with a great largesse. He

knew all but six of the juniors and greeted each in such a way as to distinguish that welcome from all others. The little boys who had not been at Haltmere before and who now stood aghast at the spectacle of Uncle Ned, he greeted in the most civil and formal way, taking the hand of each in turn as Skelton introduced him, doing a slight bow and saying that he was delighted, charmed, honored and most pleased to welcome them to Haltmere. Adam Spooner thought this quite delightful and laughed out loud, which inspired the ogre to call him a little rascal, lift him above the others and nestle him against his side as, Bobby recollected, he had once seen him lift Anthony.

“Be careful, Uncle Ned, he’ll pee his pants on you,” one of the little boys warned, and then they all laughed, not unkindly, to which Uncle Ned responded by giving Adam a noisy kiss on his crimson cheek.

“Where will everyone sleep,” Wells asked.

It was probably not the most polite thing to ask but had been troubling him from the moment they had stepped from the woods and he had seen the assemblage. Bobby and Anthony had described The Prince of Cathay suite and Anthony had even suggested to Uncle Ned that he and Bobby wouldn’t mind if they didn’t have it this time, mentioning in the same voice their companions. This he kept to himself, lest what he intended as a nice surprise turn, by contrary circumstance, to a disappointment.

“Never you fear, my boy. Room will be found for all,” Uncle Ned replied genially and turned his attention back to the crocodile. He commended them on their appearance, their demeanor, orderliness and grooming. The flattery served more to make them restless than pleased, and they began at once to shuffle about, impatient to be free on the wide grounds of the estate. There was a football game within sight and a couple of the small legs jerked sympathetically to the rhythm of the scrimmage. Skelton caught the hint and, with what he knew to be fruitless warnings on the preservation of their costumes, dismissed them to the havoc for which they yearned. The crocodile broke asunder and careened across the lawns to other pursuits.

“They are pretty!” Uncle Ned observed with a smile. “Look at them scattered around the lawn like so many little tea roses. And Spooner here. You are a climbing rose, Spooner. Who shall you have as a companion?”

“Terrence Buckingham!”

“You didn’t like Sir Reginald?”

“Oh yes! He was a terrific fellow. We made a tournament.”

“But you prefer your heroes to play football.”

“Ames said he was very nice.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can do.”

“Can Purdy and I have The Golden Swan again?”

“I’m afraid not. Tradition will be your host this weekend, my friend, and he chooses to put you in the great hall.”

“Tradition?”

“The junior boys always sleep in the great hall on May Day weekend.”

“With all those knights?”

“Indeed, to guard the traveling thespians from the ghosts.”

“I’d rather have the ghosts than those things standing there.”

And they set out once more for the Hall, Adam being reassured by Uncle Ned concerning the civility of Haltmere’s ghosts.

The great hall was the oldest part of Haltmere, dating to the time of the crusades. Though it had twice burned and thrice been rebuilt, and no timber in it was more than three hundred years old, yet the spirit of the old castle could be best felt there and the glory of the past most vividly beheld.

Along one wall stood twenty-one suits of armor arrayed with implements of battle. On the opposite wall hung the portraits of those same knights, in life size, forever vigilant. Few of the portraits could claim authenticity however, for the historical record was spare in description and parsimonious in portraiture. And what description there might have been of this knight or that was in all likelihood more romance and fancy than fact. None of them could have been as large as history made them. The suits were there to testify to that. But large they were, large as the imaginations of the painters Uncle Ned’s great grandfather had employed ninety years before.

At each end of the room there was a fireplace large enough to provide a commodious manger for a small pony but now filled with a great basket of May flowers instead. The cots, which came out only on this occasion, were lined beneath the portraits. Some of the boys would choose to sleep facing the wall. Others – the more daring – would face the men of iron and dream very brave dreams.

There were practical reasons as well for using the great hall. Wells was right. There were more people than beds and the great hall helped in that. As did the Shepherd and Staff Inn at Tuppington-on-Smart where a number of the guests stayed. And then there were the servants’ quarters and the rooms

over the stables where the other boys stayed – the wards of the town for whom Uncle Ned cared. That was, as Anthony had once observed, another world where the demands of life were perhaps a little more severe and luxury was less in evidence. But some of Uncle Ned's guests preferred that austerity and its particular society, especially on the occasion of celebrating the fecund arrival of spring.

Adam Spooner chose the bed nearest to Skelton's for the security it might offer and put his pillow so as to face the wall beneath the portraits. The knights were fine during the daylight hours but he was not sure about midnight and thereafter and hoped to be very much asleep. He was also sorry about The Golden Swan room and pouted for a few minutes, reflecting on the fact that he was, after all, playing the leading role in the production, and might be accorded some small privilege. But then Skelton suggested that he go and get the other boys, and considering the proprietary possibilities of that assignment diverted him to happier thoughts.

Bill Small had fallen in with a fourth-former named Polliver somewhere along the path to Haltmere. They shared a class in Greek together and once Polliver, who was a bigger and slower boy than Small, had stood up for him in an argument. Another time he had offhandedly offered him his apple crumb cake at dinner, saying he had a belly ache. Polliver was not a handsome boy, but he was a kindly one and the path to Haltmere has the quality of enhancing in the imaginations of its travelers those qualities of his companions which are most admirable and setting aside those which are less noteworthy. And so, to the delight of Tommy Wells, who had somewhat taken Small under his wing and to the others who hoped he would have a good time and were afraid he might not, the new liaison was both a surprise and a relief.

The mice had finally gone off on their own to join the football game.

Then Small and Polliver joined with two other fourth-formers, friends of Polliver and set off to explore the stables. Small waved back over his shoulder and smiled.

"That's good," said Wells.

"It's lucky," said Mason (and then he saw that his remark, which was not as charitable as it might have been, had brought a frown to his friend's face)

"It's lucky for him. I mean, not to be a fifth wheel. To have your own friend."

"I wish Martin and Swann had come," said Bobby.

"Why?" asked Anthony.

"Just so everyone could be here for the celebration."

"Martin didn't much like Haltmere last year when we did the masque. He was very stand-offish. I don't think Haltmere is his cup of tea."

"Did Swann like it?"

"You remember my telling you about Christian and the walks we took?"

"Yes."

"Well, Swann had a friend too, for a while."

"And?"

"He sort of dumped him and took up with Bret Tully. I guess Swann felt pretty bad."

"Well, the two of them are together anyway."

"And we are together," said Mason. "All four of us are together for the first time."

"We have to make this really smashing," said Bobby.

"Smashing?"

"You know. Really terrific. Fantastic."

"Oh, that's what you mean! I can never understand you when you speak English."

"You see, Wells, what I have to put up with," Bobby said, holding out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Why couldn't I have fallen in love with a boy from Boston!"

Anthony's eyes darted for a moment to Bobby's, then to Wells' and Mason's and then concentrated on the toe of his right shoe. His first thought was that nothing like that had ever been said before about him and in the hearing of others. It made him unspeakably happy. But it also frightened him for so great a secret to be set free, even here on the lawns of Haltmere Hall and in the hearing of their two best friends.

The silence continued for some moments. Only Wells grinned, but not so the others could see.

For Bobby the silence recalled for a chilling moment the worst times of the year, the times when he was forever saying the wrong thing and people averted their eyes or changed the topic or walked away. His heart told him that this would not happen now, that things had changed, but even the glimpse back chilled him. Were things really so fragile?

“I think we ought to see the rooms,” said Mason.

“What one are you fellows getting,” asked Wells.

Bobby turned enthusiastically to Anthony. “I don’t know. Do you?”

“No. I forgot to ask. With so many people, we might end up camping in the woods.”

“Hey,” Bobby said.

“Hey what?” Anthony asked.

“What about it?”

Anthony grinned. It was a silly idea. But it was such a nice day. He looked at the sky and then at Bobby. They were equally bright. It hit him as it sometimes still did how impossible and remarkable all of this was and how strange love was. That now so silly a thing could appeal to him. He must have shown it.

“Well?”

“Lets.”

“You fellows aren’t serious! There are wolves and things,” Mason said.

“Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” said Wells and the others joined in.

“Lions and tigers and bears! Oh My!”

“Lions and tigers and bears! Oh My!”

And they skipped in step, arm in arm, down the path to Haultmere Hall.



## 28. The Gamekeeper's Cottage

Wells had been correct in his observation that Haltmere Hall was bursting at its ancient seams and Uncle Ned was only too pleased with Anthony and Bobby's idea. The woods, though, he thought, might be a little damp, and with the morning frost a little colder than even their sense of adventure might welcome. There was a cottage, he said, in the opposite direction from the school, in the direction of the Black Heath. Once it had belonged to the gamekeeper but for many years now had been abandoned. It would provide a roof and a floor, he said. And perhaps the companionship of some field mice.

They eagerly agreed to the suggestion and Uncle Ned asked Mary to help them put together a pack with the necessary articles for an overnight camp-out. This she did, adding to the bedrolls some candles, a flask of water and a small parcel which she said, in a very serious voice, contained emergency provisions.

They stopped in on Wells and Mason who had been given the Prince of Cathay suite and smiled secretly to one another to hear their own enthusiasms for the room repeated now by their friends. Bobby looked at Anthony as Mason bounced on the bed, and rolled his eyes. Anthony blushed perceptibly.

They accepted Wells' invitation to stop by later on for a bath – Anthony with a practical appreciation for the amenity, Bobby with an enthusiasm which Anthony thought exceeded the measure of the offering. He resolved to mention it. Then they set off according to the directions Uncle Ned had given them to set up their camp.

The road, much overgrown, led them through a part of the estate which they had not seen before. It meandered past the stables, by a pasture where cows grazed disinterestedly, past a field of corn stubble and into a thicket of bracken. Uncle Ned had said that they would cross a stream three times before finding the cottage and that then it would be on their right. They did, and it was.

He had not exaggerated its state of decrepitude. There were no windows, the porch had fallen in and on a part of the roof the slates had fallen away. But it was quaint and might, Anthony tentatively suggested, even be cosy. Bobby wondered aloud how long since it might last have been used and

immediately answered his own question. Certainly not for the last year, for the nettles and blackberries were as thick as a Scotsman's sweater and it took some care to bushwhack a path to the collapsed front stoop. Anthony, having grown up with brambles, had the sense to put his hands in his pockets, his trousers in his socks and to tramp his way through. Bobby took on the obstacles without precaution, as was his way, and got well tattooed in the process.

Bobby had entertained Anthony on their walk with stories of the huts in which he had camped on outings from his school in Lugano, elaborating the various sorts of decay and refuse one was apt to encounter in such places, dwelling in particular detail on the zoological socio-history of old mattresses.

But there were no old mattresses here. Nor frames, nor chairs, tables or any other sign of human habitation. The cupboards, however, were filled to bursting with mouse nests and they sent several indignant residents scampering. There was a hearth in the corner and Bobby examined it.

"This could be very cosy indeed", he said, twisting his head so that he could look up the chimney. "But first we'd have to unblock it."

"Uncle Ned didn't say anything about a fire."

"Well, we can ask him when we go back. The thing is, how can we unblock it?"

"It's probably squirrel nests."

"I'll have to get on the roof."

"It's probably rotten."

"Looks good enough. Except over there." He walked to the corner where a wash basin had been set into the wall. The ceiling was stained. "It's been leaking here. But the rest looks sound enough, at least from inside. I'll have a look."

He walked outside and, this time more careful of his hands, made a tour around the cottage. Then Anthony heard a scrambling, a curse, some more scrambling and the sound of feet above him on the roof.

"It's steep."

"Don't fall."

"I won't. Shit!"

"Bobby!"

"I'm OK. Look I need a rock or something to drop down. I can't see where the block is."

Anthony dug around in the ashes and found several pieces of coal, none of which was heavy enough. Then he found a length of iron, and another just like it. Perhaps once they had been part of a grate. "I've got something. How do I get it to you?"

"There's a shed out back. You can climb onto it easy. I'll come back down."

They made the transaction, Bobby returned to the chimney, dropped the pipe and they heard it clatter on the hearth below. Anthony removed the debris of leaves and small twigs from the hearth and cocked his head into the opening.

"Don't drop anything else. I'm going to look up and see if it's clear."

"OK... Well?"

"Can't you see me?"

"All I can see is dark."

"I can see you. Move your head back so you're more in the light. That's good. You look funny."

"How come?"

"Seeing a head at the top of a chimney. Disembodied."

"It's not disembodied."

"It just looks that way."

"Well, it doesn't feel that way. And it's no more strange than talking to a voice without even a head, especially when it sounds hollow and echo-y."

"I am the ghost of Gregor the gamekeeper. Doomed to watch this hovel through eternity. Vex not my spirit with boyish pranks."

"Anthony?"

"Yes?"

"Ask Gregor if he ever got it on with a boy-friend."

"Wait a minute... He says he doesn't understand the expression."

"Ask him how long since he had a good orgasm."

"They didn't have orgasms back in his day."

"How long ago was that?"

"He says two hundred and fifteen years."

"Look, tell him to sit tight for another five minutes and then we'll show him a thing or two that will make his sheet stand on end. I'm gonna scoot down and get some sticks. You pile up those leaves and we'll build a fire. He doesn't mind if we build a fire does he?"

“No. He thinks it would be pretty cosy.”

“Good.”

There was a scuffle of feet, a clatter of tile, a tumble, a curse and then a thump. Anthony ran outside. Bobby lay in a clump of bracken, his eyes wide, gasping for breath. Anthony knelt by his side and took his hand.

“Bobby? Can you talk? Shall I get Uncle Ned? Bobby?”

Bobby shook his head and tried to get a bigger swallow of air. After two or three attempts he succeeded and began to breathe more normally.

“Knocked the wind out of you?”

Bobby shook his head yes and closed his eyes.

“Nothing’s broken?”

“I don’t think so.”

Anthony lifted each arm and tested the joints. Then his legs. Then put his hand under Bobby’s head and helped him sit up. “I think you’re OK,” he said, then sat back and let out an enormous sigh. “God, you scared me to death.”

“Me too.”

“Look. I’ll get the wood. You just go in and lie down.”

“OK. I’m still a little shaky.”

Anthony gave him a hand up and followed him to the door. Then he gathered a bundle of fallen branches and carried them into the cottage.

Bobby had spread the bedrolls out on the floor before the fireplace and lay on his back, shivering. Anthony broke the sticks into proper lengths and laid the fire. Then he lit it. It burned brightly.

“Just call me Daniel Crockett.” he said and turned to Bobby. Bobby was still staring at the ceiling. There were silent tears on his face and every now and then he shivered from top to bottom. Anthony covered him with the other blankets and then lay next to him. The fire had already begun to warm the room. “Bobby?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you OK?”

“Uh-huh.”

He tried to wipe the tears away with his fingers but they were sooty and made a mess. He felt Bobby’s lips. They were cold. He kissed them. They seemed lifeless. He thought he would have to cry but swallowed hard and managed not to. Then he rearranged the blankets to cover both of them and

held Bobby in his arms. "Please be all right, Bobby. I'm so scared."

"It's OK."

"You're so cold."

"I know. I can't help it."

"Do you think maybe you broke something?"

"I'm just scared. I'm really scared."

"But I'm here."

"I know. You remember how when you were little and you'd fall down that it would be a minute before you would start crying. Even after you knew you were all right?"

"Yeah."

"It's like that. Like being a little kid and wanting...."

"I know."

"...your mother."

"I know."

"You remember when I told you about being afraid of falling. Not falling but jumping?"

"Yes."

"I think maybe I jumped."

"Just now?"

"It sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"You fell. I heard you. You even said 'Oh shit!'"

"Yeah."

"So you couldn't have meant to."

"I guess not. Don't leave me, Anthony. Promise you won't."

"What are you saying? Of course I won't."

"Even if I do things that make you hate me."

"You couldn't make me hate you."

"That's what scares me. That I can. Like jumping."

"But you didn't jump."

"I know. I wish we didn't have to leave this place."

"There's the rehearsal."

"I mean Halthmere and school and our room and all of it. Even the bad parts."

"We don't. Not for two months. Then you'll come home with me like we planned and then school again. We have three whole years. Bobby. That's a

long time.”

“I know. If my mother lets me come back. If she pays.”

“If she won’t, my mother will.”

“Do you really think so? Maybe she won’t like me.”

“She’ll like you. I know my mother.”

“I bet she’ll figure us out.”

“Maybe. It doesn’t matter. She’s not a prude. I told you that.”

“And the house is gigantic and we’ll be miles away. And she’s always busy with other things. And she has always wanted you to have a real close friend. And all those things.”

“Yes.”

“I know.”

“It’s because you’ve moved around so much.”

“What is?”

“That your worry.”

“I guess so.”

“Of course it is.”

“But it feels like it does about jumping. That I might just go.”

“I don’t like this conversation. I’m going to add some more wood to the fire.” Anthony crawled out from under the covers, being careful to tuck them tightly around Bobby, and rebuilt the fire.

“You know, if this place had some windows it would be really cosy.”

“Even with a ghost?”

“Oh, my god! I forgot all about Gregor!” He turned back to Bobby and looked down at his face. “I made a mess of your face. I had soot on my fingers.”

“I don’t care.”

Anthony leaned down and pressed Bobby’s lips with his own. They were warm now. He withdrew and crawled back under the covers. He kissed him again, deeply this time. The warmth of the fire spread through his limbs. He whispered in Bobby’s ear. “You made a promise to Gregor and if we want to keep coming here we’d better keep it. Don’t you think so?”

“I guess a promise is a promise. But what will the mice think?” He nodded his head towards the shelf over the sink. Anthony followed his gaze. Two mice watched them with some interest. One had a tuft of nesting fur in his mouth.

“They’re experienced in these things I think.”

“Do you suppose boy mice fuck?”

“I’m sure they do.”

“Do you suppose we’ll fuck girls some day?”

“I hope so.”

“And get married and have kids?”

“Probably. And send them to St. Matthews.”

“And they’ll fall in love.”

“Wouldn’t that be great!?”

“Mine will be named Duncan.”

“I think I’ll name mine... Let’s see. Something like Lucien or Leonardo.”

“And Duncan will put his hand in Leonardo’s hair like this and look at his moist red lips and his grey eyes...”

“Blue.”

“...blue eyes and his heart will break for happiness and his limbs long for that devoutly wished consummation. He presses his body against that flesh which is his but not his, a sweet ache envelops his loins like an electric pastry. He hungers for the sweet mouth upon which he gazes. He sighs, and then, closing his eyes....”

## 29. The Prince of Cathay Hosts a Polo Game

The only person they found in the great hall when they got back was Adam Spooner who was anxiously trying to learn the last of his lines. The others, he explained, were out exploring and Mr. Skelton was having tea with several of the guests. Anthony, thinking it was time to become The Director, and wanting to impress his leading man with his seriousness of purpose, banged the folder of script, notes, drawings and other artist's paraphernalia onto the bed and said, "Damn!"

Adam looked at him, his eyes wide, his chin trembling, threw his own copy of the script onto the pile Anthony had already made, with a more abject but nonetheless determined gesture, and burst into tears.

"I'll never learn it. Never. It's too difficult and I am too slow."

This took Anthony by complete surprise. One forgets, being not even three years older, that the fits and tears of childhood are unpremeditated, often unwarranted and like an afternoon shower apt to catch one unprepared.

He looked at Bobby with a mixture of bafflement and guilt. He might just have dropped the jam jar on the kitchen floor.

Adam's tears touched Bobby in a familiar way and inspired in him those same sentiments which had taken him night after night to Sprinkles Three with The Land of Oz tucked under his arm. He had learned long ago to be the mother as well as the child and found in that role a different tenderness than he had learned in Anthony's arms.

Now while Anthony stood bewildered at Adam's outburst, more than a little concerned for his production, wondering if indeed Spooner *could* learn the lines, Bobby sat beside the little boy and comforted him. He smiled up at Anthony and in as deep a voice as he could muster said, "Look, Parker, you take the list to Uncle Ned and get the rest of the stuff for the costumes and I'll work with Spooner on his lines. OK?"

"But what about the rehearsal?"

"I'll have everyone under the marquee by five-thirty."

"Right. Well then, I'll get the costumes finished up."

"Good."

"Five thirty."

"See you then."



Anthony gathered up the sheaf of papers, looked at Bobby with a mixture of puzzlement, affection and pride and walked out.

Bobby let Spooner cry for longer than was entirely necessary or perhaps even than Spooner had the emotion to support. He liked the holding and Spooner liked the being held. The pleasures of comforting and of being comforted should never be underrated. Then they talked about the great hall, Spooner shared his hope about having Terrence Buckingham as his friend and finally they got on with their work.

Anthony found Uncle Ned in the kitchen, overseeing the preparations for the evening meal. The two of them made their way to the attics over the garages where the costumes were kept. As Anthony read off the necessary items Uncle Ned like an antiquarian bookman, pursed his lips, squeezed his eyes shut, remembered a particular heap and then burrowed through it, finally producing the required items. They found costumes and hats, and then a scepter and two silken banners and several other things that they had not even known they were looking for.

The boys were under the marquee at five-thirty, as promised. Adam did know his lines, had not wet his pants and impressed everyone with that combination of virtuosities. The rehearsal went well, the costumes fit and things were deemed ready for the next morning.

Bobby reminded Anthony that Wells and Mason had invited them by for a bath and that he, for one, preferred that option to a quick dip in the creek by their cabin. Anthony agreed because there was nothing to do but agree. Still it went against his sense of propriety. It was one thing to take a shower or a bath at Sprinkles House with any number of boys parading around in the raw.

It was another to plan a bath party in a place so luxurious as the Prince of Cathay suite and where – and he did not fail to remind Bobby of this – certain very private and momentous events had occurred.

“Maybe for Wells and Mason as well,” Bobby responded cheerfully. “We can compare notes!”

“We will not compare notes!”

“Just kidding.”

“Except really you weren’t,” Anthony said. “That’s just it. Like saying next time you’d fall in love with a boy from Boston! I almost died. I can’t believe you said that!”

“Well it’s true. Not about falling in love with a boy from Boston. I don’t

mean that. But with you. Everyone knows it. Wells and Mason know it.”

“They know what they want to know.”

“Well, they know about us.”

“You didn’t.”

“Wells brought it up. When I was convalescing. He wanted to talk about it. And about the stokers and getting bugged.”

“He talked about it?”

“Sure. And he talked about him and Mason. They hadn’t tried heads and tails.”

“Oh my God!.”

“I thought I’d remind him. That bed is perfect.”

“Oh my God!”

“Anthony, listen to me. Do you know why Bryce-Jones flipped out?”

“I can’t believe you told them about us. I feel like a tabloid.”

“Listen. Bryce-Jones came back.”

“What?”

“Good, you’re still coherent. Listen. Bryce-Jones came back. Last week. He sent me a postcard and wanted me to meet him in the observatory.”

“Did you?”

“Sure.”

“What did he want? No. Stop. I don’t want to know.”

“He wanted to perform an exorcism.”

“An exorcism?”

“Right. He had the table set up with candles, incense burning and he had on this cloak. He looked more like a wizard than a priest. He was crazy. Totally off his rocker. But gentle crazy. I guess some character traits stay with you. Anyway he was very sweet and...”

“Candles, incense, alchemy, exorcism, and he was sweet?”

“Yes, he was. He was always sweet.”

“What happened?”

“He preached at me awhile about the demons of sex, hell-fire and eternity. I think he stole some of it from James Joyce. It sounded very familiar. Anyway I said I had homework to do and asked him how he was getting on.”

“Crazy was how he was getting on.”

“He said that I had come to him as an angel and told him to give his life to saving schoolboys from sin. I said I hadn’t meant to, that it was some kind of

mistake. But he said, no, it was true and asked me to give him my blessing.”

“Did you?”

“Sure. I made up something that sounded like the way he was talking and he seemed pretty pleased with it. Then I went and kissed him on each cheek. He closed his eyes and I kissed him on the lips.”

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because there’s a lesson in it. Do you know why this happened to Bryce-Jones?”

“Because he found us in bed together.”

“Right. It blew his mind.”

“So?”

“So things that you pretend don’t exist and really do exist, things you don’t talk about and hide away, things that you like and pretend you don’t, gang up on you.”

“Moral: If we don’t have an orgy in the bathtub with Wells and Mason I will become a turnip.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Bobby, just tell me. Honestly. Would you really like to do it with Wells and Mason?”

“I never ever suggested that.”

“I know. But what if I did? Would you want to?”

“Sure.”

“Would you want to with Summers?”

“Summers? What does Summers have to do with it?”

“I just wondered.”

“You just wondered.”

“Yes.”

“Sure. Why not? And Porter, too. And the rest of them. Especially Summers, though. I really get off on being hurt. And then we make an announcement at dinner that any of the guests who wanted to fuck me could do it during dessert. You know, with whipped cream and banana cream pie...”

“Stop it!”

“No, I won’t! I’m sick of it. I’m sick of you making me feel dirty. I thought the thing with Summers was all over. But it’s not, is it? Bobby Ames is a bad seed. Put him back on the yacht. Sell tickets. How’d he ever

get in a fine school like this? Hooked up with a fine boy like Anthony Parker? An aristocrat. How can things like this be allowed to happen? Well I don't know! But I'll tell you this, they're done happening. And don't look at me with your mouth open and your chin trembling. I hate trembling chins.

"Bobby, please. Don't..."

"I'm sorry about your play. I'm sorry about that. I wouldn't have said this now. But... oh, shit!"

He walked away. Anthony stood there. Bobby walked toward the scullery door, pulling off his sweater, and without a glance back disappeared into Haltmere Hall.

No sooner had Wells and Mason drawn the bath than Small, Tolliver and two of their friends showed up wanting a game of croquet. They were all very impressed by the Prince of Cathay's accoutrements and especially the magnificent sunken tub which a boy named Spinwaffer remarked would be big enough for all of them.

It was, and it was into a scene of some merriment and mischief which our young hero walked with the determined stride of a wronged and angry man.

But no one noticed. They were having too much fun playing water polo with a bar of ivory soap. Bobby sat on the edge of the bed and picked up a Spiderman comic book which Small had stuck in the hip pocket of his trousers. But it was too steamy to read and he didn't want to anyway.

"What the hell are you doing out there, Ames? The party's in here," Small said. He was trying perhaps a little too hard to impress his new friends and taking responsibility, as people occasionally do, for keeping the conversation going.

"Come on in. That water's fine."

Of course the tub was too small for a sensible game of anything. Most of the energy was directed to finding the bar of soap. Holding onto it was nearly impossible; handing it to a team-mate was out of the question; scoring a goal was much more a matter of chance than skill. But all of this was quite beside the point. The bar of soap was as incidental to the game as, under other circumstances, a book or a shoe might have been – an accommodation to decorum, to the prefect of rules. The real game was of boys with other boys, naked as Eden, playing one game in the steamy bright air of the elegantly tiled room and another beneath the soapy churning water of their

communal bath.

Bobby took off his shoes and socks and stood to remove his shirt. Tolliver started a rhythmic clap. Then the other stopped whatever game they were up to and joined. Bobby blushed despite himself but played along, removing each item of clothing with what he hoped was appropriate ceremony, being not very experienced in the public arts.

The boys approved. There was even a moment of silence which no one had intended, in which Tolliver could be heard to say, "Jesus Christ" very softly, which gave Bobby enormous pleasure, and which was compensated for immediately by a general melee of dunking and screaming.

The game went on at a high pitch for some time, then things fell apart. Tolliver got out to pee and his public nakedness made Wells blush. Bobby wrinkled his forehead and tried to hold Wells against the side of the tub, but it was no good. Wells, suddenly self-conscious, jumped away and after the bar of soap. Small dunked him and one of Tolliver's friends dunked Small and, for a moment, the game came to life. But only for a moment. Small came up coughing and Mason jumped to his side. But it was more an excuse to end things than an emergency of any sort. Small was fine. One by one they moved to the edge of the tub.

Small got scatological, Mason got his clippers and trimmed his toenails and Bobby did a very subdued one-person water ballet. Small was accused of having polluted the bathwater and denied the charge. The charge and their pretended horror and disgust, however, provided an excuse to end the ceremony and, one by one, they got dressed. Then they sat around for a while longer, ceremonially boasting of unlikely exploits, naming heroes, predicting the outcome of certain athletic contests, lying, debunking one another's lies and generally having a good time.

Bobby decided he had enjoyed himself. He felt no guilt at all and then felt some guilt in that. But not much. He had liked touching Wells and regretted somewhat that they were not alone. But that thought lingered only for a short time. He thought of Anthony and realized that he was glad he had not been there. He would not have wanted him to be naked here, among the others.

He accounted that an important understanding and filed it away as partial testimony in behalf of his character. He was sorry for the fight, but not entirely. There was something good in it as well.

He was filled suddenly, as they sat there, with a sense of well-being. In

the friendship they shared. In appreciation of their earlier applause, but mostly from a sense of imminence and expectation which took the form in his imagination of a simple country scene. There was a cottage and a woods and a path lined with flowers. There were curtains at the windows of the cottage.

He had a pack on his back and a walking stick. He called out and Anthony appeared on the porch in his underpants. They were the white ones with the dark blue trim at the waist and legs. What did you call that? The trim. The waist you called a waistband. And the legs you called ribbing. That was it.

He stood with one leg crossed in front of the other. No, with his feet apart. No, he sat on the porch, his back against the shingles, one leg slightly raised. He waved.

### 30. From Every Wasting Sigh

Dinner was held throughout the main rooms, and a very festive and jovial crowd it was. The new preps sat at the big table with Uncle Ned at one end and Helter Skelter, as guest of honor, at the other. Adam Spooner and Justin Pilgrim sat in the parlor with eight of Uncle Ned's London guests, including Christian Starr and Terrence Buckingham. Adam was perhaps the most pleased guest at the entire party and very nearly got silly about it. But he remembered the catechism he had received from Ames that afternoon and occasionally ran it over in his mind for the sake of both sobriety and continence.

Wells, Mason, Parker and Ames had a table for four in the front hall under the dragon and a bottle of champagne "from an admirer" whom they unanimously agreed must be Terrence Buckingham but was in fact Hector Skelton. Such are the small injustices of infatuate youth that they fail to notice those who most notice them and think not to reckon homely care at its true value.

Bobby and Anthony had listened for most of the evening to Wells and Mason who it appeared from the nearly hysterical level of their enthusiasm had taken Bobby's advice concerning the use of the bed. In any case, it sufficed along with the other business of the evening – toasts, visits from friends at neighboring tables, Anthony's description of last minute-changes in the play – to carry them through the meal.

It wasn't until Small made a toast to friendship, unembellished by fine sentiment and all the more affecting for its simplicity, that Anthony lost his way. He left the table and went to walk on the lawn. Bobby let him alone for a while and then, saying goodbye to the company and remembering to secure a flashlight, went out in search.

Anthony had walked for a while thinking about the argument, about the bath party which Wells had so vividly described over dinner and wondering where things stood now. It seemed endlessly complicated, not as a snarl that with patience might be sorted, but as something beyond his power to set right. It frightened him to think so, for the fear of loss made his love all the greater. It was fathomless, beyond his comprehension.

He returned to the library by the outer doors and borrowed the Keats once

again. There was a passage. He had discovered it the other day in his own copy. It troubled him, as Bobby's story had troubled him earlier, unaccountably. There was the taste of ashes. Old ashes. Times past.

He had found the passage again and sat under the lamp by the carriage house re-reading it.

Could I weed  
Thy soul of care, by heavens, I would offer  
All the bright riches of my crystal coffer  
To Amphitrite; all my clear-eyed fish,  
Golden, or rainbow-sided, or purplish,  
Vermillion-tail'd, or finn'd with silvery gauze;  
Yes, or my veined pebble-floor, that draws  
A virgin-light to the deep; my grotto-sands,  
Tawny and gold, oozed slowly from far lands  
By my diligent springs: my level lilies, shells,  
My charming-rod, my potent river spells;  
Yes, everything, even to the pearly cup  
Meander gave me, – for I bubbled up...

He felt himself blush. Yes he had thought that. The first time too. Bobby bubbling into his mouth. Not at all what Keats had intended. Or what he might have wished to think. But true. He was no different, no more chaste than they, than Bobby.

...bubbled up  
To fainting creatures in a desert wild.  
To gladden thee; and all I dare say,  
Is, that I pity thee;...

Yes, here was the part. Why should she pity the lovers?

I've been thy guide...

He heard Bobby's step on the gravel and looked up. He closed the book.

"I got a flashlight."

"Oh. Good."

"Are you ready?"

"I've just been waiting for you."

"You were crying again, weren't you?"

"No."



“Keats?” he said, indicating the book.

“What else?”

“It was a pretty nice banquet.”

“It was. It was pretty nice of Uncle Ned.”

“Well, it was his birthday party.”

“Even so.”

They walked to the end of the lawn, speaking of the party, recalling things people had said. Then, at the edge they paused. Bobby showed the light into the forest.

“It’s a little creepy at night.”

“There’s nothing that can hurt you.”

“That sounds like something a father would say.”

“My father did say it.”

“I thought he probably did.”

Bobby started down the path. Anthony reached out to hold the pocket of Bobby’s trousers as he did sometimes and then, pausing, let the opportunity pass. He let Bobby get two or three steps ahead and then followed.

By the time they got to the cottage they had endured a very long silence. It was new for both of them. Anthony tried to consider it as an epicurean might. But even thinking of that word put Bobby back in his mind, for it was a word his friend used to chide him. Chide him gently.

Bobby laid a fire and Anthony spread out the two bedrolls close by. He lay on his own, still dressed, and lit a candle. It would seem odd to take off his clothes, he thought, and decided he would do it later, after the light was out. He opened the Keats and then, almost in the same motion, closed it again. Bobby had nothing to read. He couldn’t just ignore him.

He wanted to tell him that he was sorry he hadn’t done the bath, that he didn’t want to be a prude. That it was all right for Bobby to have done it.

That he couldn’t say he was sorry about everything he had said. That being in that room in that place which had been sacred, doing what they had been doing was somehow profane. That something had died and it hurt his heart to think about it. He wanted to say right now, “If I ever lose you Bobby I will die,” but people didn’t talk that way. Especially now, with a silence like this, with things so complicated.

Bobby lay on his side, his back turned to Anthony and fed the fire. It felt peculiar to be turned away, to be so intentionally turned away. But it was the

only way to be alone right now and he had to for a couple more minutes.

Who had started this being silent? Maybe he had. It would have been harder to say things from behind than from in front. He could have said, "Oh, there's one of the cows" or "Here's the first stream crossing." But he hadn't.

And now who was going to break it? Not him. Not yet anyway. Not say he was sorry, because he wasn't. He had thought about Wells again during dinner. He was so small and delicate and beautiful. He felt something had been lost. He had wanted to touch him again. He thought of Wells' body.

When he saw his ass he thought of the bugging and it made him excited. What he had said to Anthony was true. He would have done it with Wells. Or would he have? Earlier he had been relieved. When things broke up. And thought of Anthony, who had sat next to him, whom he loved so much, more than the rest of the world. Was he a whore like his mother?

And then it wasn't his mother at all or his father who had never told him there was nothing in the woods to be afraid of as he should have. Or anyone else except himself all alone in a ruined house in the woods... with his friend.

The night came back to him as clearly as if he were there now. The night Anthony came to his bed. And now he had turned his back on him.

He put another stick on the fire and sat back, his arms around his knees. Anthony moved up beside him and sat likewise, the book held beneath his two hands. Then he opened it again to the passage and read it out.

I've been thy guide; that thou must wander far  
In other regions, past the scanty bar  
To mortal steps, before thou canst be ta'en  
From every wasting sigh, from every pain,  
Into the gentle bosom of thy love.  
Why it is thus, one knows in heaven above:  
But, a poor Naiad, I guess not.

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. I was reading it before, trying to figure it out."

"Before on the bench."

"Yeah."

"It sounds sad."

Bobby moved closer and felt Anthony's arm around his shoulders even as he moved his own to bring his friend closer.

"I kinda like this old wreck of a place," Bobby said.

"So do I."

“Maybe we can come here again. Maybe some weekend we could get some stuff from Uncle Ned and fix it up a little.”

“That would be cool.”

“We’d need windows, first off.”

“Are you cold too?”

“It’s like a campfire. Warm face; cold ass.”

But they didn’t move. Anthony lay his head on Bobby’s shoulder and then after a minute he felt Bobby’s cheek on his forehead.

Then they sat for a long time watching the fire, until it was coals again.

“Are you still cold,” Bobby asked.

“My backside still is. How about you?”

“Yeah. I guess I should put more wood on.”

“I wonder how we should put our bedrolls.”

“What do you mean?”

“Heads or feet by the fire.”

“Heads.”

“I agree.”

“I’ll get some more wood if you’ll do the bedrolls.”

“OK.” Bobby picked up the flashlight and went outside. Anthony fixed the bedrolls side by side and looked at them. Bobby came back in with the wood and noticed the way they were. He looked away and added the wood to the fire. Then Anthony picked up the rolls, dumped them in a pile and started from scratch, making one bed.

“I’ve gotta pee,” he said and went outside. When he returned, Bobby was under the covers, his pants piled on top of his shoes by the side. Bobby had his hands behind his head. He was looking at him. Anthony undressed slowly, despite the chill.

“You want some water?” Anthony picked up the flask and took a drink.

“OK.”

Anthony handed him the flask.

“Thanks. You know what I was thinking?”

“What?” Anthony crawled under the covers. His leg touched Bobby’s for a moment and he moved it. *This is crazy*, he thought.

“I’ll bet Uncle Ned would have some old furniture we could use.”

“There’s lots of stuff in the attics.”

Anthony’s leg touched Bobby’s again and he didn’t move it. Then he

turned as he always had and lay his head on Bobby's chest, their legs woven. He felt Bobby's arms and snuggled into them.

Afterwards Bobby slept and Anthony stared at the fire. He thought about tomorrow. The play. His play. A simple idyll. Enchantment, romance and a transformation. The stuff of plays. But what of real life? This day. And tomorrow. And the summer. And being older.

Bobby's head rested on his hand. Anthony touched it gently. It wasn't a beautiful hand. The nails were chewed and there were bramble tracks across the back like little red footprints. The ink stains might never come out. He thought of the way Bobby held his pen, of the way his tongue played at the corner of his mouth when he wrote the final draft of a paper. He closed his eyes and listened to his friend's breath. So quiet.

Then he thought of a kiss, so soft that you would fall into it and sleep.  
And sleep.

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