

jared bunda
THE WELL-TEMPERED
SCHOOLBOY



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The Well-Tempered Schoolboy

By Jared Bunda

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1. An Appointment With the Headmaster

When Bobby Ames returned from chapel on Wednesday morning his name was on the message board. He reported to Clara Grundle, the Dame of Sprinkles House, who informed him, her large countenance filled with reassurance, that he had an appointment with the rector in 30 minutes.

Clara read her boys like tea leaves, discovering in their apparently impassive and impervious adolescent faces secrets of which they themselves were not entirely aware. In this augury she was renowned and even somewhat suspected. But she was also appreciated, for that which she divined and yet allowed to pass, the boys concluded, might not be as bad as they had imagined.

"It's the money," he said. "It happens every time."

"And what if it is?" she asked. Clara Grundle believed that her boys should "chin up to things" at the outset. It was better to be prepared for the worst, she believed, but this was not from any strain of pessimism. She had learned from her uncle, a doctor of podiatry, and believed it to be true, that preparing the patient for the worst possible outcome could only improve his final opinion of the practitioner.

"I'll have to leave," he said, not avoiding her eyes.

It was a subject they had discussed before. Clara had divined from an absence of mail that Bobby Ames was more on his own than he ought to be and had inquired, when the occasion presented itself during his first month at the school, after the details. The picture he had drawn — of a father who had left when the boy was only two years old and a romantically inclined mother on a yacht somewhere in the Mediterranean — was not unique to her experience, but the boy was. He stood out from others she had known, as she explained once to Henry Skelton, the master of Sprinkles House, like a nice piece of cut glass at a jumble sale.

"And where will you go, if you do?" she asked. It seemed to him merciless for her to put such a question to him; he would have preferred reassurance.

Some schools had been more humane than others in their dismissal of him. There had been one in Switzerland, run by an entrepreneurial woman named Chris who wore a great deal of jewellery. She had moved him at once to a hotel at the nearby ski resort and informed his mother. Two days later a fragrant Italian named Carlo whom he had known from Brindisi pulled up alongside him on the main street of the town in a Lamborghini and six hours later they pulled into Cannes. It couldn't have been said that his mother was waiting for him; but she was there, on the boat, an old fashioned in her hand, a Swede named Holgar with very large teeth beside her.

The next day the Lamborghini was picked up by the police from where it was parked by the pier as Bobby's driver sat drinking wine at the Bar across the street. Bobby watched it all with

a detached interest. It was the last he saw of the car but it was Carlo and not Holgar who sailed with them to Sicily. A month later Bobby had been enrolled at a small American school in Istanbul.

Things were different here at St. Matthew's from what they had been in his other schools. Helter Skelter, as the housemaster was known to the boys, would stand up for him. He would find a way. And there was Anthony, his roommate, who had said as if it were the simplest thing in the world, "Don't worry, my mother will pay. It would be nothing for her. Anyway she likes you."

But Bobby did worry about mothers.

"I don't even know where she is," he said, trying to be merely annoyed. He had little success, however, being merely anything when it came to his mother. It was too complicated a situation. His best effort at detachment was never good enough, and there was always a tangle of unruly nerves beneath whatever face he might paint.

The thing which perplexed him the most, however, was that even now, when that fear left a palpable metallic residue in the back of his throat or brought an occasional paralysis to his knees, he thought of walking away from everything. Not of having to leave, but choosing to. Disentangling himself. That was the way he thought of it. Even though he did not really want to be disentangled. In fact never in his life had he been so happily ensnared as he was at St. Matthew's School.

"Well, they can't turn you out on the street now, can they?" she reassured. Clara shifted in her chair slightly. She rarely moved very far, being as monumental in fact as she was in sympathy. Weighing 310 pounds, she inclined to view the hand of fate much as her own — disinclined to move quickly or without extraordinary cause. What was, was, she believed. What would be, would be, and what had been, probably would be again. The moods of her boys, she understood, were more airy and subject to the slightest change in the currents of fortune. Her stationary aspect, she believed, and explained occasionally to Helter Skelter, provided an antidote to their restlessness. And a certainty. They always knew where to find her, whatever they might need. Perhaps no more than a reassurance or one of the sweets which she kept in constant supply in a biscuit tin by her chair.

"Well, I'll tell you this much," she said, folding her hands in what ordinarily would have been a lap. "St. Matthew's school has never in all my years turned away a boy who scores goals."

That was more in the line of what he wanted. It was true. The team needed him; he was the high scorer.

"You really mean it?" he said. "Never in thirty two years."

"Well, I guess I better change," he said.

"You'd better hurry," she said. "It's quarter past already." But he was already half way up the stairs.

It was bewildering to Clara that creatures could move so quickly.

Bobby's adjustment to St. Matthew's School four months earlier had been difficult. Coming in the middle of the year was always hard for a boy but Bobby had appeared determined to make the difficult impossible. He had turned the dingy sloop which was his sometime home into a yacht, his fortune-hunting mother into an heiress and her continuum of lovers into film stars and soldiers of fortune, who, instead of gin, drank fine wines and sherry and instead of giving him a pound to "disappear for an hour," gave him rare Roman coins and once a small graven image of a Carthaginian deity with emerald eyes which he had hidden in the ruins of Hadrian's baths for safe keeping. His tales were patently invented and the more the other boys had dismissed them as such the more he had clung to them.

Late one night or early one morning at the nadir of his folly he had wept. His roommate, Anthony Parker, had heard him and offered comfort. The other boy's tenderness and affection had marked a turning point.

Anthony Parker was the son of Lady and the stepson of Lord Fairchild, a modest and thoughtful boy, a lover of poetry and natural science both, a musician and watercolorist and a fine student. Bobby and Anthony had become an item in the society of the school, where relationships were much talked of and romances much imagined.

He shucked his blue jeans and polo shirt and put on a pair of charcoal trousers and a white shirt. Anthony's. A tie would have been excessive. But loafers would suit the occasion well. Anthony's. He spit-polished them quickly and grabbed his own jacket on the chair.

Then he combed his hair, took a deep breath and turned the handle on the door. To his surprise it turned in his hand and Anthony walked in.

"You're all spiffed up," Anthony said.

"Appointment with the rector."

"What about?"

"Probably the tuition."

"You think so?" Anthony tossed his books onto the bed and sat down. "I'll call my mother," he said.

"Not yet. It might not be. Relax. Clara says it can't be anything bad."

"I hope not. You want me to come?"

"What, and sit outside while I have my appointment?"

"I could read Silas Marner."

"Don't remind me."

"You haven't started it yet? Bobby!"

"Anthony!"

"He's probably going to tell you you're flunking out!"

"Thanks for cheering me up."

"I'll stay here."

"Good idea." Bobby turned for a final check-out. Anthony

gave him a 'thumbs up.' "I hope it is that I'm flunking out," he said, opening the door. "That would be better than the money thing. I can't handle it again."

"It'll be okay."

"Be here." "I will."

"Thanks."

The reassurance of seeing Anthony made the journey across the lawn to the rector's house easier.

Ragnhyld Soames-Winthrop answered the door, along with the two Pomeranians, Flanders and Swann. There was a rumour that Flanders had a habit of lifting his leg on boys' shoes when neither of the Soames-Winthrops was observing. Adam Spooner was one boy to have so claimed, offering his own right shoe in evidence. The veracity of this was put into question, however, by the fact that Adam Spooner's shoes were quite often in that condition, without Pomeranian assistance.

Having paid his respects hurriedly to Mrs. Soames-Winthrop, Bobby took the precaution of greeting the dogs at their own level, both in order to keep Anthony's loafers out of their reach and also to quiet them. Calmed, they were said not to be a threat.

He stood again and Mrs. Soames-Winthrop asked him about the soccer match against Limewood Hall in which he had distinguished himself. She was not, he noticed, very attentive to his response. In fact she seemed preoccupied. He wondered if it had to do with his appointment. He thought for a moment of asking for the bathroom, for the uneasiness in his stomach seemed now to have spread as well to his bowels, but he didn't want to appear weak, so he took the proffered place on the sofa and she excused herself to check the oven. There was a sentimental smell of roasting meat. There had been roasts at Fairchild Hall during his spring holiday with Anthony. He had come to associate them with solidity, timelessness, the

security of the wealthy. People did not do roasts unless they expected to be around for a long time, he thought.

He studied the parlour. It had five doors. There were more doors, it seemed, than walls. Dr. Soames-Winthrop was fond of remarking to visitors that the rectory provided a marvellous example of 18th Century meandertecture, which from a want of hearing perfectly a boy had repeated to his friends later as neandertecture. Dr. Soames-Winthrop was a man of few and predictable humorous utterances. Usually these were preceded by a prolonged and ineffectual clearing of the throat at which visitors had been observed to show alarm. "Siesta resistance" and "Kyrie Liaison." were among his other neologisms. The first described little boys who refused to take naps, the second the music master's messenger boys. Just as invariably the small joke would be followed by the rector's batting the end of his nose with his right index finger once or twice. Then a small smirk would appear at the bottom right corner of his mouth. This would be lost on all but the most practised observer, for at that precise moment he would avert his head to examine the heel on his right shoe, the final ceremony in this ritual.

The clocks ticked. There were three of them. There had been clocks at Fairchild Hall as well. Since then, Bobby had taken a dislike to digital timepieces. They raced rather than counted. He decided that if Mrs. Soames-Winthrop returned he would ask her about the grandfather clock in the entrance hall to make conversation. When he was nervous he planned things ahead so that they might not take too unexpected a turn.

Flanders chased Swann around the sofa and mounted her. Swann looked mildly perturbed and then indifferent. Flanders couldn't seem to get the right position and finally gave up. Neither indicated that it retained a memory of the incident. Flanders tried to scratch his right haunch with his hind leg and fell over, apparently forgetting that, too. It was one of the advantages that dogs had over people.

Returning, Mrs. Soames-Winthrop straightened the magazines on the table and in so doing revealed her cleavage. "Did she do the magazines?" Small had asked Martin -once- after he had visited the Soames-Winthrops for tea. Apparently it was a thing she did. Boys were said to have put them in disarray for the very purpose of inviting the display. It was a very nice cleavage and she was quite expert in revealing it. Bobby had seen cleavages before, and nipples as well. To think so now made him feel light-headed and complicated somewhat the sensations in his lower abdomen. Small explained that when you had a boner it took the blood from your head and that was why people behaved so foolishly when they were in love. It was probably true, Bobby thought, though he was relatively inexperienced.

Ragnhyld Soames-Winthrop was an uncommonly handsome lady. That was an expression used by her older admirers at St. Matthew's — that is to say, the staff. Among the sixth formers she was thought of differently, as were most of the more attractive staff wives. She had a strikingly sculptured face, small in design and fine in its proportions, with a slightly Asian lift to her dark brown eyes. She was as plentiful in spirit and ample in disposition as she was restrained in figure, a woman with whom any healthy young man might gladly spend an afternoon and with no greater expectation than the pleasure of her conversation and the hope of her good opinion.

Publicly she was very much the official and ceremonial wife who made sure that the right beverages got into the hands of the right people and that the wrong ones did not. Because St. Matthew's was not an affluent school, she had only one servant to help in these tasks, a girl named Trudy from a local farm who provided a powerful argument against the adage that calls sense a common thing. It surprised Trudy repeatedly, for example, to find that objects left uncovered in the refrigerator gradually hardened or that the strings which confounded her vacuum cleaner were in fact the fringes of Mr. Soames-Winthrop's prize Kalim carpet.

But Trudy was good-hearted and very popular with the boys and so Mrs. Soames-Winthrop had kept her on now for nine years. Why she was very popular with the boys was a question which neither of the Soames-Winthrops had spent much time considering, and that, all things considered, was probably the best course for them to have taken.

Despite the fact of their no longer sharing the same bed or very many of the same opinions, Dr and Mrs. Soames-Winthrop got along about as well as any middle-aged couple of their acquaintance, and better than most. Partly it was simple British civility that allowed this. Neither would have initiated or tolerated a rudeness. Nor, for that matter, a withdrawn silence. Each was gregarious and together they made a team not unlike that which they had immortalised in the naming of their beloved dogs.

Mrs. Soames-Winthrop had dutifully taken the seat opposite Bobby Ames and was about to open a conversation when Dr. Soames-Winthrop opened his study door and walked in.

"Hello, Ames," he said. "Good of you to come." He smiled. Weakly, Bobby thought. A small mouse forced its way into Bobby's large intestine and began to run back and forth in panic. "Come in," the rector said, placing his hand as he always did on the back of Bobby's collar. Bobby felt somewhat reassured by the gesture and followed the rector into his study.

He took the seat offered, the one that the boys called the rector's love seat. It was popularly and perhaps accurately held among the boys at St. Matthew's that masters either loved or hated boys. How else explain their choice of such an occupation? That some both loved and hated them made it sometimes difficult to plan one's behaviour. Flirtation could be at times the absolutely right thing and at others disastrous. Earnestness was usually reliable and enthusiasm could often be counted upon. Being reserved and thoughtful seemed, all in all, the best course, but that was not in Bobby's nature. He was, for better or worse, ingenuous. When affection was offered he accepted it gratefully and graciously. To sarcasm he turned a puzzled and disarmingly forgiving smile.

"Get out your comb," the boys would say to Bobby when they approached the rector on one of the school paths. He had the sort of hair that begged to be mussed and Dr. Soames-Winthrop never let him down. Bobby liked it even better when the hand dropped to his shoulder and a greeting turned into a stroll. Then he would even lean into the tenderness, for in fairness he had had little of it in his lifetime. If he took a ribbing from the other boys, what was that. They liked him too much for so little a thing to matter, and he they.

"My dear boy," the rector began. He stood looking out the window for a moment before turning and then squared himself and his jaw. Bobby could see that he was in distress. He felt a spasm of anger at his mother, who counted upon the kindness of strangers such as this good man. It was unfair. He spoke even before having decided to: "It's my mother, sir, isn't it?"

The rector was noticeably affected by this initiative. His mouth moved in a short dumb show of what he had planned to say and then reconsidered.

"Yes, my boy."

"It's happened before, sir. A lot of times. I'm sorry."

The rector appeared to be confused at this news.

"I don't think you understand, my boy," he said, approaching and then stopping short of the sofa. He blinked and dipped his head as unconsciously as a pigeon and was silent. Perhaps, Bobby thought, he should not have been so forthright. He had not meant to confuse the man, merely to relieve him of his burden.

"She really doesn't have any money, sir," he continued, hoping to sound matter-of-fact. He didn't want sympathy. Not in these circumstances. Not when she required that he beg. "She lives off her boyfriends," he said. He hadn't meant to say that but wasn't sorry that he had.

"You mustn't say such a thing," the head replied.

"It's true, sir. But Parker says his mother might help out. I'd like to stay, sir. I love St. Matthew's."

Bobby Ames had no facility at all for saying the word, "love", and knew immediately his error. The tears came to his eyes so quickly that he had no time to prepare. The word was an incantation which summoned from his imagination visions of a sad and wistful hero with a quick smile and a false confidence, going his frightened way from one adventure to another, leaving behind his friends, conversations at midpoint, beans sprouting on blotter paper in the science room, unfinished equations, and an unfinished soccer season. His concern for Dr. Soames-Winthrop was real but it could not stand up to the sadness he felt for this poor dissociated fourteen-year-old, and now it overflowed.

Dr. Soames-Winthrop withdrew the handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Bobby.

"Oh dear," he said and turned away.

"I'm sorry, sir," Bobby said, sniffing. "It's just that I have so many friends here."

"My dear boy," the rector began, his face now quite contorted with the effort of enlightening his young charge. "I don't think you understand. It's not a problem of money."

"It's not?"

"Your mother has had an accident."

"An accident, sir?"

"Yes. A rather bad one, I'm afraid."

The realisation came to him like the faint smell of camphor. He waited for the words.

"She has passed on, my boy."

"Sir?" It was not an expression he had heard before. So she had not died, after all. What had she passed on, he wondered. Certainly not the money. Or if she had, then why was the rector so distressed. He wrinkled his brow.

"There was a fire. On the boat."

The alcohol stove, he thought. "Alcohol," he said.

"Mr. Brightly didn't say. He called this morning. Apparently he was able to swim ashore. The boat was in a harbour, I believe."

"Did it sink?"

"I don't believe Mr. Brightly said, but perhaps it did."

"And she was on it."

"Yes."

"And she's dead?"

"Yes, my boy."

Now it wouldn't be her fault that she wasn't there, any more, he thought. He felt free. It was not what he should have felt, of course. He felt unequal to the occasion, unequal to the rector's sympathy. He focused on the fact of the boat.

"I hope it sank," he said. He didn't want her floating around from place to place.

"Perhaps it did."

"It was pretty old and rotten. It's a wonder it didn't sink before this."

"I'm sorry my boy. I'm terribly sorry."

"I never liked it very much anyway. I had to sleep up in the bow and it smelled."

Dr. Soames-Winthrop accounted Bobby's concern as an avoidance, a healthy one probably, at least for the time being. He could not have understood — nor perhaps could Bobby at that moment and in all its complexity — what a hated thing the boat had become for him over the years, as he lay cramped in his bunk beneath the bow listening to his mother's life like a movie without any picture. He wept again for the sadness of those years.

The rector walked to the table upon which his sherry service stood and poured a glass of Amontillado. He handed Bobby the glass which the boy put to his lips without much thinking of its contents and drank off in a gulp. He gasped. Then choked. He stood up. The rector smacked him on the back a little harder than he might have liked and that set off the mouse which had now made its way back up to his stomach., Suddenly, to his great distress, Bobby had returned the Amontillado as well as the remains of a cherry tart into the pocket of Dr. SoamesWinthrop's Oxford cloth shirt pocket.

To Dr. Soames-Winthrop's credit — it must be said that he had never in all his years seen so sudden a purgation — he reached for the boy rather than his handkerchief, careful to turn his head away from the polluted pocket.

At last Bobby caught his breath and calmed. He felt slightly dizzy, but not from the sherry, very little if any of which he had retained. It was from the sense of his world tilting, of things taking on this new perspective. From the tentativeness of his control, and the labour of maintaining his pretences. She was drunk, he thought. That's why she didn't get out. And then he felt ashamed of the thought. He could feel the rector relax his embrace and was sorry, not ready quite yet to be on his own. He thought of Anthony who was just a boy, like him. There were no adults left now. Not of his own, anyway.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking at the ruined shirt.

"Of course. It is a great shock. I wish you could have been spared. The fates are so very capricious."

"I mean about your shirt."

"Oh, it's nothing."

In fact, it made the rector look quite preposterous, which was something of a relief under the circumstances.

"I must look a little ridiculous," Dr. Soames-Winthrop said. "I don't know what to think, sir."

"Would you like to spend the day here with Mrs. SoamesWinthrop and me?" he asked. "We have a spare room."

"Thank you," Bobby sniffled. "But I need to tell Anthony. And Mrs. Grundle. And Helter... Mr Skelton." He felt himself wrapping the cloak of his borrowed family around him. He wondered if it would be too much for them to have his troubles and was sorry for the burden he must bring back with him.

"Of course. And especially Parker. I have arranged to have him excused from class. He is probably outside the door with my wife now."

"He's my best friend," Bobby said.

"I think he cares for you very much. So do we all. You have many friends here, Bobby."

"Thank you, sir." He shook the rector's hand and started to the door. Then he stopped. "But what will become of me?" he asked.

"Oh, my dear boy!" the rector said.

It had not been Bobby's intention to speak so pathetically.

But he had not thought it out. Now having done that he said,

"I mean, what am I going to do? I have no one else."

"You have St. Matthew's School. For as long as you need it.

And of course we must find your father."

"I haven't seen my father since I was two. I don't even remember him."

"And you have no idea where he might be?"

"No, sir. And even if I did it wouldn't matter."

"Surely that's not true."

"I think it is, sir."

"I was looking through your registration material earlier, to see whom we might notify. There was no one listed other than your father."

"There is no one, sir. I think I'm an orphan."

"You are certainly not that." Dr. Soames-Winthrop picked up the green folder and opened it. "Your father is named but no address is given."

"We never knew it."

"Yes... Hmmm. Robert A. Ames. Is it your father's name too?"

"No, he's Clayton."

"What does the A stand for?"

"Amius."

"What a lovely name. Amius."

"Yes."

"Is it a family name?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you know what it means?"

"I didn't suppose it meant anything, sir. It's just a name."

"Almost all names mean something, my boy. This one sounds very much like the Latin amore."

"I'm not taking Latin, sir."

"Ah, yes. It means 'to love.' It's corrupted, of course."

"Corrupted, sir?" Bobby was not attached particularly to the name. He had never thought much about it, in fact. But it was a part of him and he felt obliged to defend it against what sounded to be a gratuitous slight.

Soames-Winthrop realised his mistake. "No, my dear boy.

Not in the sense of being corrupt, but in the sense of no longer showing the original form. `Amius' is not itself a form of the Latin verb. But I think we can safely guess that it is intended to mean `beloved'."

Bobby looked at the floor. There was something cruel about it, he thought. Like the fragrance of something which could not be touched. Or a sense one had upon awakening from a pleasant dream, a wistfulness but not in real time.

"It's a beautiful name, Ames. It's something your father gave you because he loved you. It's a kind of inheritance, wouldn't you say?"

"Please, sir."

"Yes, of course. Well, let's leave the possibility of finding your father open, shall we? I will work on that."

"Yes, sir. But what if you can't find him, sir?"

"You leave that up to me right now, will you? And don't worry."

"Yes, sir."

"Trust me."

"I do, sir."

Anthony and Mrs. Souses-Winthrop were waiting when Bobby and the rector stepped out of the office. There were oatmeal cookies on the table and the magazines were out of order.

"My goodness, Jack, what has happened to your... Oh, I see."

"Ames has decided to return to Sprinkles House for the night."

"We have a very cosy guest room," she said.

"Thank you, ma'am, but..." He looked at Anthony.

"Of course, I understand."

"You must take care of this young man, Parker."

"Yes, sir, I will."

"I will let you know how things go with our researches, Ames."

"Thank you, sir."

"Think about that inheritance."

"I will, sir."

"Well, then."

They walked out into the cool and fragrant April day. Anthony put his arm around Bobby's shoulder. The cinders crunched.

"You'd think with all this time and all the feet that they'd have worn smooth," Wells had once observed. "It would take a million years," Mason had said. Wells had been walking with his arm around Mason's shoulder just as he and Anthony were walking now. Then they had all slipped into the pump house and smoked, sharing cigarettes, one to each couple, and talked about Mason's dad who had driven his car off a bridge in Somerset two weeks before. Mason had cried.

"I didn't really cry about her," Bobby said.

"Oh."

"I did cry, though."

"I could see."

"I puked in the head's pocket. Sherry. I wasn't expecting it.

I thought it was water."

"He looked pretty funny."

"He was all right."

"He's an all-right fellow."

"I don't know why I cried. It never helps."

"Sometimes it does."

"Yeah, I guess so. Sometimes. Soames-Winthrop said there wouldn't be any problem of my staying here." Bobby reached down and took a handful of stones. They weren't even slightly rounded.

"Good."

"Do you think I'm in shock?"

"Probably."

"I don't feel in shock. What I really feel is like I'm free."

That's a funny thing, isn't it?" Perhaps they replaced the gravel every two or three years, Bobby thought. He pitched a stone at a beech tree as they passed. He missed it.

"What was that about an inheritance?"

"My middle name. My father picked it." Bobby pitched the stone and hit the tree squarely.

"What is it?"

"Amius."

"You're kidding."

"No, it's on my birth certificate. Soames-Winthrop said it means something like beloved."

"That's cool."

"He's going to try and find my father."

"How?"

"He didn't say."

"I'd like to meet your dad."

"So would I."

"I thought you hated him?"

"I do, I guess." Bobby stopped. Anthony took another step and turned.

"What is it?"

"What if I'm an orphan?"

"Huh?"

"What if my father's dead? Or if he isn't dead but never shows up? What then?"

"I don't know."

"I think I'd be a welfare case. They'd put me in some kind of institution."

"I wouldn't let them."

"Thanks." Bobby looked at the stones in his hand and dropped them slowly to the ground. He rubbed the residue of dust from his fingers and looked at Anthony. "I think I have to try and find him."

"How?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

"Well, Soames-Winthrop is going to try, so you can wait and see how he does."

"Yeah."

"I'll bet he does love you. I think it was meant that you were supposed to learn about your name today."

"Meant?"

"You know."

"I don't believe in that stuff."

"You should."

"If he loves me it's a pretty strange way to show it. Go away for twelve years and never even send a postcard."

"Maybe he couldn't help it."

"How can you not help running away from your family?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. Hey!"

"What?"

"What am I going to tell people?"

"What people?"

"At Sprinkles. The guys."

"They already know. Helter Skelter called a meeting."

"He told everyone about my mom?"

"Yeah."

"Why'd he do that?"

"He did about Mason's dad last year too. Remember?"

"Yeah."

"It's a good thing to do."

"I guess so. It's still going to be weird."

"Yeah. You ready?"

"I guess so."

2. The Damp at The Top of The Stairs

It was unnaturally quiet when they walked in. The boys who lingered at the perimeter of the kitchen, redolent of freshly baking cakes, revealed a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment. What did a boy look like after his mother died? The youngest were perhaps not sure they wanted to know. The older, being unpractised, didn't know what to say. Martin took the initiative: "Sorry, Ames." He held out his hand. Bobby took it and said thanks. Martin stepped aside like a child at a recitation. Then others found their voices, "Yes, Ames." "Beastly bad luck, old man." "Rotter, Ames."

"Sorry for your trouble, Ames," said Tan Callahan in his soft brogue. Tan's dark curls were like Anthony's; so, in some ways, was his disposition: gentle, unaffected. And his heart was dangerously open. Once Bobby had kissed him in the shower and after that Tan had always blushed when they met. He blushed now, too, and Bobby briefly put his hand on his shoulder.

"Thanks, Tan," he said. "Thanks all of you. It's nice to have friends."

"You have us, Ames," one of the 'mice' from the third floor said. From the sounds of assent it appeared that he spoke for others as well.

"Thanks, Peavey," Bobby said, catching the boy's spectacled glance from over by the magazine table. Peavey had one curled in his hand. Probably the latest Fantastic Stories, Bobby thought. The magazine was Skelton's sop to the sci-fi nuts in the house, of which young Peavey was the greatest devotee.

Skelton disapproved of science fiction himself. He saw little to be admired in progress which had served only to estrange mankind from its native instincts.

Mrs. Grundle could not be avoided. She had a lace hankie in her hand, one of several she kept in her right sleeve. "You poor, dear boy," she said and then her face collapsed into a pitiable contortion of speechless sympathy for which Bobby felt unaccountably guilty. He was not up to all of this sympathy. Nothing had really changed at all, he would have told them if it had seemed the right thing to do. But it wasn't. And they wouldn't have understood. Clara had been more of a mother in three months than his own had in fourteen years. But how could he have said that and not been thought a monster? He kissed her wet cheek and said simply, "I'm really okay, Clara." She nodded, speechless. So much feeling, he thought. He wondered how he would have measured up had their circumstances been reversed. Or had his with anyone there? Was he capable of this? What if Anthony's mother died? But that was different.

Anthony waited for him at the bottom of the stairs, and when he turned and saw him his composure almost slipped. 'Yes, I can feel,' he thought.

They walked up the stairs together. Adam Spooner sat on the top step waiting for them. He was Bobby's secret sharer, Anthony had said once after they had read the story in English class. Adam was a waif. And needy. He had attached to Bobby like a wistaria to a new wall

and Bobby had stood firm because his own world had so seldom supported anything that grew. "You're making up for things," Anthony had said. "Yes," Bobby had replied.

The problem was that Anthony, who was the most tolerant person Bobby had ever known, hadn't any patience with Adam Spooner. It wasn't merely that he was one of the youngest 'mice' — as the boys on Sprinkles three were called — or that he took time from Bobby which Anthony occasionally begrudged, or even that he smelled bad. It was that he peed his pants, a behaviour which Anthony found totally repugnant, socially unconscionable and probably indicative of some deep psychic rupture to which his own sense of order would not admit sympathy.

Bobby felt differently. At ten, as a harbour rat, he had done the same. But he did admit that it was socially suicidal at a place like St. Matthew's. And as for the deep psychic rupture, well that was another thing. Adam was the survivor of a murder/ suicide at the breakfast table, an event compared to which Bobby's own unsettled life seemed mundane.

Bobby read to Adam one or two nights a week, if he didn't have too much homework. Skelton approved of this. He liked for the older boys to show an interest in the younger.

"Sorry, Ames," Adam said. "You won't go away now, will you?"

"I don't think so, Spooner," he said. It was Adam's prescience; that was the uncanny thing about the boy. So often he would put into words what had been for Bobby merely an intimation. It was because they feared the same things, Bobby had concluded. Being alone. Being left behind. The feeling he had and which Adam might have understood was like the feeling one had at the top of a building or on a bridge. Not that he would fall, but that he would jump.

"Maybe I'll come up this evening," he said, "and we can talk. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Ames." Spooner moved aside so they could pass. They both noticed the damp spot on the top step as they walked on.

"He's peed his pants again," Anthony said when they were out of earshot.

"You didn't have to look at him that way."

"What way?"

"With such disgust."

"He'll never learn better if he doesn't get signals, will he?" "Well, he can get them from someone else."

"He won't from you; you're a bloody fetishist." Anthony took the gamble of a light-hearted argument. It was one of their strategies for connecting with one another after an ordeal. Bobby acceded.

"Not a fetishist. A waddayacallit."

"What?"

"You have a name for it. That thing you got from Latin class. The person who likes small things."

"An Epicurean."

"That's it. That's what I am."

"An Epicurean fancies subtle and delicate things. Nuances.

Fragrances. Tastes."

"Spooner is very fragrant."

"You and Helter Skelter."

"I'm not that far gone. I couldn't live up there."

"But you go up there and read to him. I don't know how you stand it."

"Well did you lived there."

"It wasn't my choice."

"You breathed the air then."

"That's why I'm demented. I paid a great price. I shall never be able to play the cello properly."

They had closed the door behind them and acted as they might on any ordinary day. Bobby went to the mirror to comb his hair and examine his eyes to see if they were bloodshot from his crying, and Anthony flopped on his bed.

"My face is all splotchy."

"It's not your best face, admittedly."

Bobby turned from the mirror.

"You know Helter Skelter said that Adam never cried after that thing that happened. Maybe that's why he pees his pants."

"You're crazy."

"I remember as a kid it made me feel better," Bobby said.

"Like crying does."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, I'm glad you stopped. What are you doing?"

"I'm looking at you."

"I know that," Anthony said. "But why?"

"Because you are so beautiful. You can't help yourself at all, can you?"

"It's natural to blush. It's like blinking."

"I love your eyelashes."

"They're hereditary."

"They're beautiful." Bobby leaned over, put his lips against Anthony's and felt himself slip into his other's being, behind the newly installed orthodonture.

"Bobby," Anthony said.

"I like it when you say it."

"But not that your father gave it to you."

"He rejected me."

"You assume."

"I don't want to get into that again. Not now."

"Okay," Anthony said. "But you need someone, you know."

"I've got you."

"Not like that. I'm just a kid. I wish you believed in God!"

"I'd rather trust a kid," Bobby said.

"Did you ever hear about the earthquakes that destroyed Sicily?"

"When?"

"I think it was the eighteenth century."

"What about them?"

"Well, when they started coming all the people panicked and prayed that they would stop. And they did stop."

"Evidence for the existence of God," Bobby said.

"Just listen. So all the people went into the churches and cathedrals to give thanks."

"And then the real earthquakes hit."

"How'd you know?"

"It's the kind of thing God would do."

"That's a terrible thing to say."

"They were all killed, right?"

"Thousands of people were," Anthony said. "And you know what the survivors did?"

"Built more churches."

"Yes. More than before. And in record time. Sicily is one of the wonders of the baroque period because of that."

"All of which proves how incredibly stupid people are."

"No, it proves how faithful they were."

"And you don't think it's stupid after God killed them off in the churches? I think it's the stupidest thing I ever heard."

"But life went on." Anthony sat up. He was becoming quite agitated by the story. It was one which he had himself discovered, that is to say, put together, when he and his mother had spent a holiday in Palermo. It was a talisman for him. He had wanted to share it with Bobby before, but had never dared expose it. "The point isn't whether you live or die. Millions of people are born and die every day. The point is that Life goes on. Capital L. And people reaffirm it even in the midst of the greatest tragedy."

"I don't know."

"I don't mean to preach. I'm sorry."

"I love it when you do," Bobby said. "You are so earnest."

"You mustn't laugh at religion."

"I'm not. I'm laughing at you."

Anthony put his hand in Bobby's hair and stroked it.

"I do believe in Eros, though," Bobby said. He lifted his hand and cupped Anthony who lay heavily into him. They kissed again.

"You're getting hard."

"It's sacrilegious." "Why?"

"Your mother has just died."

"My mother approved of sex."

"But not between boys."

"We never discussed it."

"People never do."

"I'm going to lock the door," Bobby said. "Then we can have a little snuggle."

"Okay."

Before he could reach the door, however, there was a knock.

Anthony swung his legs off the bed and sat up. He looked at Bobby and just for a second saw a look of fear and that he was on his guard. Just for the beat of a moth's wing, and it was gone.

3. Cookies and Hard-Boiled Eggs

It was Wells and Mason.

"Are you having visitors?" Wells asked.

"Sure. Come on in. We were just going to snuggle a little." Bobby turned to Anthony who frowned. Anthony did not approve, even with their best friends, of so public an airing of their intimacies.

"In the middle of the afternoon?" Mason, who was proud of his Prussian forbears, appeared genuinely distressed at the idea. There were limits, after all. Excesses pressed one's powers of rationalisation. There had been many discussions among the four of them concerning such things. They were the best of friends and little remained unsaid among them.

"Obviously we've come just in the nick of time," Wells added. And then with a sincere gracelessness, "It's pretty awful, Ames."

"I remember when I lost my dad," Mason said.

"We brought some crisps," Wells told them. Having said his piece he didn't want to dwell on the subject. His own mother had had a breast removed the year before. "Mason, where are the crisps?"

"I thought you had them."

"No, I said to pick them up."

"I'll get them." Mason started back out of the room and stopped. "Looks like it's going to be a party. The others are coming."

The others included Swann, Small and Martin as well as Bret Tully who had recently taken up with Swann, Martin was at the head. He had the manner of a forty-year-old accountant with four children and an overweight wife. He wore brogues, usually black, and carried a pocket full of pens. "How are you doing, old chap?" he asked and put his arm on Bobby's shoulder.

"Fine, Uncle Lester," he replied.

The others laughed. No one called Martin by his Christian name. Sometimes there were good reasons, Swann had pointed out, for avoiding Christian names. His own, Israel David, was a case in point. Martin's was another.

When Martin asked a question it was never rhetorical or ceremonial, so he pursed his lips and looked carefully at the young man upon whom he had placed his attention.

"Seriously?"

"Do we have to be serious?"

"You're a winner, Ames. Absolutely top drawer." He squeezed his neck and turned to the rest of the gathering. "I say, let's tell Grundle we want to have a wake."

"People are supposed to bring casseroles and cakes and pies and scalloped potatoes," Swann said.

"I've brought some biscuits," Small offered and produced a box of Breitenbach's Best.

Tully produced some Gladbum's raspberry syrup in a half-full sticky bottle and some paper cups. Small also had a tin of sausages and Anthony found the stale remains of a tin of shortbread.

Wells returned with the chips. "I asked Clara if we could have some cookies, and she's sending some up when they come out of the oven."

"Penis butter?"

"Smells like it."

"Well that's not so bad," Martin said. They relied upon Martin to assess things. "Are we having a good time yet, Martin?" Small would say as a tease, but actually they were grateful. Martin was the sort of person who would stop a game of monopoly in order that everyone might have a pee, count his money, assess his position on the board and make deals, out of the hearing of others. He was also the sort of boy whose room was immaculately neat and whose socks were arranged according to the depth of their nap, the ones with holes being at the front of the drawer and those barely worn at the back. They deferred to him for these qualities, mistaking them for order and as a kind of insurance against their own inclinations to excess.

"When my uncle died they had an incredible do," Small said. "He was a vicar. There must have been a hundred people. And they had champagne."

"I wouldn't mind a little bubbly," said Tully, who was the youngest looking of them all and sometimes affected an air of recklessness.

"You are a little bubbly," said Small.

"That's a non-sectarian," Tully said. He pounced, in fact, as if he had been waiting for the opportunity.

Anthony laughed. The others, surer now that Tully had misspoken, joined in.

"You mean a non-sequitur," Anthony said.

"Non-sequitur. That's it. It doesn't follow."

"If you are going to accuse a fellow of something you could at least pronounce it properly," Small said. "Crisps?" He handed the bag to Ames.

"Look who's talking," Tully said. "The Council of Kent!?" "I said Ghent," Small said, his mouth full of crisps. "It just sounded like Kent. Anyway, just because I don't suck up to Ethel the way you do...." He turned to the others. "Tully keeps his picture on his bedside table so he can say good night to him every night."

"That is an outrageous lie. And you're changing the subject."

"The subject is you're bubbling over and out of your chair practically every time Ethelred the Ready comes into the classroom and begins to lecture. 'Oh, Mr. Ethelred, I read that in the Council of Crepitus Ventris in 669 the Visigoths established a rule that boys could no longer be sold into concubinage.'"

"It's true," Tully protested. "And it was the Council of Albi. I'm not ashamed to be interested in history. I'm going to study history at Magdalen. The trouble with you, Small, is that you are an anti-intellectual."

"Wait," Wells interrupted. "Stop everything. If I'm going to follow this argument I need to know the story. Are we talking about Tully getting off on Ethelred or Small committing non-sectarians or what?"

"Yes, for God's sake, fellows," Mason added, "if you're going to make a scene, at least have it make some sense so that we can join in the abuse when the opportunity arises."

"Hear, hear," added Bobby, and then the others. "Hear, hear." "The subject," Tully said, assuming an oratorical stance, "honourable gentlemen, is that this cretin here presumes to be an intellectual through the stratagem of associating unlike ideas in such a bewildering way that his audience accedes to the device and pronounces him brilliant when in fact he is a dunce!" "If I may, honourable lords, gentlemen of Sprinkles Two," Small returned, "what you see before you is the agony of pre-putrescent love. This lad, hanging upon the very cusp of sexual maturity, still a treble as you hear, has lost his heart to a member of the staff. One Ethelred the Ready by name, admittedly a man of awesome stature and — it would seem great sexual prowess, who keeps a mistress in Tuppington-on-Smart..."

"He does not!"

"Who keeps a mistress in Tuppington-on-Smart, as I was saying, and has been seen with her, in fact, riding in his Aston Martin to the marshes."

"It was his sister, pin-head!"

"To the marshes. And we all know about the marshes, don't we? Well, most of us do. Tully here, of course, wouldn't, for to say he bubbles with enthusiasm is not to say.... Ah, it is a delicate matter. How shall I put it?"

"Any way you want to, Small, but get on with it."

"Here here!"

"Alas, dear friends, the lad cannot yet, in that other sense, bubble."

"Ahlthhhhh."

"I can too! And it's not true about Mr. Ethelred. I don't love him; I think he is a good teacher. Everything comes down to sex with you, Small. Your mind is a cesspool. And I don't have a picture of him. And everyone in this room likes Mr. Ethelred."

"Hear, hear."

"The point remains that you commit non-sequiturs all the time and then try to draw attention away from them by trying to embarrass people so they won't speak up. Well, I have and so there. And when my voice changes I only hope I will be blessed with something better than that adenoidal fog-horn of yours."

"Bravo bravo."

"I don't know about getting into the sack with Ethel," Bobby said, "but I wouldn't mind slipping my butt behind the wheel of that Aston." Anthony had caught his eye a moment before, noticing that Brett Tully, while conducting himself admirably, was wearing down. There is no burden heavier for a fourteen-year-old boy than that of a delayed ripening, and Bret still looked more like twelve. It was, on the one hand, a part of his charm; it was also something upon which it was not fair game to play if he appeared at all unwilling. Now he looked quickly at Bobby and perhaps closed his eyes for a moment in gratitude. Had he been put to the test of effervescence, as he and Swann and one other boy in the room knew, he would have failed.

There was a knock at the door. Bobby opened it to admit Tom Carstairs and a platter of cookies. Bledsoe and Quin-Quiller were with him. They carried four large bottles of Coke, some more crisps and a bowl of hard boiled eggs.

"Hi, Ames." Carstairs said. "Present from Clara."

"Drinks, too," Wells piped and relieved Quin-Quiller of two bottles. "Opener?"

Anthony reached in his desk drawer and produced one. He wrenched off the top of a quart and passed the opener to Quin-Quiller who poured one of the bottles out into several cups. He presented one to Bobby.

"Sorry, old boy. Don't know what to say really. Cheers." "Thanks, Quin. Cheers is a good thing to say."

"Here's to you, Yank," Bledsoe said, raising his cup. Carstairs passed the cookies to him,

"Sweets for the sweet," he said. Carstairs played the role of house vamp broadly. No one would have dreamed of condemning him for it, embarrassed as it sometimes made the other boys, for there was also something sinful and bold about it which teased at their imaginations.

"Hey, this is turning into a pretty good wake! I mean... Sorry, Ames. You know what I mean."

"It's okay, Mason. It's great you're all here. Really." "You going to the funeral, Ames?" Bledsoe asked.

"I don't think so. I don't think there'll be one. The boat burned up at sea."

"How ghastly," Quin-Quiller said through a half-chewed peanut butter cookie. "Did it sink?"

"The rector didn't say. I guess it must have."

"How'd they find out?"

"The guy she was with. He swam ashore. He was probably sleeping on the deck and she below. I suppose it was the alcohol stove. It always gave me the creeps."

"So what happens to you now, Ames?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, are you going to stay and finish the term?"

"I don't know."

"Of course he is!" Anthony said. He got up off the bed with the clear purpose of getting things on some more comfortable track than this. He picked up a crisp bag from the floor and started arranging his books on the desk.

"It's what a wake is supposed to be," Swami volunteered quietly. The wake having been his idea, he felt entitled to define it.

"I'm sorry. I just wondered."

"It's okay, Quin-Q. I really don't know. I've been thinking maybe I'd hit the road. Even before this."

"He's delirious. You're delirious, Bobby," Anthony said. "We should talk about something else. This isn't the time or the place."

"What is it supposed to be?" Bledsoe asked, peeling an egg.

"Working through things," Martin said. "Talking about the deceased with people who are close to you. Celebrating the life that was lost." Martin withdrew his head for a moment from the

Rolling Stone magazine he had found on Bobby's desk. He refilled his glass with Coke.

"Celebrating the life that was lost," Bobby said. "Hmmm." Anthony sensed danger.

"Bobby! Come on, guys. This isn't a good idea."

"Please, Anthony, it's my wake.. I mean my mother's wake. I want to talk about her."

"Really, it's a good idea, Parker," Swami reassured. There were sounds of assent, and Bledsoe offered Anthony a hard-boiled egg.

"I don't want a hard-boiled egg. Why do we have hard-boiled eggs?"

"You always have hard-boiled eggs at a wake," Carstairs said. "It gives people something to peel."

"It's already peeled," Bledsoe said.

Anthony took it.

"What was she like, Ames?" Bledsoe asked. "Blount-Morrison says she's a real looker. I mean that she was." "That's true."

"Like Ames," Carstairs said.

It was the sort of remark which would have landed anyone but Carstairs head down in the WC.

"Thanks, Carstairs.

Well, she was sort of a loser, to tell you the truth. She and my dad broke up when I was two. She got the boat and we lived on it. And she sailed it. And we moved around and she got laid."

"Bobby, for Christ's sake," Anthony pleaded.

"Well, what am I supposed to say? She was a loving and dutiful mother who raised hybrid tea roses and went to social functions? She was a drifter like my dad. A gypsy, that's what she really was. And she got rid of me as best she could." "You went to a lot of schools."

"I could write the book on schools!"

"How does Saint Mats measure up?"

"The best."

"What's the best thing?"

"The dingbats, misfits, freaks and perverts who go here."

"You included, Ames."

"Shit, man. I'm an American citizen."

"You and Parker are the most notorious perverts in Suffolk."

"Anthony has taught me some bad things. I cannot lie. I came here pure in heart and body and was corrupted."

"Is it true," Quin-Quiller asked, "that you have been successful in bringing off a telekinetic ejaculation while watching Parker undress?"

"A telekinetic what?" Bobby asked. Wells and Mason nodded their heads, but to the the rest of the boys the term was new.

"Coming without touching your cock," Wells said.

"That's impossible," Carstairs said.

"It is not," Wells said. "I have been studying up. It can happen in the right circumstances."

"What are they?" Tully asked.

"You have to be in a state of grace."

"That leaves you out, Wells," Small said.

"It leaves us all out," Wells said, quite seriously. "But some day it will happen."

"Sure, Wells," Small said, eager to get on with his cross-examination. "Where were we?"

"Ames said he had been corrupted," Tully said.

"That's right," Bobby said. "By microbes."

"Microbes?"

"Yeah like in The War of the Worlds. The environment is hostile to my native and natural modesty. Bryce-Jones explained it all to me."

"Poor old Bryce-Jones," Wells said. "A fellow of infinite wit. I knew him, Horatio."

"Bryce-Jones had the wit of an apricot," Small said decisively. "He was as shrivelled up as one, too. He gave me the creeps."

"He liked you well enough, didn't he, Ames?" Quin-Quiller asked, never having himself been

quite sure what that relationship had amounted to.

"He was very nice to me. I won't make fun at his expense."

"Get that, fellows? No more grenades at Saint Michael," Swann said. "Rest in peace."

"Christ, Swann, he's not dead," Wells said. "You know it always seems like it, though, when a fellow leaves. It's always so hush hush."

"Yeah," Quin-Quiller assented. There was a muted appreciation of the truth in this, a troubling area. As if the outside world was like a poisonous desert into which one stepped only with the most dire of need and, having stepped, might never return again to the world of St. Matthew's.

In the silence which followed, Anthony and Bobby exchanged looks. Each had kept the secret, and would. Of the afternoon when Saint Michael — so called for his manner of lecturing the boys, as if he were a fifty-year-old master, on the evils of sex — had walked into their room without knocking and found them naked on Anthony's bed, asleep. Bobby had waked in time to see the impression the scene had made upon his protector. Michael's face had simply gone blank and he had left the room in a kind of trance. It was the next day that they learned he was gone. The rumour was that he had had a breakdown.

Bobby had carried the guilt of that with him, for he had, in a way, led Bryce-Jones on. Not that Michael had needed much.

Bobby had listened to his lectures, including the one now alluded to about the deadly microbes in English public schools and the foreigners' susceptibility to them. Bryce-Jones had been a kind of friendly ogre for Bobby during his first weeks at St. Matthew's, sheltering him from the consequences of his own social faux pas, hovering, giving him the blessing — such as it was — of his position as prefect. Bobby thought about him still, fondly. The loss of him had been yet another. But he was not allowed to dwell on this.

"Ave atque vale, Michael Drury Bryce Jones," Small said. "Red herring exceptionnel."

"Red herring?"

"Very clever, Ames. Did you see how cleverly he changed the subject, just as the indictment was heating up."

"I didn't."

"Quiet, Ames, I have the floor. Now think for a moment, friends," Small continued. "Without allowing the contemplation of this question to raise your testosterone level, tell me, have you ever seen Ames naked?"

"Does the Pope live in Rome?"

"Well?"

"It is impossible not to see Ames naked. He's a bloody exhibitionist."

"My point precisely. Then you have seen Ames emerge from the shower," Small continued.

There was a choric response.

"And have you ever noticed whether it is extended to its full proportions or shrunken, retiring, and hideous.

"Hideous," Bledsoe said.

"Ames tires it out in the shower," Swann accused.

"There's nothing left of it!" Wells said, shaking his head in disgust.

"I ask you, is this normal?" Small pursued.

"Yes," Bobby yelled. "It is natural!"

"No," the chorus responded.

"And I ask you brethren, have you ever seen this same person who now sits before you fondle himself in class the way some uncouth people in the upper forms do?"

"Yes!"

"And have you ever seen him salivate down his chin and roll his eyes while Henry Truebooth conjugated the verb, amare?"

Anthony darted a quick look at Bobby, but he had not made the association.

"What?"

"Has he ever masturbated in class?"

"Oh! Yes!"

"And it is widely known that he has for several months now cohabited with a member of royalty."

"Anthony's not royalty; he's only a lord," Quin-Quiller said.

"For God sake, Wells! You guys! This is ridiculous," Bobby protested.

"He's not even a lord. He's just landed gentry," Carstairs said lackadaisically.

"I've never beaten off in class!"

"You've thought about it," Small accused.

"Who hasn't?"

"But that's the point. It's your mind. It's fetid."

"It's not my fault," Bobby said, falling to his knees. "Whose is it?" Small demanded.

"It's because there are no girls here."

"What do you say to that, jury?"

"Insufficient cause!" "Excommunicate him!"

"Lock him in a closet." "Cut off his cohonos."

"Sell him to a photographer!"

"Hey, guys," Martin interrupted, "I hate to ruin the execution but some of us have got a class in about thirty seconds." "Oh, my God!"

"Shit!"

"Sorry for the mess, Ames." "That's okay."

"You coming, Parker?" "I've got the day off."

"Good thing too," Small said, winking. "Keep your eyes on this one. Last cookie. You want it?" "No."

"Anyone want it?" "Eat it, Small."

"You eat it, Swami." "I don't want it."

"Figuratively, Swami," Small said, stuffing the cookie into his mouth and dumping the crumbs into the wastebasket by Bobby's desk. Waving over his shoulder, he closed the door. It was like the aftermath of a stampede. The room was incredibly quiet.

"Wow," Anthony said.

"I love those guys," Bobby said.

"I know," Anthony said. "So do I." "Well? Where were we?"

"You were about to lock the door." "I remember now."

4. Anthony Gives His All

Clara Grundle liked simple food, uncomplicated motives and common names. "Bobby" had always been one of her favourite names. Her elder brother in Hammersmith was named Bobby and a nephew in York as well.

"I don't know what to think," she said to Henry Skelton one afternoon after tea and over a glass of port. They met on Thursday afternoons when the boys were at sport to plan the week ahead. They rarely planned, however, as life in Sprinkles House was fairly predictable. But they did discuss the boys, which was the real purpose of the visit, so that each might have advantage of the other's gleanings. They had discussed Adam Spooner's nightmares and concluded that Skelton should probably not allow him to sleep on the cot in his study, that it was a disincentive to his recovery.

They had also discussed Bledsoe's bout with a badly infected toe-nail and made resolutions, which time and habit would cause them to forget in the days ahead, that Skelton must more systematically examine the boys after their Saturday baths for such eruptions before they got out of hand. There had been Thurman-Stowe's boils two years back, Clara remembered. The topic, however, was Skelton's suggestion that Bobby should change his name to Amius. He had learned of the name from Soames-Winthrop and had been taken with it. It was a purely academic discussion since all boys at St. Matthew's were called by their surnames, except by Clara Grundle.

"I think it's just the right thing for the boy," Skelton said.

"It's something of his father's for him."

"That may be, Henry, but Ames is a simple boy. He's a Bobby and you won't persuade me otherwise for all of your psychology."

It was psychology, of course. There was no pretending it was anything else and Clara had no patience for it. Henry had tried his best over the years to translate Freud into Suffolk common sense but without success. Clara had a nose for theory. And not simply psychological theory. The other two theorists of Skelton's triumverate fared no better in translation; Fourier and Swedenborg were not names Clara had ever heard, but she knew of their existence as surely as astronomers knew of black holes and dwarfs. By inference. Skelton's utopian schemes sounded to her bookish and his religion sounded slightly heretical.

"It's a matter of self-image," Skelton said. "Of knowing who he is."

"All he has to do is stub his toe or look in a mirror," she had replied, "and he'll know quick enough who he is."

He had tried the Latin bit, the 'beloved', on her as well and she had taken out her handkerchief, not for an aesthetic reason, however. A name was a name was a name, Clara agreed, having

no idea with whom she might be agreeing. But the word "beloved" had always been one of her most favourite. A young man had once addressed his suit to her under that greeting. Years before. It stayed with her, as he had not, to comfort her old age. And she was quite ready to think of Bobby Ames as a beloved. She would gladly have wiped his tears and set him confidently on his way back into life; but he had not asked, and she had not pressed any more affection upon him than he had been willing to accept. A name, whatever it might mean in Latin which was in any case no longer the language of the Church could hardly offer the consolation which her ample person might have provided.

"Give him an Amius and the next thing you know he'll be a Blessington-Pokersmythe or some such thing," she said. And that was the end of that subject. But not of Ames. The boy's spark was gone, Clara observed.

"He's grieving," Henry said.

"Not over the loss of her, I hope," Clara said, pursing her lips. It was a mannerism intended to distance her from a foregoing remark. You didn't really hear that from me but we both know it's true, she might have said.

"I don't know. I don't think so. His father, I think. I think the boy pines for his father."

"He has little reason to hope, of course. A man like that, abandoning his child at the age of two. And now lost even if he did want to be found. A needle in a haystack."

"The rector has put an announcement in the London papers, and one from New York as well."

"Well, he has us," Clara said.

"But we may not have him, if he doesn't get a father."

Clara put down her hand work. Henry poured another glass of sherry and explained.

Anthony Parker lay on his bed pretending to read a book. It had been a week since the wake. He had been pretending to do a lot of things lately. There was a lot of politeness between them and now and then the edge of something else, like the glint of a blade taken momentarily from its sheath and then returned. He wished Bobby would cry. Tears, he thought, like water, would heal the parched landscape, bring things back to life. Some purgation. But his own eyes were dry as well as his friend's. It was a dry and dusty feeling. Bobby sulked, daydreamed, failed tests, forgot obligations and slept in his own bed. They dressed with their backs turned to one another. Anthony looked out the window. There were dark clouds. It had been threatening rain now for three days. Thunder rolled off in the distance.

"In six weeks school's out," Bobby announced. He had been studying the calendar on his desk.

"Time flies when you're having a good time," Anthony said.

"Don't be sarcastic. It doesn't suit you."

"Sorry."

"It's not much time," Bobby said.

"It's plenty for me."

"Is it?"

"More than enough."

"For what?"

"For nothing." "Something."

"Nothing can come of nothing," Anthony said. It sounded to Bobby like a quotation.

"Keats," he said. "Shakespeare."

"Macbeth." "Hamlet."

"I lose."

"No, I do."

"Don't do this, Anthony." "I'm not doing anything."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean."

"It's not important."

"Then what is?"

"I don't know." Anthony sighed and lay back on his bed staring at the ceiling. It needed painting, he noticed. He had never noticed the room before. It had just been there, but now it seemed to need attention. "You won't even argue with me," he said.

"There's nothing to argue about."

"We could argue about whatever you meant." "I didn't mean anything."

"I don't see why you should want more time."

"I didn't say I did," Bobby protested. "I thought you did."

"Well I do."

"Why? You don't use what you have." "You're being sarcastic again."

"That's not sarcasm."

"It's mean, Anthony. I can't help it." "Sorry."

"You don't have to use time to have it matter." "Sometimes it helps."

"Anthony?" "What?"

"Do you think there's any chance my father will answer that stupid ad?"

"It's your father, isn't it?" "What's my father?"

"That's what's on your mind, isn't it?"

"Him? Are you kidding? After all these years? I've got better things to do."

"What things?"

"What do you mean, what things?"

"You don't do anything except sit and stare. You're like some kind of zombie."

"I'm sorry."

"That's what I mean." "What?"

"You used to get mad if I said something like that. You don't even defend yourself."

"Well, you're right. I am a zombie."

"But you don't let me do anything. If you'd tell me what it is, I could at least help, or try to."

"There's nothing you can do. I think it must be like the flu or something. It will go away."

"So you do think about him."

"I guess so. I don't know how you can abandon a little kid like that. I feel sorry for him."

"Yeah, so do I."

"I've told myself every story you can imagine these past two weeks." "Three."

"Mute."

"What kind of stories?"

"Sad little stories in which the father finds his son at last.

They are united and everything is okay and it was all a big mistake."

"Maybe it will turn out that way."

"Maybe in Irkutsk." "What?"

"Nothing."

"You must feel awful inside."

"Do you pity me?" "No, I pity me."

"What?"

"I pity me because I love you and I don't know how to show it any more."

"You do show it."

"You know what I wish you'd do?"

"What?"

"Hit me on the arm."

"You hate it when I do that." "It hurts."

"You want to be hurt?"

"Just do it,"Anthony said. "I'll tell you why later."

"No. You're crazy."

"Don't worry, you can't hurt me."

"Of course I can."

"Not really. But if you do, then I asked for it. It's not asking very much."

Bobby stood up despite himself. He couldn't have said what he felt except that Anthony had been on his case for two weeks now. Brooding, criticising, always straightening the room. Or sighing. That was the worst part.

Anthony had a sweat shirt on. Bobby gave him a punch, not hard but hard enough to make it hurt. Anthony was nothing but skin and bones.

Anthony blinked his eyes and smiled. "Just what I thought." "What?"

"Your muscles have atrophied. Just like everything else."

Bobby hit him again, harder. Anthony winced and shook it out, and Bobby hit him again as hard as he could. Anthony hung his head and shook it from side to side. Bobby hit him a fourth and a fifth time and then pushed him back onto the bed. Anthony held his shoulder with his right hand and closed his eyes. Bobby felt he had earned some tears and stared unfeelingly at his friend's tightly shut eyelids. Anthony tried to roll over on his stomach to hide his face but Bobby held him there by the other shoulder. His left arm looked peculiar. He reached to touch it and Anthony went limp.

Bobby waited outside the infirmary. When Anthony came out with the nurse, his arm was in a tight sling. It felt to Bobby as he imagined it must feel to someone whose heart is restarted by an electric impulse. Seeing his beloved friend, injured, jolted him back into awareness.

"Parker explained to me that you were playing a game."

"Yes, ma'am."

"It was a very stupid game."

"I know."

"I should report you to the rector for punishment."

"Yes, ma'am."

"But Parker promises that you won't try it again."

"We won't, I promise."

"Parker is much more fragile than you are, Ames. I don't imagine he hurt you much at all."

"Not much at all, ma'am."

"And you dislocated his shoulder."

"I know."

"You must have hit him very hard."

A tear suddenly broke free of Bobby's left eye and hurtled recklessly down his cheek. It disconcerted the nurse, who was less adept at tears than slings. She didn't like weakness in

the male species and she didn't like passions of the sort which were clearly evident here. She was relieved of any further need for action, however, by the arrival of Henry Skelton.

"It was just a game, sir," Anthony said, now ignoring the nurse.

"A pretty rough one, it seems," the housemaster observed, appraising his two inmates.

"I started it," Anthony said.

"Is he all right?" he asked the nurse.

"Fine. He should keep that on for a week, just to be sure.

The shoulder is weak. He'll have some pain."

"Thank you, Miss Wimblewest."

"Yes, Mr. Skelton. Better keep your eye on those two."

He opened the door and they preceded him onto the green. "Now what in God's name was that all about?" he asked. Bobby was clearly still incapacitated. Anthony began to explain that he had challenged Bobby to a duel. Skelton stopped him.

"Wait, I shouldn't have asked. I'm going to get a story. I don't want one. I'm not going to get the truth, am I?"

"It's complicated, sir."

"A friend's quarrel?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't think Ames meant to hurt you."

"Oh, no, sir! We're..."

"Yes, I know. I know. It's been too quiet, hasn't it? I have something to show you, Ames. Why don't you come up and spend some time with me this evening."

"All right, sir. Is it about my father?"

"Yes, it is."

"Have they found him?"

"No. But we do have some news. Let's say eight o'clock."

"Yes, sir."

"Now probably you two have some talking to do as well."

"Thank you, sir."

Henry Skelton held open the door to Sprinkles and they preceded him into the hall. Mrs. Grundle, seeing Anthony's sling, let out a cry of horror.

"A game," Skelton said. "Next they'll be doing it with swords or pistols. Go on, up to your room. And Ames..."

"Sir?"

"Be gentle with your friend."

"I will, sir."

When they were in their room Anthony went to the window seat and put his feet up in that way which for Bobby had become emblematic of him. In silhouette, his face profiled, the light filtering through the back curls of his hair, where it meandered over his collar.

Only now there was a difference. His right arm was wrapped in a white triangle of cloth. He had been hurt.

Bobby sat on the floor below him, his own head against the fragrant leather chair which Lady Fairchild had provided in recognition of Anthony's first published poem. It had belonged to Swinburne, or at least the dealer had so claimed, and charged accordingly. He pulled his legs up, making himself into Anthony's reflection. He reached up and put his hand around Anthony's ankle.

"Why didn't you tell them that I fell?" Anthony asked.

"I didn't have time to think of it. I thought you were dead."

"That you had killed me."

Bobby nodded. The tears started again, quietly.

"You wanted to kill somebody," Anthony said, "but I don't think it was me."

"Why did you do that?"

"Make you hit me?"

"Yes."

"Because you were the dead one. You were a corpus sentimental^{is} depressis."

Bobby laughed and choked. Then he coughed. Finally he caught his breath. "And you thought I'd be better if I dislocated your shoulder."

"I didn't really expect you to do that. You're darned strong." "It wasn't me. It was someone else."

"It was some other you?"

"I guess so."

"I'm glad it came out of its cave, even if I do have a sore arm. How are you?"

"How am I?"

"Yes."

"I'm not the one about whom it matters how he is," Bobby said. "But I'm fine. Let's go to bed."

"I'm afraid I'll lie on it."

"I won't let you."

"Okay. But it really hurts to get it set. I couldn't stand it again in the same day."

"Is it really awful?"

"I spewed all over the table in there."

"In the infirmary?"

"Yes."

"This is the month for puking."

"I guess so."

"Here, I'll help you up."

Though Anthony needed no help, he welcomed it and played the invalid to the best of his abilities. He sat on the edge of his bed, the one in which they both usually slept. Bobby knelt and removed Anthony's shoes and socks. Then his jeans. It was trickier with the shirt.

"This is like that trick with the rings," Bobby said.

"What one?"

"You know, where the guy gives a shake and they all come apart."

"Don't give me a shake, please."

Once the shirt was off, Anthony got gingerly under the covers.

Then Bobby took off his own clothes and got in next to him.

"Shove over," Bobby said. "I need to be on the side without the bad shoulder."

"You'd better do the door."

"Oh. Forgot." Bobby went over and hooked the bolt on the door and then slid in beside Anthony and pulled up the covers.

"How could I have hit you so hard?"

"We know what we are. We know not what we may be."

"Shakespeare."

"Right."

"Hamlet," Bobby mumbled.

"Ophelia. She goes crazy because Hamlet stops loving her."

Bobby wrapped his legs about Anthony's and lay his head on his friend's chest. Anthony stroked his hair.

"We know what we are. We don't know what we'll be," Bobby repeated, more or less.

"We know not what."

"Would you go mad if I stopped loving you."

"I'm sure I would," Anthony said.

"No, seriously."

"Probably not."

"But you would become melancholy and a little suicidal?"

Bobby asked.

"Undoubtedly."

"Three weeks, Huh?"

"Actually three weeks and two days. We hadn't done it for two days before you got the news."

"I know."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Bobby said, "when I was leaving the room that day and you were standing there I wanted to make love to you."

"So did I."

"We should have."

"You would have been late."

"And I would have felt guilty, I suppose, getting the news when I was still sticky."

"Will you feel guilty now?"

"I never feel guilty, you know that."

"But you just said..."

"That was different. And anyway I probably would have felt guilty about not feeling guilty."

Bobby raised himself on one arm and pressed his lips against Anthony's. He felt them come together and his body responded as if awakened from a long sleep. "Oh, Anthony," he said, drawing away for a moment. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I'll never do it again."

"Never say never."

"What?"

"Never say never again."

"Ophelia."

"No, stupid. Hemming."

5. The Master of Sprinkles House

Sprinkles Three had at one time been a small theatre for the entertainment of the Earl's family and guests. It was done, like the house itself, in the style of the late baroque, which is to say more ornately than twenty small residential boys might require. Not more than they might enjoy, however, as they did, one generation after the next, lying in bed studying the Greek myths frescoed upon the ceiling. Or Roman myths. It wasn't entirely clear. The artist had worked from a very loose text, it appeared, for no one could say with certainty whether the children portrayed were being abducted, ignored or simply there for the decoration they provided and the labour of holding up certain drapes and tapestries. Bacchus was easily identified, as were Persephone and Orpheus. It could be argued, but not conclusively, that Zeus had someone or other behind a drape.

The walls along the side were generously faced with mirrors so that practically every boy might admire himself in the grand style. On the back wall were depicted three scenes from Henry the Fourth by William Shakespeare: Prince Hal's revels with Falstaff, his imitation of his father (the play within the play) and his coronation and renunciation of Falstaff. They provided a warning to the boys to choose their friends well.

What had originally been the stage, raised one metre from the floor of the room and at one end, was now Henry Skelton's apartment, consisting of a small bedroom, a study, a private bath and kitchen and a dining area. From the dining area a window opened to the dormitory and from there, occasionally, the master of Sprinkles Three restored order, called for lights out or rang the morning wake-up bell.

In the larger room there were twenty beds which might at one time or another have had some order to their arrangement. Now, however, they were wherever the boys wanted them. They were as liable to being moved as were the boys who occupied them liable to change their moods and friendships.

Usually boys paired. Occasionally they quadrupled their beds so as to create a common centre space in which to play or pitch a tent of blankets.

Always some boys would be independent, or become so after a falling out, retreating to the wall for a while to reconnoitre the situation. Some chose to sleep alone throughout their entire stay on Sprinkles Three which would be until they reached the age of thirteen and moved to the first floor.

Skelton believed that human nature was essentially good and that evil came into the world through the imposition on it of artificial codes and poisonous pedagogy. There were therefore only two rules on Sprinkles Three. "You may not hurt yourself and you may not hurt others." It was a simple and largely effective code. It was rare that a boy had to be punished, but when it was necessary it amounted to no more than his removal from their society for a day or two. For this purpose what had once been the cloak room served well. It was not an unpleasant room, but it was removed and a boy who was asked to stay there might not tarry with his friends in coming and going.

Skelton also believed that good health was maintained through natural means. Comparing a clear mountain brook to the outlet of a marsh he spoke ardently of the need in the human flowage of what he called flux. Flux was no more than water. "Nature's natural freshet," he called it and prescribed for those under his care six or eight pints a day. To a boy who looked pale and sickly he might be heard to remark that he needed flushing and the boy would be supervised into a rigorous adherence to the eight pint rule.

Very often it worked. There was a good deal to Skelton's theory, the maths teacher, Mr. Felleway, conceded with an uncharacteristic charity. "If anyone could be bothered!" he would add, alluding to the time it consumed in one's day to be so conscientious in the matter of a tasteless beverage; not to mention the time one must then spend in the WC.

Three of the denizens on Sprinkles Three were bed-wetters. Skelton approved of bed-wetting. In his own school he had been beaten for it and here, while the boys on Sprinkles Three were certainly not rewarded, neither were the others allowed to abuse them for their lapses. Skelton believed that many of the world's political problems could be traced to an over-rigorous programme of toilet training in childhood.

Because it always had a few bed-wetting, Sprinkles Three had a particularly ammoniac character to it. Skelton, some boys said, was not unlike a vampire in his sleeping requirements needing not a coffin but an atmosphere not unlike that of Uranus — they were careful to give it the right pronunciation — which preserved him from one generation to another.

Bobby arrived on Sprinkles Three at seven, thinking to read to Adam Spooner a few more chapters of The Hardy Boys before his meeting with Skelton.

Adam was sitting at his study carrel working on his English paper. Bobby pulled up a chair and they talked about how unfair it was for Mr. Featherstone to give two compositions in the same week. Then they played a game of chess. Adam was a better chess player than Bobby. He was a piece ahead when Mr. Skelton stuck his head out of his door and invited Bobby in. Skelton's study was no more orderly than the world outside it; he practised, in reasonable and appropriate measure, what he preached. He removed his academic gown and a pair of slippers from an easy chair and invited Bobby to sit down. Bobby knew the chair well and lowered himself carefully into its depths; it was the kind of device into which a small boy might disappear entirely and in which a fourteen-year-old had to work to maintain an aspect of dignity.

Skelton sat on the sofa across from him. "Is Anthony resting comfortably?" he asked, packing a large meerschaum pipe.

"Yes, sir, as well as could be expected," Bobby replied. He looked at his fingernails.

"I take it you lost your temper."

"It was a game."

"Your idea or his?"

"His."

"He taunted you?"

"I guess so."

"Would it be imposing to ask why?"

Bobby studied the tattered fringe on the chair and when he finally looked up found that Skelton was smiling.

"Yes, it would be, I can see that. None of my business. You and Anthony are still friends, I hope."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"Good. Well, these things happen. I guess I was wondering if it had to do with your mother's death."

"I think so. I was being a... I wasn't being very good company. I think Anthony was trying to wake me up." "And did he?"

"Yes. I feel horrible about it, Mr. Skelton."

"I can see that. But don't punish yourself more than is fair." "I don't want to be done with it yet, sir. Anthony's my best friend."

"I know that. Well, I asked you to come up for another reason, didn't I? Hmmmm. Would you like a small glass of sherry?"

"Yes, sir, I would." Bobby had once read that you should always get back onto a horse which has thrown you. This would be his second acquaintance with sherry.

"It's a very nice sherry, actually. See what you think."

He took two glasses, neither particularly clean, from a corner cabinet and filled them from a decanter which, Bobby imagined, might be quite elegant with a little dusting. Then he sat down again and tasted his. Bobby followed his example.

"It's a little dusty," Skelton said.

"Oh, it's fine, sir," Bobby reassured quickly. It was said of Helter Skelter that occasionally he could read your thoughts.

"But dustiness in wine is not to be dismissed, especially in a very light and dry wine. With this one, perhaps a little less desirable. Well, cheers to you, my boy."

"Cheers, sir."

Bobby was pressed to find an appropriate epithet for Mr. Skelton's wine and so settled for the most sensible and, he realised, heartfelt.

"I like it, sir. Thanks."

"It's my pleasure, entirely my pleasure." Skelton put the glass carefully back on the silver salver, finding a congenial place in the swirled filigree of its decoration for the base, and began speaking of the up-coming house play. He wondered if Anthony was working on anything, and Bobby said that he thought he might be. Then Helter Skelter talked of one which he remembered from a few years back in which a boy had hurt his best friend in something of the way Bobby had hurt Anthony.

For all of his iconoclasm, Skelton spoke through indirections when it came to the boys. Sometimes it was quite humorous. Sometimes touching.

Bobby recalled a time after one of the Friday films in the common room. It was a W. C. Fields comedy. They had been sitting very close and at the end, Anthony's head was on Bobby's shoulder. Skelton had got them aside over the crisps. "W. C. Fields said at least one thing worth remembering," he told them. "The only thing worse than not getting what you want is getting it." They had smiled appreciatively but uncomprehendingly, and he had continued, "The general run of human beings is very suspicious of people who have what they would like to have."

Then he had left them and talked to some other boys, but they had pretty well understood what he was getting at.

Bobby awakened from his brief reverie, realising that Skelton had finished with the play and was getting down to business.

This he indicated by refilling his glass. Bobby's had been hardly touched.

"The reason that I wanted you to come up here, Ames," he began, "is to tell you that, despite this thing with Parker, you are a decent fellow."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I appreciate the interest you've taken in Spooner. It means a lot to him."

"I like Spooner, sir."

"I just wish we could get Spooner to."

"Yes, sir."

"Spooner seems to think you're going to be leaving us."

"I don't plan to, sir, unless I have to."

"Good. I don't know where he got the idea. He's a strange little boy."

"Still, I do think sometimes that I might leave." "Ah"

"Not exactly because I want to."

"Because you aren't allowed to stay?"

"Not that either, really, sir."

"What does going away mean to you?"

"Being free, I guess. I felt that way when my mother died."

"Free."

"Yes."

"And then?"

"And then I didn't any more."

"I see."

"I wish that I did."

"Freedom isn't always found outside, Ames. Sometimes you can find it in a very small place."

"Yes, sir."

"Well. I have a letter here." Helter Skelter produced it. "It's from Mark Brightly. It came to the rector today. He inquired about your father, you know."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't approve of the idea?"

"It's a waste of time, sir. Even if you could find him, he wouldn't want me."

"Why don't you read this. I'm afraid Brightly's penmanship isn't much better than it was when he lived in Sprinkles House."

He handed the letter to Bobby who, with some effort, was able to read the following:

Dear Rector,

I have given some thought to your inquiry concerning Dot and her ex. And also as to what you might tell Bobby about the accident more than [indecipherable] first note. Really there isn't much more to tell. I was sleeping on the deck and Dot below when the fire started and by the time I was aware of it, it was already too late. It went very fast, you can tell him and I don't think she suffered. That's small comfort, I know, but [indecipherable] is. As you know, I jumped overboard before the boat sank and swam to another boat anchored nearby.

Concerning her ex., I may be able to offer a little more. They were estranged, you know, for most of the boy's life. She never spoke of it very much but I assumed there had been a [indecipherable] of some sort, probably with another guy. A month ago this lawyer came to the boat with a letter. She had to sign for it. It was from him. She had a quick look [indecipherable] it up and dropped it into the water. He was in Amsterdam, she said. She was angry that he had found her. We left the next day for the Adriatic. All she'd say about it was that he wouldn't let it alone. Not let what alone, I asked her and she said, "Bobby, what else?" and that was the end of it.

That's all. It isn't much, I know, and I wish for Bobby's sake it were more. He's a good kid and he's had a bad time. I hope you can find his pater.

Oh, the other thing. The boat wasn't insured. Dot had stopped making the payments in October, apparently. If I had known I would have [indecipherable] or something.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours Sincerely,

Mark Brightly, '68

Bobby returned the letter to Skelton. The boy's obvious distress touched his host.

"It's difficult to read, isn't it?"

"No, not about my mother. I'm glad to know the boat sank, though."

"Why is that?"

"Well, it settles things. I don't know. I wanted it to have sank when I first heard. I guess I didn't want people messing around."

"I can understand that."

"And I hated it."

"The boat?"

"Yes."

"But there's more in the letter. And it distresses you."

"The part about my father."

"It sounds more complicated than you thought."

"Yes."

"There's even the possibility that he had not wanted to give you up."

"Yes, I guess so."

"Don't you think we should try to find out?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I feel so tired of it all."

"The rector put an announcement in the Amsterdam papers today. To the attention of Clayton Ames."

"What did it say?"

"The rector is a little melodramatic sometimes. Hmmm. I think it said, 'Clayton Ames, your son needs you. Contact John Soames-Winthrop, Rector, St. Matthew's School,' and then gave the telephone number and the address."

"It's not true."

"About your needing him?"

"Yes."

"Is there anyone else at all, Ames?"

"There's no one that I know of, sir. My mother's parents were killed about the time I was born, I think. And my father's family — well, I wouldn't know."

"I guess you'd just as soon talk with Anthony about this now."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then. Look Ames, promise me something, if you don't mind."

"What is it, sir?"

"That you won't disappear on us."

"I'll try not to, sir."

"Well, that's honest. Then promise that if you do, you'll let someone here know where you are."

"I promise, sir."

"Good." He stood up and they walked to the door.

"You know, Ames, nothing good can happen to a fourteen-year-old boy at large in the world with no one to care for him."

"I've been like that most of my life, Mr. Skelton."

"Not on your own, my boy."

"Yes, sir, I have. There were times... It doesn't matter, sir.

It's just that you wouldn't have to worry about me. I could Manage."

"Perhaps you could, but I hope you won't put it to the test.

What more can I say, then?"

"I appreciate all that you did say, sir."

"Yes. Well."

"Sir? I am happier here than I have ever been in my entire life."

"That's what's so confusing, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Off to your friend, then, and take care of him."

"I will, sir."

"Oh, Ames."

"Yes, sir?"

"Stop by Spooner's bed on your way out and see what you can do to reassure him. He's been having nightmares since your mother's death."

"I know."

"Good."

At the door he shook Skelton's bony hand and suddenly regretted that he had not finished his glass of sherry. It wasn't likely he'd be offered more in the near future. It was clever, he thought, of the old man to remind him about Spooner. But what could he do? Anthony was probably right. Some morning Spooner would wake up and remember the whole thing, and then go bonkers. Like Bryce-Jones had. Poor old Bryce-Jones.

He missed him and he wondered about him. He had wanted to ask Skelton about him but the still disturbing and confusing events of the last days confounded his intention. It was possible, of course, that Bryce-Jones had spoken to Skelton about what he had seen. It was one thing to welcome the old man's approval of his relationship with Anthony; it was quite another to consider that he had heard such a report as Bryce-Jones might have given. It made him blush to think of it.

Whatever had happened to Bryce-Jones was not something that would happen to him, however. He was harder than other people. He thought of Adam. He would read him a chapter tonight.

6. Auguries

To Michael Drury Bryce-Jones the powers of light and darkness were as real as a gladiolus. The pursuit of goodness was his life's work and the rooting out of evil its concomitant. He had wrestled with the dark seducer and had stood also, from time to time, in a sunbeam. It was he who had observed the aura of light which accompanied Bobby Ames even into the dank and grey interior of the chapel at St. Matthew's School and had spoken of it to Helter Skelter. It was he who had felt the cold breath of the evil one as well and had become therefore the boy's champion and protector, placing himself in the very path of that malevolent spirit.

There had been no question among Bryce-Jones' contemporaries concerning the roots of his precocious evangelism. It seemed clear enough to them that he had been smitten with the young Bobby Ames. That the part he played was not that of the lover, or even the seducer, but the protector, had not put them off the scent. He watched the boy like a mastiff, some had said. Others had said a vulture.

But young Bobby had seen him as the good and solicitous friend which he also was. Bobby had been perhaps the saddest of anyone at the school to see him leave.

It had been a precipitate departure. Rumour had it that he had suffered a mental breakdown. In fact it was something very much like that and brought about, as Bobby and Anthony had guessed, by his defeat at the hands of the dread spirit who had entered their room and accomplished what Bryce Jones had to conclude — there were limits to enlightenment! — was the loss of their virginity.

It had all been too much. The task, the meagreness of his will against the powers of darkness. His failure. And worse than any of these things, the sudden loss of his own certainty. For Satan had left no signs, no scent of sulphur or smoke, no mark upon the perfect flesh of the lovers, no indication of depravity upon their faces. And for a horrible moment St. Michael had wondered if he might have been mistaken. About everything. Everything that mattered. Everything which had allowed his world to make sense. Everything which had allowed him to account in himself, in his devotion to this boy, for what might, in a lesser person with a more meagre cosmology, be considered infatuation. Without good and evil nothing would make sense. And yet there they had lain, white on white, marble on marble, as innocent as Eden. His heart had stopped. And lucidity, at least that lucidity with which he had more or less kept company through his first eighteen years, departed.

But not for long. No more than a week later, so strong was his young disposition, a new lucidity descended upon him.

It was on the third morning after his return to the family estate in Lincolnshire that numbers first revealed themselves to Michael. Judson, the family retainer and Michael's most devoted caretaker for the past fifteen years, had set the morning paper by his plate at breakfast. He had glanced at the news stories cursorily and without any arousal of interest. They had to do with things which might once have held his interest. He was introspective enough about his state

of mind to recollect that he had held other opinions and interests some time back. But this recollection was as we think of childhood and there was also that partial amnesia which we all bring to those memories. The place in which he now found himself, he had begun to understand, was a place to which, miraculously and suddenly, he had matured. He attached to this circumstance a measure of mystery and wonder. Something had happened to him that was of a different order from what he read in the newspaper. It even occurred to him that perhaps he had been abducted by extraterrestrials. Or perhaps not abducted, but acted upon in some benign and empowering way. It was like an electricity in his brain which titillated like soda water and attuned his senses.

Specifically it alerted him to the luminosity and life of numbers and it was these to which his eyes wandered on that watershed morning over poached eggs and a rasher of bacon. He found in an advertisement for ladies' lingerie a patterning of the letters M, S and B which stood out as if in bold-faced type from the page and in the same instant saw in their place the numbers 13, 16 and 2 which as suddenly became the number 31. No less than Darwin or Fermi was St. Michael struck by the certainty of perfect revelation. The number 31 was his own number, a key with which he had been entrusted by some intelligent being beyond his power to comprehend.

He never finished the second egg or made much of an impression on the bacon despite the fact that he had awoken famished. It would not be food that would now sustain him but rather the pure energy of the sun. He craved it as a vampire craves blood. They were, after all, of the same species. He knew that with an indifferent certainty, reborn now as he was, dispassionate and prescient. If he were to look in a mirror he would see a new face: paler, more world-weary, ancient, even. So certain was he of this that the act itself was unnecessary.

But it was necessary that he be in the sun, so he picked up the newspaper and walked out onto the balcony.

There was an iron table there, and he spread the newspaper out, opening it to page 31. Of course it was on the right side of the fold, and of course, as was inevitable, precisely thirty one lines down from the right hand corner and 31 spaces in from the right margin, were the letters A and M which were the first and thirteenth letters of the alphabet. One which was divisible only by itself and thirteen, a prime number containing the digits one and three. The letters began the word, Amstel. He read the relevant paragraph:

Cleaning up the Amstel River will be no simple task, a source in the department of Public Works observed to this reporter. But it is a task to which the parliament must address itself at the earliest opportunity.

It wouldn't be as simple as that, he understood. Not that literal. He was not given this power merely to clean up rivers. But for some related reason. That he must discover.

He sat back, letting the full force of the sun caress his face. Judson came onto the balcony to ask if the young master would like another cup of tea.

Michael turned and smiled. "No, Judson, I will have coffee now," he said with remarkable grace and an appropriate but certainly not obsequious or condescending gratitude. Yes, Judson was taken aback. It was the transparency of his state. Of course it would confuse people. Such clarity of vision visited human beings only rarely and must appear peculiar to others. He must not frighten the old man.

"It's all right, Judson," he said softly, with a will to reassurance that hit its mark. Judson nodded and retired to the kitchen.

All was well. He could make all well. He would. He turned back to his newspaper. In this mass of black symbols arranged by people who had no idea of the forces working within them, lay the secret of his destiny.

For two weeks, with very little respite for sleep or nourishment, Michael perused the printed matter which came to hand. He sent Judson, now, for all of the newspapers, including French and German ones. Being adept in both languages, he was able to confirm for himself that the same powers which spoke in his own tongue were luminous in others as well. Moreover, the combination of the three languages with respect, for example, to the same news story or the same market quotations, gave him a sextant's fix on certain combinations, as if by triangulation, and lent to the simple geometry which he had developed with a pencil and ruler another dimension which confirmed or refined his conclusions.

They were, at first, not remarkable findings. Quotidian, in fact: the likelihood of changes in the commodities markets, the imminence of a sixteen-car pile-up on the M1 as a result of fog, a cut-throat war on the sale of certain Japanese cameras, and three or four misdemeanours in Chelsea involving a Pakistani with only one aim distantly related to ex-president Zia. No mention again of the Amstel. But he was in a frame of mind to be patient. Things were no longer in his hands. Not all of the things which made themselves clear to Michael were absolutely clear. He was, he realised, still a novice.

For example, he had been unable to discover whether or not on Thursday last, outside a pub called the Queen's Head which was just off King's Road, a thirteen-year-old boy named Tommy Prince had taken his life over the loss of a parakeet to which he had taught the entire pentatonic scale; or whether the royal family's purchase of a parakeet named Tommy would inspire the writing of a musical comedy called "Thirteen."

In the same vein, he could not be sure whether a man recently arrived from Soweto or Somalia had written to the Prime Minister in his own blood, protesting certain practices in South Africa, or that a Somallier would be serving the Prime Minister a wine which would cause him to perspire.

In the third week, however, the messages began to converge once again on the area of the Amstel, and he was reassured. Rembrandt's name had appeared five times now at the periphery of the nexus defined by his decipherings. As had the names of certain Dutch patriots and political figures. Even the new opera house on the Amstel appeared to be involved in the forces which spoke to him. And then one morning it was all there before him.

Changes in morality laws proposed in the Dutch Parliament. Hot debate over age of consent.

He read ahead for the text of the proposal but it was not given. He must have it, of course. But how? He decided to call the newspaper. He opened the phone book to its listing of international country codes. Then he stopped. The number for The Netherlands was 31!

There was no question now of where his mission lay. There would be no time for them to mail the material. He would get it when he arrived there.

He put his mind to the matter of logistics.

His father owned a hotel in Amsterdam. What was it called? He picked up a recent report to stockholders of the B-J Corporation, his father's holding company, and leafed through it. There were twenty hotels in all. There it was: Amstelhoek Villas. He picked up the phone and dialled his father's office.

7. Post Restante

Bobby stood outside the school post office, away from the other boys, examining the letter he had sent almost three weeks earlier to Mark Brightly. It had been stamped and returned. Though he could not read Greek he assumed it must say, "addressee unknown." He wondered if his father had ever got any letters back like that. He and his mother had never had a real address. Just poste restante in whatever port the boat was temporarily lodged. And so he had written to Mark in Piraeus, hoping he might still be there. On the envelope he had written, HOLD FOR ONE WEEK ONLY, for, as he knew, a poste restante letter might stay unclaimed for months.

Bobby had an urge to open the letter and then realised what he was doing. It was enough to be his own mother and father without being his own correspondent as well. He looked at his handwriting. Not very good. He wasn't much good at anything, really.

He looked out over the lawns of St. Matthew's School. Boys moved from point to point in small groups. There was a frisbee game. Several of the little boys divided up a parcel of cookies. One of them spotted him and smiled, holding out a shapeless brown object. He shook his head and the boy turned back to the trove.

He thought about Irkutsk. Someone had mentioned it in a conversation with his mother when he was very young, and he had associated it for some reason with his father. He could not remembered why, if indeed he had ever known, but the association had stayed with him. When he was older and still dreamed of the great family reconciliation, he imagined that it would happen there in Irkutsk. He had marked the map in the atlas with a yellow crayon. He and his mother would go inland from the gulf of Tartary and around the great Khingan mountains by camel train. His father's caravan would be waiting for them. There would be pavilions and banquets. His father would have a duelling scar and a shoulder holster loosely slung over his silk shirt. The king would send a telegram.

He had been younger then. Now his fantasies took a different turn.

They tended to self-glorification. Now instead of the reconciliation he thought of the reckoning with his father. He had planned that it would occur when he was old enough to reckon. Probably in a bar, and not in Irkutsk. His father with a bottle of whiskey on the table and a woman on his lap. He, taller now than his father, imposing, unshaven. The room becomes silent. The chick on his father's lap gets up and says something like, "Guess I better leave you two boys alone." Then there are just the two of them, he with a bewildering calm about his person. And then he speaks.

But he could never get the words right. They didn't match the rest of the scene. His voice was too high and too complaining, almost tearful.

Now even that fantasy had evaporated. What if his father had wanted him all these years and had been kept away? Why was he in Amsterdam? Maybe that was why all the schools, all the

moving from one to another. Maybe the money was just an excuse, a way of hiding from him the fact that his father had searched for him, even cared for him, even....

"Shit. Shit. Shit," he said and wiped at his eyes.

"More bad news, Ames?" The familiar voice suddenly broke his reverie and he shoved the letter into his pocket. It was Small. Small stood there leafing through a model car catalogue. Recently he had adopted the habit of appearing nonchalantly as if out of thin air. It was an appropriate manifestation for Small whose experience of puberty was that of an ingot forced between two rollers. His thin frame had become thinner, his nose longer and his voice seemed always on the verge of hysterical escape from its laryngeal confines.

"No, it's from Steven Spielberg. He wants me to try out for a movie."

"Wait, don't tell me. It's Alice in Wonderland, and you're going to play the mock turtle."

"Actually it's Superman eighteen. Look, Small, you've got to stop sneaking up on people like that. You're going to give someone a thrombosis some day."

"That's not how you get a thrombosis. A myocardial infarction maybe. Actually I'm practising."

"I know, for the CIA."

"It's not called the CIA over here."

"M. I. 5, then."

"You're on the right track. You're out of sorts, Ames. Anything you want to share with the secret service?"

"Thanks, Small, but no. Are you heading back to Sprinkles?" "I've got a models club meeting. I don't suppose you'd like to come. We're having a membership drive this month."

"I've got to take care of something."

"Well, if you change your mind."

Small started down the path towards the Commons House and then turned back. "I have an F16 fighter you could make. It's American."

"Thanks, Small. Maybe some other time."

Bobby had begun to practice over the past several months what Anthony called the "art of sentiment". It was something he had learnt from the Epicureans he was reading in Latin. The idea was that one should relish, like other sensations, the sudden revelation of irony in daily life. The example Anthony had used in his paper was of observing in the person you love and to whom you have never acknowledged that love an unconscious imitation of your own habits.

Small's invitation had set these thoughts off for him again. The domesticity of the situation was poignant and in its way appealing. The very idea of sitting around a table with Mr. Chumwell making an F16 fighter plane to suspend over his bed on a monofilament line. How safe and secure. The smell of glue and damp wool. The small muscled recklessness of small boys. He was touched by Small's invitation, and that made him think of the other boys, their abuses and their jokes, their careless approval and dirty minds. He thought of Sprinkles House, of reading to Adam cuddled next to him with his pee-sodden stuffed rabbit, of a word with Helter Skelter, maybe a game of chess, of Mrs. Grundle and the smell of popcorn, which was a little like Adam's smell. Was that an irony too?

But why should he feel so wistful now? Was he really going to leave all this? Did he want to? Was the comfort of it all too easy? Or was it something else, someone pushing him from the edge of a cliff, as happened in his dreams? Or calling to him from a darkness.

He thought about his friend. It calmed him to do so. Anthony was so different from him. It was remarkable in a way that they should love one another.

Anthony was the centre, the mainland, the ground beneath Bobby's feet. With Anthony the world seemed calm and eternal. Before, the future had been a dark staircase upon which he feared to stumble. He would never have climbed it. But with Anthony at his side it was another thing. Only musty carpet and cobwebs. A phantasm. And if there had been ghosts, what of it? The light of their love would have blinded them, sent them screaming and shrivelling back into the past.

Certainly he loved Anthony as much as he imagined it was possible for human beings to love. More than his mother had loved his father. Or his father had loved her. Or either had loved him. His love for Anthony had changed everything. He was no longer a piece of left baggage. He was his own person now. But what, being his own person, must he do? That was the question. He wasn't a student like Anthony. Or a musician. Or an artist. And there was no way that he would win a scholarship to Cambridge the way scholarship boys were expected to. So why should St. Matthew's care about him one way or another? Wasn't it better to get on with his life now, whatever it might be? Or was that all an excuse? Was it really Amsterdam that unsettled him so?

When he arrived back at the room he found Anthony lying on the rug between their beds. It was a tree of life rug. Lady Fairchild had sent it from Turkey during a visit there. He had both their pillows under his chest and a plate upon which there remained one oatmeal cookie. Mrs. Grundle made cookies on Wednesday afternoons. First come, first served. Anthony had saved it for him. In fact he had probably saved two and then weakened. He stopped reading and rolled over on his back.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Anthony never went on with whatever he was doing. Even if it was only a smile and a greeting, he acknowledged your being there. And it wasn't simply, like some of Anthony's habits his

chronic deference to adults, for example — simply a matter of breeding. It was an expression of the boy that he was, not the boy someone had taught him to be. Another sentimental vignette!

"Any mail?" Anthony asked.

"Nope."

"Did you look in my box?"

"None for you either. You want to play fives and have a swim?"

"I have to read Silas Marner," Anthony said.

Bobby stripped down to his briefs and rummaged for a pair of running shorts. He'd run for awhile. That would do the trick. They weren't where they were supposed to be. He checked in his jeans drawer and then among his underwear without luck.

"I can't find my shorts."

Anthony was staring at him, his head on his hand.

"It's not nice to stare at people when they don't have their clothes on," Bobby said. "Have you seen my shorts?"

"You've got a hole on your right cheek."

"Sorry."

"A slight disorder in the dress kindles in me a wantonness."

"Keats."

"Wyatt."

"Both pairs couldn't be in the laundry."

Anthony put his hands behind his head. "I feel desultory," he said. "Don't you feel a little desultory?"

"Great word. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Anthony admitted. "But it should mean languorous, soporific, indolent, slightly decadent. Slow, like falling leaves, sensual like a long soft kiss."

"Aha! So that's what you're up to?"

"What?"

"You've hidden my shorts so that you could seduce me in my underpants."

"I wonder how it's really pronounced," Anthony mused.

"You never hear people actually say it. Desultory, desultree, desultory, dezeltree. Yes, that's it. Long and drawn out like that.

What are you doing?"

"I'm looking it up."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?"

"I don't want to know what it means." Anthony turned as if to re-enter the world of Silas Marner.

"Well I do. Ha!"

"What?"

"Very interesting."

"Okay, you can tell me," Anthony said. "But not if I'll be disappointed."

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Well, I'll look it up myself." Anthony held out his hand for the dictionary.

"I'm going to take the dictionary with me."

"I can borrow one."

"Not if I tie you to your chair."

"You aren't skilled enough to tie a knot that I can't untie blindfolded," Anthony said. "Anyway, I have to read Silas Marner. But I have a good idea."

"What?"

"You mouth the meaning and I'll read your lips."

"Okay — Well?"

"You need to be closer."

Bobby knelt next to Anthony and mouthed the phrase again.

"Well?"

"Maybe if you actually pressed them against mine it would work. You know, getting more than one of the senses involved."

"And I know which senses, too."

"It's called kinaesthetic."

"Not where I come from. I need to snuggle up a little closer though. Give me one of those pillows."

Bobby leaned down and kissed Anthony's ear. "It means unplanned," he whispered, "and this wasn't. You have been lying here all afternoon waiting to seduce me." Anthony turned and offered his mouth. Bobby covered it with his own and, like a spelunker returning to a cave known only to himself, wandered gladly within its secret interstices.

The chip off the top of Anthony's right canine. The smooth gold filing at the back molar. The unwelcome scaffolding of orthodonture on the top. The ski jump down the backs of his lower incisors, the soft underside of his tongue, the taste of his saliva and the scent of his breath. Bobby pulled away and laughed.

"What's the matter?"

"I feel like a dentist."

"Well you're not supposed to inventory a person's teeth. It's supposed to be tongues."

"But tongues get boring."

"Let's do breathing."

"Okay."

They lay not kissing but exchanging breaths. One would breathe out and the other in, each the other's last breath. Soon they would get giddy. Bobby called it induced hyperventilation. Anthony said it was a natural high, the kind that even the Queen would approve of. Bobby suddenly pulled away. He had been trying to get into Anthony's trousers and had encountered an obstacle.

"What the hell is this?"

"A safety pin."

"That's disgusting," Bobby said. "Only street people do up their jeans with a safety pin. Why don't you wear another pair?"

"They're all in the laundry."

"This calls for a more concerted effort." Bobby sat up and addressed both hands to the task. Having accomplished it, he lay down again and resumed the game. "What the hell! This is like the labours of Hercules."

"What's the matter?" Anthony asked.

"When did you start wearing boxer shorts?"

"I didn't. They're your gym shorts. I went out running after lunch."

"You could have made this whole thing a lot simpler if you'd told me that fifteen minutes ago."

"Oh cripes, what time is it?" Anthony suddenly asked.

"Three fifteen."

"My 'cello lesson!"

"Not today!"

"Sorry."

"Well, we've got fifteen minutes. You should have told me about the gym shorts."

"Why?"

"Because then I could have attacked you and torn your clothes off," Bobby said. "I could have gotten into that. Actually I'm feeling sort of brutal and boisterous today."

"You aren't, either. I know your moods. You're preoccupied and when you're ready to tell me about it you will. And all I really wanted was a kiss, anyway. I don't want to erupt before my 'cello lesson."

"Well how about me?"

"What about you?"

"I'd be willing to erupt."

"There's not time. Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Bobby!"

"Ouch! Oh, God I'm stabbed!"

"What's the matter?"

"Your damned safety pin."

Bobby held his hand up. There was a nasty red line down the back of it.

"Serves you right."

"It's not funny, Anthony. I'm going to have a scar."

"It will be a reminder not to let your sexual appetites stand in the way of art."

Anthony stood up and looked at his fly. "You've got blood on my trousers. Now what will I do?"

"Tell Maestro Boscallio that you're having your period.

Anyways, you can't play the 'cello with pinned pants. Put on my jeans."

"Yes, I'll take those if you don't mind. Thank you."

"There is something you haven't told me about the maestro, isn't there?"

"Of course. Hadn't you guessed before this?"

"How could I have been so dense!" Bobby said. "It's why you never get any better, isn't it? You don't play the 'cello at all. It's just a ruse."

"Oh, shut up."

Anthony grabbed a shirt from the drawer, pulled it over his head and checked himself in the mirror.

"What do you mean 'preoccupied'?" Bobby asked.

"What?"

"You said I was preoccupied."

"You are."

"What do you mean? I've been a laugh a second."

"I mean in your heart."

"Oh, shit."

"It's true." "I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Like what?" Anthony asked.

"Like 'in your heart'."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's so beautiful the way you say it. Anthony, we need to have sex right now."

Anthony sniffed his arm pit. "I should have taken a shower."

"You're fine. Anthony, you're not listening."

"What?!"

"Can't you be late?" "Why?"

"I need you."

"Don't be melodramatic."

"I do."

Anthony pulled the strap tight on his 'cello case and looked at his friend.

"I can't now."

"Okay."

"There's something wrong."

"I'm just being melodramatic," Bobby said.

"It's more than that."

"I'm fine."

"I love you," Anthony said.

"I know."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, let's go."

"Music?"

"In my case. No. Wait. Yes. Oh damn. What time is it?"

"Three twenty-five and 42 seconds. 43, 44, 45, 46."

"Okay." They walked out of the room and down the stairs.

Anthony held his 'cello over his head the way he always did to keep it from bumping. It provided yet another sentimental vignette for Bobby, who suddenly wanted to cry. Over a 'cello case! No, something else, too.

"Bobby?" Anthony stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yeah?"

"It isn't us, is it?"

"No, it's not us. It's me."

"Is it big or little?"

"Incredibly little. Smaller than your dingaling."

Anthony flushed and looked to see if anyone had been in earshot.

"Don't say things like that."

"Why not?"

"Bobby!"

"Okay."

"I'll come right back."

"I'll probably go for a run."

"You ought to lift some weights. You're getting flabby."

Anthony ran in the direction of the music building without looking back. Bobby stood and watched him all the way.

8. The Gypsy

It was a chance circumstance that Bobby should have had the four o'clock hour free that afternoon. He took the long way to the gym, through the copse by the observatory and along the river.

On most days the four o'clock hour would have been taken with Medieval History, but Mr. Ethelred was attending the funeral of a great uncle who, though decorated for his bravery in both wars, was now, at eighty-six, ignominiously the victim of a hit and run motor-cyclist. It had been near Saxmundham while taking his daily exercise. These details had been pronounced by Ethel during Tuesday's chapel address as evidence of the role played by chance in the affairs of men. Charlemagne's dribbling dotage, for example, and the invention of white wine.

Mr. Ethelred was as provident with circumstance as a boy with a hamper, Mr. Skelton had once remarked to a colleague on the path. "He'd use the evidence of his own gangrenous leg to illustrate the corruption of the world sooner than have it cut off." It was Wells who had overheard, while waiting table.

Whatever Mr. Skelton said was held to be true. At least by the younger boys. Some of the sixth formers could be seen to roll their eyes at such reports, although this was perhaps more in defence of an independence only recently won from Helter Skelter's brooding and maternal scrutiny.

Bobby's mother had lied to him about his father. He was more certain of it each time he considered the matter, which had become three or four times a day recently. Why had she told him so little? Why had she simply erased him from their lives? He was angry, now, as he had never thought to be before, that he had not insisted on knowing more. He felt as he had once felt when he had become separated from his mother in the Istanbul bazaar. There were so many people and so many directions to walk. And he had walked, it seemed, for hours. But it had only been ten minutes before she had found him. "Always stay put," she had said. "Always when you are lost stay put." He had thought of that from time to time. Once he had told Anthony about it and Anthony had pointed out, as of course he would, the irony of Bobby's never being allowed to stay put and therefore always being lost. To think about it then, with Anthony, had been fine. He held him closer and nothing could frighten him. But now Anthony was helpless to remove his fear. It was a deeper one and somehow he had wandered to the periphery of his life at St. Matthew's without intending to, so that the outside world was only a few steps away. Who can say why we leave behind so readily that for which we have longed our whole lives, once it is within our grasp? Is it for some phantasm of an earlier possibility, now lost?

Bobby crossed the quad and waved to Quin-Quiller and Carstairs. Carstairs was wearing one of his outrageous scarves.

He thought of Bryce-Jones who had been preposterous, too, in a totally opposite way. He would have liked to talk with him now. About how it really was between him and Anthony.

Bryce-Jones would have thought it a sin, but so were a great many other things of which he and Anthony were not guilty. And might have been. Not necessarily things like theft, greed or covetousness, but like cheating or an excess of appetite or lying.

Then he thought of old ladies with embroidered handkerchiefs up their sleeves. Out there in Tuppington-On-Smart. Or in Holland. He wondered if ladies had hankies in Holland. They had never had the boat there. In Holland. That was odd, too, because it was a city that was hospitable to boats. He had read that the other day in a book on Holland which he had taken from the school library. He had been studying up on Amsterdam.

He was not afraid of the world. He had not survived nearly fifteen years without learning a thing or two. He would stop and cut wood for the ladies with handkerchiefs and the men would stand around and talk with him, smoking their pipes with Dutch tobacco. And he would wear a blue sailor hat. They would let him sleep in the barn. He would milk their cows and collect eggs. He had never milked a cow. Probably, he thought, it was something like milking Anthony. He grinned and looked at the statue of Lord Sprinkles as he passed. Lord Sprinkles held a gun and a brace of pheasants. Even back then it was a good place to be, Bobby thought.

He walked under the window of Maestro Boscallio's third floor study. Anthony was playing a Bach partita as Bach had never intended it to sound. He was a very bad 'cellist. Sometimes Bobby had a fantasy of his mind unravelling like a sweater caught on a briar. Unravelling with each step away from Anthony. He sat on the bank by the Smart and let some tears come. It had become like wanking off lately. He had to get some out every day in order to maintain his equilibrium. He cried over very little things. One day for a dead bird. Once because of a picture Adam had made for him of Sprinkles House. A tear fell where the pin had scratched him. He held it there and another fell. They made it sting. That's good, he thought. Feelings washed over him like the water over the stones on the river-bottom. He loved the Smart. They had swum in it and raced boats. They had sent messages out in bottles to the world at large. "Help!" Anthony had written. "I am being held in captivity by a sex-crazed American!"

He dried his face and felt better.

He went straight to the weight room and took off his shirt. Anthony was right: he was getting flabby. A month ago he could press sixty pounds and the muscles in his arms had showed it. Anthony had commented. He thought of the circumstances of that comment. No, mustn't do that, he thought.

He started with fifty. He pressed, breathed, counted and relaxed. Then again. He felt the tension go, or rather concentrate itself in his arms. It was where he could feel it and test it, under control. He lifted again and heard the door open.

He waited for a greeting, and, when he heard none, looked up. It was Neville Summers.

"Fancy meeting you here."

"Hello, Neville."

"You could put a little more enthusiasm into it."

"Did you follow me here?"

"Would you like to think so?"

"No."

"Then I didn't."

Neville was a handsome boy with a bad reputation, both for his business dealings at the school and his personal practices.

He had the charm of a candidate for Parliament and the intelligence to support it. There was no question that in the world outside of St. Matthew's he would get what he went after — just as he had within its confines. One of the things he had wanted was Bobby Ames.

There were more of Neville's sort in the world outside of St. Matthew's than of Anthony's, Bobby thought. He had known some. Even before Neville. Everything that was opposite to Anthony was there in Neville. Cruelty, cynicism, ugliness. Of character. Of soul. Not of body. No, definitely not of body. That was what made him dangerous to Bobby's imagination.

He lifted again and held the barbell longer than he wanted to, until he felt the pain in his arms turn slightly numb and distant and the breath in his lungs sour. Then with a gasp he put it down and took a deep breath.

He didn't want to be there with Summers now. His mind was too confused. He got up off the bench. Summers was wiping the handles of the weight pulls with a handkerchief. He was fastidiously neat. It was a sign of his evil, Bobby thought.

Then Summers sat on the floor, cross-legged, and pulled the weights behind him. The pulleys squeaked. He held his arms forward and his biceps bulged. He smiled. There was not a hair out of place on his head.

"Something's up, Ames. You want to tell me about it?" Summers held his arms out as if they held nothing. Then he relaxed them against his chest, then over his head. There was a fierceness of black curly hair there, and on his chest as well. Neville Summers' body wasn't like a real body at all, Bobby had once thought, but like the drawing of one in a science book.

"Nothing that has to do with you."

"Sorry about your mum."

"Yeah, well."

"You going to stick around?"

"I haven't decided."

"It's inevitable, Ames. It always was."

"What is?"

"That you'll leave. Some night. With your battered little suitcase."

"I don't have a suitcase."

"You don't belong here. You're too exotic. Like an ibis.

You're a wanderer, Ames, a gypsy."

"And you're an asshole."

"It's true. And much worse. But not a gypsy. Old blood, old money, old sins. Traditional nastinesses, Ames. I'm cocooned.

This is all inevitable for me. As inevitable as it is impossible for you."

"I belong here just as much as you do," Bobby said, wanting as much as he had ever wanted anything for it to be true.

"Oh, you could never belong here, Ames. You're not one of us. You're not landed, Ames. You're a floater. By the way, Ames, do you still have that silly phobia?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, or have been talking about."

"Anterior penetration, Ames. Sphinctulating. Getting your tank topped up."

"If you mean can you do that to me the answer is still no!"

A big N period O period."

"Well, how about something else, then?"

"No!"

"So absolute! You are incredibly cute when you do that,

Ames. I really do like you."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

"Well, I'm a funny person, aren't I? By the way, how's the loved one?"

Bobby walked to the door and opened it.

"All right, Ames, I take it back. I'm sorry I spoke the forbidden name. The name Neville Summers must never expel through his contaminated lips. I won't say, it again."

"I won't be here if you do."

"You're going to do it all wrong, Ames."

"Do what?"

"Run away. You don't have the style. Beautiful boys never have style. Beautiful women are another thing. It's funny that way. You'll sprain an ankle jumping over the wall." Summers laughed. "Oh, God. Never laugh when you're pressing a hundred pounds. Shit." He stood up. "You don't have to stand there with the door half open, Ames. I'm not going to rape you."

"Really?"

"That wasn't rape, Ames. You wouldn't be here now if it was."

"I'm not here. Goodbye, Summers."

"Don't be so skittish, Ames. Look, I might have something that you ought to hear about."

"I can't imagine what it might be."

"Come in here and sit down. I can't stand to talk to people in doorways."

Bobby walked back into the room. "I'd just as soon stand," he said.

"Suit yourself. Tell me how you expect to support yourself, Ames."

"I'll get a job."

"A fourteen-year-old American runaway without any working papers? Be serious, Ames."

"I'll find something."

"Have you any contacts?"

"A few."

"Ballocks."

"I have. Friends of my father. In London."

"Your father?"

"Yes."

"You told me you'd never even seen your father."

"I never told you anything about my father."

"Well, someone else did, then. I've heard it."

"I haven't for a long time but there are friends of his who keep in touch with me."

"Look, Ames, this is unadulterated pathos. Forget it. I have a proposition for you. Pure business."

"I'm listening."

"A career."

"In what?"

"You name it."

"I don't get it."

"I know this organisation that looks out for kids like you."

"I'll bet I know how, too."

"Big bucks, Ames. No skill required."

"I heard once that you sold your younger brother to some seniors, Summers. Is it true?"

"Absolutely. But he got a cut. He was happy with the arrangement. You have too narrow a view of the world, Ames.

It's bigger than you think. It's going to eat you up."

"They can't be much worse than you out there."

"Oh, they are, Ames. Much worse, but this place I'm talking about is all bunny rabbits and sweets."

"Where is it?"

"Amsterdam."

"I'm going to London."

"There are branches, but not in London. You should consider Amsterdam."

Bobby was distressed at the idea of Neville Summers having anything at all to do with Amsterdam. And unaccountably saddened. As though something he had not yet dared to hope for was already being denied him.

"No thanks, Summers."

"Look, I'll put a card in your mail box. No obligation. Just in case."

"It's a waste of your time. I'll just throw it away."

"That's up to you. It's always nice to have an address in a strange city."

"Goodbye, Summers."

"Ames?"

"Yes."

"I admire your will power."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You do have a boner, don't you?"

"I hate you, Summers."

"I'll be here for awhile if you change your mind."

"Don't count on it."

"I never count on anything, Ames."

Bobby closed the door behind him. It was true. He did have will power. He'd resisted. He felt very good about it, in fact.

He would like to have told Anthony, but that would, of course, have meant confessing to the times when he hadn't. He wanted to confess. It was a burden. He wanted Anthony to take away the burden, to forgive him. But he couldn't risk that. It might change everything. And right now there was enough change as it was.

9. Myrtle the Turtle

Bobby couldn't have explained to himself, let alone Anthony, how it was that Summers should have provided what Mr. Featherstone would have called the inciting action of the adventures which were to follow in his young life. And perhaps he wasn't, in point of fact, any more than one cause among many, the distinction of his part being merely that it was the last played on the stage of St. Matthew's School.

Bobby returned to their room and began to pack. He would take only the backpack. No one would think anything of his crossing the campus with it. A suitcase would be another matter. He pulled open the top drawer of the dresser and stopped. Underpants. His and Anthony's together. He stared at them. "This is ridiculous!" he said aloud. He delved into the pile of socks and took five pair at random. Why had he started with the underpants? It felt as if some internal organ had got loose and was trying to come up his throat. His liver, perhaps, or his pancreas. What did they call pancreas? Was that sweetbreads or lights? No, lights were lungs. He filled his lungs with air again. The organ pressed at his epiglottis. He closed his eyes.

"Okay, we'll start with socks. Plain white socks," he said. This habit of talking aloud would have to be watched. He had caught himself doing it the other day while walking back from chapel alone. About the possibility of Holland suddenly being under water, of all things. He opened the next drawer and sorted through the pile of socks for those most likely to last more than a week or two. Most were ready for incineration. He and Anthony wore the same kinds of socks. There were black ones for dress up and white ones for every day. He didn't take any black ones. He hadn't it in his heart to have black things. He tossed five pair in the pack. So it was going to be fives, was it? That was Anthony's lucky number. His own was seven. Or at least he thought it was. He had never really tested it and couldn't any longer remember when or why he had chosen it.

Then some jeans. Two pair. And two pair of khaki shorts. Plain colours. None of those running shorts or striped jerseys. He didn't want to be too noticeable. This wasn't so bad, after all. A belt for good trousers. Oh! Good trousers and a button-down shirt. He folded it as Anthony had taught him to. He saw Anthony's long fingers and his delicate wrists. "Oh shit," he said. "This is not going to work."

He'd take his shower first.

He pulled off his shorts and underpants, sat on the edge of the bed and looked at 'the turtle'. Anthony had named Bobby's penis the turtle because he wasn't circumcised the way Anthony was. The turtle was also one of Bobby's totems. A turtle and a wolf. I should have asked Neville for money, he thought. Whores get money. That's the whole point, isn't it?

"You'd better hide your head," he said. "You should be ashamed of yourself." Turtle was all tucked inside. Myrtle the Turtle. Anthony had so named it. Anthony's totems were an owl and a fish. "A horny owl," Bobby had observed when the subject had come up. "Or Athena," Bobby had said. "Green-eyed Athena." "No, grey-eyed," Anthony had said.

He liked the idea of Athena; he liked the girl in Anthony. Mr. Featherstone had cast him as Viola in Twelfth Night and there had been a hush when he had come on stage. All the twitters and chattering had stopped like The Road-Runner at the edge of a cliff. Then later when Viola was disguised as Cesario it happened again. After the play was over and they walked back with Wells and the others, Carstairs had said, "You were smashing, Anthony!" Anthony had blushed and said thanks, that it was a hard part to learn in only three weeks with everything else to do, and Carstairs had said, "Oh, you played the part well, too," and then everyone had laughed.

"I think you should change your name to Andrew-Jean," Carstairs had said then. "Maybe I will," Anthony had said, being for a moment uncharacteristically fruity, but everyone had laughed. It was one of those times, of which there had never been more than a handful, when Bobby had seen into Anthony's soul as you see a trick picture for its opposite. This time Bobby had seen the image of a beautiful girl. He knew he could have loved Anthony as a girl. It was just a matter of closing one eye and changing the point of focus.

Thinking about it all again that night, with Anthony asleep in his arms, he had composed a poem:

Your eyes are green,
Your hair a midnight sigh,
Your skin the feel of silk.
The other parts
Which I have also seen
Make turtles raise their heads and cry
Errant tears of milk.

"Why do you always have to make a joke of things?" Anthony had said when he recited it. He hadn't been angry. He'd said it the way Mr. Featherstone said, "Can't you take more care with your penmanship, Ames?" Not so as to throw the boy out with the bathwater, but sad for his careless imperfections. Of which there were many more than dear Anthony knew.

Bobby shivered at the recollection of Neville, and the turtle peeped out to see what was going on. "No way!" Bobby said and stood up, wrapping himself in a towel. Then he walked down the corridor to the showers. He looked into the mirror. "Not bad," he thought. "God gave you looks, anyway. And a well shaped nose, a decent set of ears. Eyes a little too far apart, but nice. What else? Not enough hair." He fluffed out his pubis. He examined his armpits and his chest. Nothing. "You'll never be a real man like Anthony. You don't have the right chromosomes," he said to the boy looking out. He looked closely for zits. So far so good. Maybe that was chromosomes too. Give a little, take a little.

He stared into his own eyes. You've got some good things, he thought. Skelton wasn't all wrong about you. More courage than most. Because of Anthony. Lots of loyalty. Because of Anthony. You know how to be a good friend. You can listen when you have to. Your jokes aren't as bad as Small's. You can handle a soccer ball as well as any fifth former. Then he whispered confidentially to the boy behind the glass, "The thing is, sport, can you make it out there on your

own? Without you know who?"

He had never called himself "sport" before and wondered where it had come from. Maybe it was gratuitous. Mr. Featherstone had talked about the gratuitous act. They were reading Gide in French. Could there be such a thing? Anthony had said yes, being a poet. Bobby had said no, that everything was caused. "Then that's too bad," Anthony had said and that was the end of it.

He turned the shower on hot and then cooled it to a pleasant entry level. In the shower he always wanted to sing. It was no joke about people singing in the shower. It was like scratching a dog's chest and having its leg start going. Or like the turtle always checking to see where the action was. It was something that just happened to you.

Bobby's musical style was between a steam calliope and the great organ at St. Paul's, a kind of penny-whistle, oom-pah-pah one man Kalverstraat, Madonna, The Grateful Dead, Bach, Verdi, all arranged for the same instrument. Now it was a 'cello suite by Bach which Anthony had been torturing lately.

The turtle was fond of music, especially if there was a good bass line. But not in the shower. For a reptile, the turtle was often surprisingly disinclined in the presence of water. That was because of the boat, Anthony said.

Having completed as much of the suite as Anthony had so far practised, Bobby began to turn down the hot water little by little. This was his one concession to austerity and self-discipline. If he could stand in the shower for the count of twenty-five after the hot tap was entirely off, then he could stand anything. It was a way of verifying that he still had some character and this was especially useful to his self-esteem after a scene of the sort which he had just left with Summers.

Between fifteen and twenty-five came the primal scream. Helter Skelter had come in only the first time Bobby had produced it and after that left him alone. Skelton approved of such things.

The other denizens of Sprinkles House came to know it as well. Its effect was, overall, a cheering one. Others enjoyed, by surrogation, what the originator enjoyed as a personal exorcism. Bad spirits could be seen departing the old manse like rats from a sinking ship. "Bobby is having an exorcism," Mrs. Grundle had once remarked to the Dame from Trump House. Small, within earshot had turned and said, "He's cooling his cohones, Clara." Clara, being of a literal mind and not given to the study of foreign languages, corrected herself thereafter. "Bobby Ames is exorcising his cohones," she said a week later, watering the flower boxes when Mrs. Soames-Winthrop was walking Randers and Swann and happened to pass the house as Bobby let go.

He turned off the tap and stepped out into what now seemed a remarkably warm bathroom. He was goose-pimpled from head to toe, his teeth chattered, his lips had shaded to blue and his face glowed bright and ruddy with promise that his flame had indeed not gone out. Anyone seeing him at this moment anyone, that is, with real blood pumping in his veins and who knew a Raphael from a Rockwell, would have wondered what art really had to offer that life didn't.

Emerging as it were from the sea, his spirit revived, his features bright and fresh, his sex shy, his proportions much nearer perfect than the Parthenon — and without the use of optical illusion — he was indeed as close to a god as anyone on the dreary coast of Suffolk was likely ever to see. The shame of it was that so few did and that Utopia was therefore delayed another generation.

Had Zeus glimpsed him, his pantheon would surely have made room. Textbooks in the jam-smearing and tattooed packs of schoolboys would miraculously have altered themselves, and leather-bound copies of Homer, smoked like ancient kippers in the libraries of university dons, would have rewritten themselves to include a youth named Amius, beloved of Zeus.

Had this been Ionia, had Sprinkles House provided in its loftiest chambers a table spread for the gods rather than an attic of little boys, had Bobby been Achilles and Anthony Patroclus, then a more epic tale might have been written of men, heroes and gods. Then might Bobby have left this Suffolk landscape with gods to oversee his Odyssey, prince in search of a precious cargo and a kingdom. Then might he have encountered worthy and awful foes and have fought great battles. Then instead of a boy might he have been a youth, instead of a youth a hero.

But this is not to be, for no gods inhabit Sprinkles House. Nor at this moment, it seems, any boys either, as he stands in a chilly puddle of water, drying the interstices of his toes with his towel, then unthinkingly returning them to that same puddle which he tracks out into the hall and which like a ghost of possibility follows him a short distance before disappearing. His pubis has recovered a modicum of dignity and Myrtle the Turtle studies the tiled floor as it passes beneath like a lady in a sedan chair, unseen but wondered at.

He returns to his room and again confronts the mirror. He has dried his hair and now combs it into place with the part in the middle, a style he has recently adopted from a photograph of a 1920's crooner. "The only problem is that it's like drawing a line for an axe-murderer," Small had commented when Bobby had returned from the barber the first time. Bobby had promised to stay away from axe murderers. Anthony liked it. That was the important thing.

With respect to Anthony and the others, he had decided to temporise. It was actually advice from the rector three days past which had put the idea in his head. Dr. Soames-Winthrop, in relation to the negotiations now going on with the attorney, had said that they mustn't look to extremes. Life was usually a modification, a variation, he said, rather than a revolution. Thinking of absolute thises and absolute thats was the kind of thing that could get a fellow too high up or too low down. Just take one day at a time, he advised. And so that was what Bobby had decided to do, and also to say. He looked over the note that he had penned after returning from the gym.

My Dearest and Most Beloved Anthony,

I am going to go away for awhile. That was the temporising part. The "for awhile" part. But maybe it would be for only awhile. He couldn't have chosen more than that for

himself. Not leaving Anthony for good. I need to straighten things out in my head. You know how weird I have been lately and I think you will understand what I am doing better than some others may. That was a little bit manipulative, he had to admit. But it was also true. I have to get this thing about my father settled one way or the other. Even school seems to depend on that and the head's notice in the papers didn't work. I am going to Amsterdam. Don't ask me how I expect to find him. If I had to think that out right now I'd probably lose my nerve. First, of course, I'll check around the waterfront and the canals. And if that doesn't work then I don't know what next. But something will come to me. You've told me that a hundred times when I've gotten in a corner, and you've always been right.

The thing is that no one else can do this for me. Tell Helter Skelter that it's me against the bureaucracy. He'll understand that. And tell Adam that I will write to him and that I'm only going away for a little while. And, Anthony, if you can find it in your heart to read to him now and then. In fact he imagined now a reconciliation between the two of them, each bereft in their common loss. He glimpsed the three of them — Skelton, Anthony and Adam — sitting in Skelton's study over a glass of dusty sherry, commiserating. And he would be there in spirit, like Jesus among the disciples.

I will write to you, my beloved, every day that I can. I couldn't have said good-bye, even knowing it's for just a short time. I could hardly even pack, seeing you in everything. I love you so very much, Anthony. Please don't stop loving me because of this. If I thought you didn't I don't know what I'd do.

Love,

Bobby

He put the letter in an envelope with Anthony's name on it and lay it under his pillow. That way he wouldn't find it until night time. That would give him a head start. It was as much the thought that they wouldn't come after him as that they would, however, which inspired him to this precaution.

He was going to look for his father. That part was true. And it was that which gave him the strength of purpose which he now needed. But there were other reasons as well, of the sort at which Skelton had hinted. There was some compulsion driving him. He felt it like a wind against which it was too hard to walk sometimes. He was frightened of again being alone but he had dealt with that and could again. He had resources and like a swordsman's postures and parries they needed practice. He had become rusty, too comfortable. It would be good to test himself again. In this he had a mixture of confidence and concern, but more than anything he was exhilarated. He felt his heart beating faster already. He was eager to test the new person he had become in Anthony's love. Then there were the things that he liked less to think about and yet which had brought him to feel more and more an alien at St. Matthew's.

He was, after all, as Summers pegged him so rightly, a gypsy. No old blood flowed in his veins as it did in Anthony's. No one in his family had ever sat at Arthur's table or fought with Henry the

Fifth at Agincourt. His blood was the same as had flowed in his mother's veins. There was nothing beautiful, noble or promising in his patrimony. His mother had been what she had been, and his father? He was almost afraid to find out. But the only hope lay there. "The apple never falls far from the tree," Martin had said once of a boy who had been dismissed from the school for stealing. The boy's father, it was said, had served time for mail fraud. When Martin had said it, Anthony had caught Bobby's eye. And others, too, he sensed, had made the connection. It was there, no matter what they might say, in their minds. It had to be.

"I looked at you because I knew what you would feel, not because of what you are," Anthony had said that night, lying in his arms. And it was true. Anthony was his lightning rod. But there might have been more as well. He could never know.

And he had to leave because what Neville had said was true. He was an impostor, a gypsy like his mother. There was no place he could call home, let alone an estate like Fairchild Hall, Or a history. Even his name was without precedent. He was a mistake.

There were enough reasons to go. Too many.

He dressed. Then he closed the pack, hoisted it to his back and closed the door behind him.

He walked across the campus, uninterrupted. The gate to the woods was rusty. No one used it much any more. Some of the red came off on his hand like fine powder. He closed it behind him and rubbed the grains between his fingers. Then he turned back and, taking out his knife, scratched a name in the cross bar. When he came back, he would come this way and it would be the first name he would see. It would be important to have it in some place more secure than his heart. Then he put his knife away and started down the path to the highway.

10. Father, Son and Loyal Retainer

Lord Bryce-Jones's secretary was away from her desk when Michael called, which most likely meant that she was ensconced with his father in the Murphy bed which posed as a collection of nineteenth century classics on the wall of his office. She had been his father's mistress now for the past five years.

When she returned his call an hour later, Michael put the matter plainly. He would like a suite at the Amstelhoek Villa for the next several weeks in order to do some research. Could it be arranged?

As it turned out, Lord Bryce-Jones was only too happy to oblige his son. So glad in fact that he called his son directly, himself — a thing virtually unprecedented in their relationship. Now, it may seem cavalier of a parent to so easily dispose of a son who appeared, from the report of his rector, to have wandered somewhat from the path of common sense, but Lord Bryce-Jones should not be faulted in this, for he was quite ignorant of the details behind his son's departure from St. Matthew's, those details not having been reported to him at all but to a subaltern who could not under any circumstances have brought himself to tell Lord Jones that his son was mad. Instead he had spoken of over-work, over-conscientiousness, a need for rest.

The fact was that Lord Bryce-Jones was losing money on the Amstelhoek Villa and couldn't get his accountant to figure out why. Compared to other like hotels in the city, it was way out. He had intended to send someone from within the company to observe the operation from the guarded perspective of a guest. It was pure serendipity, he said, that Michael should have called.

Not serendipity, Michael thought, but he kept the knowledge to himself. They settled the preliminary details at once on the phone. His father would arrange an identity for him: he had people who could do that pretty quickly. Was there a name Michael preferred to use? Smith, Michael suggested. Smith it would be then. Michael Smith. When did he hope to go? Soon, very soon. Then the papers would be seen to at once. Ten thousand pounds would be deposited in his new name in Lloyds Bank in Amsterdam. Was there anything else?

Yes. What should he look for?

For the time being, no more than the number of people who appeared to be staying there, their opinions of the service and his opinion of the way in which the place operated.

He could manage that, he thought.

"You have Judson call and reserve the royal suite. If the registration never shows up on the ledger I guess we'll have a pretty good lead on what's happening, won't we?"

"Yes. You see I've got this thing I'm working on," Michael started.

"Good," his father said. "A man needs work. I have mine and yours was school, but now..."

"Precisely. And I think I've found something..."

"Look, son, I've got to go. You get yourself over there and keep your eyes open."

"Yes, Daddy."

There was a click at the other end. For a moment Michael felt a twinge of something unfamiliar. Was it a sadness? Perhaps.

It would have been nice to have told his father about his new powers. Being a man of genius himself, he would have appreciated it.

When Michael put the receiver back, Judson was standing nearby, waiting. Without asking the old man's business, he announced his own, so pleased was he with its prospect.

"We're going abroad, Judson."

"We, sir?"

"You and I"

"How extraordinary, sir."

"Does it suit you then?"

"Most definitely, sir. I shall have to call my sister. Oh, sir?"

"When, sir?"

"I would like to go on Friday. That gives us two days."

"I shall begin packing, sir."

"We are going in the grand style, as it were, Judson. An assignment for Daddy. And one for me as well."

"And where, if I may ask, sir?"

"Amsterdam, Judson. You have been there, I believe. I shall have an experienced guide."

"I hope I shall be of some use, sir. Now if you will excuse me. "

"Certainly."

Michael unfolded that morning's London Times upon the dining table which Judson had just cleared and went to work once again on the second page of the financial section where he had earlier found a most productive combination of numbers.

Judson returned a little later to the library and found his young master sitting in the red moroccan leather chair upon which Michael had liked to crawl as a young child and in which from time to time he had sat upon Judson's lap listening to stories of Ceylon where Judson had spent time while in the British infantry. It touched the old servant now to see in that same chair his young man so thoughtful and matured, lengthened now to near ungainliness. Michael seemed lost in his own thoughts. Judson cleared his throat.

"Yes, Judson, have you made out our lists?"

"I have pretty well done with them, sir. I was wondering about dinner jackets, sir."

"Oh, I suppose I shall have to have them, Judson. Who knows where my father's investigation will lead us? Have you ever had the feeling that you had done your bit, Judson?"

"I'm not entirely sure that I follow your question, sir."

"That you've put in your time. Done your bit, you know. That it's someone's else turn."

"Oh, yes, sir. I felt that way in Burma near the end, when my term was extended."

"Then you know how I feel right now."

"Not entirely, sir."

"Morality is a funny thing, Judson."

"I have always thought so, sir."

"I sometime wonder why people try to maintain any moral order at all. I mean, it's so much work, isn't it? And it's never done. And what is done doesn't last any more than a..."

"Than a sandcastle, sir?"

"You remember our sandcastles, Judson?"

"Indeed I do, sir."

"It's a good figure, Judson. Yes, like those. You work and work to build moats, fortifications and diversions. You know, of course, that it's a waste of time."

"But it was enjoyable, sir."

"Building the castles?"

"Yes, sir. You were quite good at it, you know."

"Sometimes I feel that I'm still building sand castles." "How is that, sir?"

"I mean moral ones. If one can be said to build moral sand castles. I suppose one can. In a manner of speaking. You know, perhaps, that at St. Matthew's I was student assistant to the chaplain."

"Yes, I did know that, sir. And we were very proud of you."

"It's good to know that someone was. Well, it seems that I was always working so against the grain of things. As though people didn't want goodness at all."

"Well, among schoolboys, sir..."

"Perhaps I expected too much."

"Perhaps, sir."

"I wearied of it, I can tell you that."

"One does weary of God's work, sir. My brother who is the preacher in Aleside St. Mary wearies occasionally, I know." "I can appreciate his struggles."

"But you are not at St. Matthew's now, Master Michael." "But the commission, it appears, is to stay with me." "Your calling, sir?"

"Yes, Judson. I had hoped it might be of a different character. Some secular thing. Crime, or international espionage. High finance, even. At first it seemed that's where I was being led, but these past weeks have been like sliding down the side of a funnel."

"Into morality, sir."

"Yes. You see, Judson, the way this thing works is that I am able to see patterns where before I saw only randomness. Take this page of newsprint, for example. To the ordinary person this page appears to contain news stories. And it does."

"I am reassured in that, sir."

"But on another level it contains more than that. Do you remember that programme we watched once on the telly when I was about ten or eleven? About the images carved in certain South American landscapes? They make no sense at all from the ground but do from the air. As if they were intended to be seen from some aircraft." "It doesn't come back to me, sir."

"The point was that the men who made the images, which covered several miles of ground, could never have seen their effect, because they were so close. One had to have the

perspective of an aviator to appreciate them.”

"I believe I follow your example, sir. Your own perspective on what appear to most of us merely to be stories in the newspaper is like that of the aviator.”

"That's it, Judson. Once you see the bigger picture it is impossible to see a newspaper again in its conventional sense.”

"And the messages which you see revealed as it were in this landscape of print have to do with matters moral?”

"Unfortunately. There is something awry. There is some pernicious force at work there, Judson.”

"In Amsterdam, sir?”

"So it appears.”

"I am sorry to hear it, but perhaps, sir, you will be able to set it right.”

"We, Judson. We will be a team, you and I.”

11. The Estate Agent

Bobby got a ride soon after he reached the main road, with a man who said he was an estate agent and who could drop him at Tuppington-on-Smart. He was an unattractive man with an unattractive accent and a great deal to say on his own behalf, a hustler, Bobby thought, in a cheap suit that was too small for his bulging frame and with an ambition too large for his natural talents.

He provided a running commentary on the real estate which fronted the road as well as that which lay hidden at the end of a disappearing lane or behind privet. His interest in it was purely economic.

"That one there," he said, pointing accusingly at an Edwardian cottage, "that's what I'm talking about. £125,000. She'll never get it. Not with Harman, Gresham and Welborn she won't. Too upscale for her. They won't give her the time of day. They've got bigger fish to fry than that pathetic little piece of real estate. I could have moved it for her. But of course Budley Limited isn't Harman, Gresham and Welborn is it? That's my company, by the way."

He reached into his vest pocket and produced a gold case which he flipped open with one hand producing therefrom with the gesture of a card sharper a small white card edged with gilt and which he handed to Bobby. Bobby smiled and looked at it. It was done in a heavy gothic script.

Budley Limited, Estate Agents
Aldringham, Suffolk

Mr. Bill Scruddy, Esq.
Appraiser and Estate Representative.

"Bill Scruddy," the man said, and extended the same hand, the box now safely returned to his waistcoat pocket. He had a large pinky ring with the markings of what Bobby imagined must be a secret men's society. He took the proffered hand.

"Billy Lee Deacon," Bobby said, calling to mind the name of a play Anthony had started and never finished about a revival preacher. It wasn't a very good piece, but Bobby had wanted to play the part. The house decided instead to do Much Ado About Nothing in which Anthony had made his debut as a girl. Bobby was sorry about Billy Lee Deacon but not about Anthony's performance.

"They don't have the money, ya see. Not really. Just some old clothes and a box of jewellery. And an opinion of themselves that they're still part of some dead aristocracy. They're not. I can assure you of that, my boy. They're most definitely not. But they hold on. And keep their noses in the air. Bill Scruddy could turn that cottage in a month. Less. But the old lady will stay with the silk stocking firm and go to the poorhouse. Oh, I'll get it sooner or later, if you know what I mean. When she's really ready to do business. If I have a mind to."

Bobby didn't know whether to say, "Right-O" or, "You don't say!" or something more American, but it turned out that he didn't have to say anything; this wasn't intended to be a conversation. That suited him fine. The fewer questions about himself the better. He suspected that his chauffeur would have forgotten him within the hour. He hoped so, just in case they decided to come looking for him. He tried to appear attentive, however, in exchange for the ride; and so he looked at the buildings as instructed and occasionally said, "Really!?" which seemed to do the trick.

His own thoughts wandered ahead. There was a girl at the tea shop in Tuppington-On-Smart named Katherine. She had been nice to them when they came to town and once had even flirted with him a little bit. She was the only person he knew and they would get there about tea time. It was a matter of letting things happen one at a time, as the rector had recommended. If she wasn't there, then that would be all right, too. He would make his way to Harwich where the ferry left for Holland. He had checked a map. Altogether it was no more than an hour or so from the school. That had been good luck.

"You got the afternoon off, 'ave you?"

The man suddenly seemed interested in his companion. Or had run out of his own palaver. "I'm meeting my dad. You know, on the sly. My parents are divorced and he's not supposed to see me. Every other Friday we get together for tea."

"Do I know!? I could tell you a bit about divorce! Two kids." Here. He produced a wallet from his pocket and flipped it open. "Look through there. You'll find them." The man indicated the set of plastic card holders. They were stuffed with business cards, credit cards, membership cards — one for the Suffolk Friends of Youth, which struck him as odd — and then there were pictures of two children about ten and eleven — both girls. A little pasty and without any remarkable feature. It was as if the photos had been taken just after they had awoken. Not from a nap but a sleep weeks or months long.

"They look like you," he said taking the gamble.

"A few years ago maybe, before middle aged spread," he responded proudly. He held his hand out for the wallet, perhaps nervous that his passenger might continue his researches, but fumbled it in the taking so that it landed in Bobby's lap. He reached for it with the same deftness Bobby had earlier observed and, flicking it onto the seat with one gesture, let his hand settle in Bobby's crotch with the next, all so smartly that Bobby, despite his surprise and displeasure had to admire the man's facility.

"Why don't you take a fiver out of my wallet there. A boy your age can always use a little pocket money."

The man was a pro. No doubt about it. If Bobby declined the offer, he understood that the hand would be removed. For a moment Bobby hesitated and then examined the contents. There was a very thick wad of bills.

"Here, let's see that?" the man said, at the same time giving a pull on Bobby's right thigh. Bobby

moved closer and handed Bill Scruddy the wallet.

Scruddy didn't take it. He couldn't have with one hand now digging into Bobby's crotch and the other on the wheel. "Look, why don't you see if you can find a tenner in there," he said.

Bobby did. For a moment he hesitated and then removed it. He wondered if the extra five had been for his sliding a little closer or that more would be expected of him. If so, the deal would be off. The man stroked him for awhile until the turtle started coming alive; he seemed pleased at that. Bobby was less pleased and tried philosophically to open himself to new experiences. Certainly Bill Scruddy wasn't a dangerous man, whatever else he might be.

"My wife took off with the assurance salesman. How do you like that? The assurance salesman! Assurance for what, is what I want to know. And who gets the kids? She does. You explain that to me. Not that I could have done by them very well. I'm not married myself now. I've had it with that. Once is enough for a man with any brain in his head." Bill Scruddy slipped a finger in between two of the buttons on Bobby's fly. Bobby could feel himself stiffen. The remarkable thing was that it was all as if nothing was happening. The conversation, the speed of the car, the view of hedge and an occasional farm. As though the man's hand wasn't in his pants at all. All in all he felt in control of the situation, quite satisfied with his prospects. The man seemed much more nervous than he.

Bill Scruddy popped the button open.

"It's ten pounds a button," Bobby said, removing another tenner from the wallet.

"What? Oh. Help yourself."

"There are six buttons."

"Well, well," Bill Scruddy said. Bobby took another fifty pounds from the wallet.

"That place would make a nice starter home," Bill Scruddy said, indicating a small rectangular stucco place with an estate agent's sign on it. "I've got a couple that's interested, actually, but Spencer Bock has an exclusive for three months."

"A starter home." Bobby thought. The phrase amused him.

"I don't mess with these little properties very much any more myself. Some of my staff do. You know, working their way up. We try to provide services for the whole lot of clients. The money's in the big properties and they know who moves the really big stuff in Suffolk." The man caught his breath for a moment and removed his hand so as to attend to his own condition.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to...?"

"No."

The man removed his penis from his trousers. It was as ugly a thing as Bobby had ever seen. Was that what happened when you got older? He'd never do that. Not for a hundred pounds. He looked out the window. The man slipped his hand inside Bobby's underpants. Bill Scruddy didn't really seem to know how to manage. Bobby slipped his pants down; in any case he didn't want to come all over his jeans, and pretty soon something was going to happen. Bobby had thought of asking for another twenty pounds for the underpants, but it seemed excessive. He was beginning to feel a little guilty as it was. The man was silent for a few moments. It seemed that there were limits to his capacity for divided attention.

Bobby came first. It was more pleasurable than he had any right to expect, all things considered. Then Scruddy did himself with a good many grunts and groans. For a moment Bobby feared they might sideswipe a truck, but Scruddy was adept. Bobby had to give the guy credit, pathetic as he was.

In a slight concession to his feigned ignorance of the whole matter, Scruddy mentioned that there was a box of tissues in the glove box; he failed, however, to acknowledge Bobby's thank you.

"I don't have to go after them; they come after me. It's experience they really want in my business. And straight talking. They didn't get all that money pouring tea, if you know what I mean. Now there's a property. That will be a sweet two mil if I'm not mistaken. Talking of your golf clubs."

They hadn't been as far as Bobby could recall. But golf clubs probably stood for all the rest. Places where he couldn't have gone except with his plastic briefcase and ill-tailored suit. He looked more carefully as they passed. There were fairways off to the back and along the road. Not very well kept ones, Bobby noticed. It was sandy country. You couldn't tell the sand traps from the landscape. He and Anthony had played golf once at their club in Wicksford. Anthony and he had been twins. White shorts and forest green knit shirts with the club emblem. "How did they know your eyes were going to be green when they built the club?" Bobby had asked. "Green is the standard with the Parkers," Anthony had answered, and Bobby realised again that the improbable was always the rule in Anthony's life. "My mother told me once. The first Earl or the second I think. His wife had green eyes and that's when they built the club."

"That's a very private kind of golf club, if you know what I mean," Scruddy said. Apparently he assumed Bobby did, for he continued. "They bring the girls out from London, mostly. I've seen some of them. Came out here with a friend once. Played eighteen. Didn't get into that sort of stuff myself. You never know about floozies. I'm not a prude; don't mistake. I like a little on the side myself now and then."

The man was a fool. Not amusing but pathetic.

"If you knew these rich toffs the way I know them you wouldn't be surprised. It's pleasure they're after, and they have the money to buy it. But I guess you're a little young for all that kind of talk. I'd better watch my manners or I'll be in for corrupting the young."

As if to point up the absurdity of the thought, Scruddy adjusted the vest that contained him like

twine on a bale of hay and moved his neck within the collar of his shirt like a bull scratching between fenceposts.

"Now look at that one there. Built by an American oil millionaire. Lived there one year and back to Texas. Stayed on the market for over a year. Lots of vandalism. Sold for a quarter of a mil. Now it's been sold again for an off license and inn. Fellow in Thorpeness bought it. I'll tell you what I'd do with a listing like that myself...."

They passed over the Smart as it meandered its way to Tuppington. Bobby glimpsed a footpath, and it reminded him of one that he and Anthony had once taken closer to school. There was a meadow. They had brought a picnic. Then they were lying on the grass by the river. Anthony was sitting cross-legged against a tree with a book. Probably Keats. Or Swinburne. Yes, Swinburne. That was the time he'd discovered Swinburne. Bobby had been looking up his shorts wondering why it was such a turn-on when he could see him naked any time he wanted to. He had said so and Anthony had quoted from some poet about things that are hidden teasing the mind. And then, self consciously, Anthony had crossed his legs. Bobby had laughed. "It's no good," Bobby had said, "I can still see. Your shorts are too baggy. If you don't want people getting horny on your underpants you'll have to wear snugger shorts."

"I'm trying to read," Anthony had said then, without making another adjustment, and Bobby had slipped his hand up, and in a few minutes they had both come in their pants. Anthony had said, looking at the spot, "Now what shall we do!?"

He could remember the tone of voice perfectly. Anthony's "Oh dear" voice.

"We could just let people enjoy looking at us. They would, you know."

"I don't want to be entertaining," Anthony had said a little petulantly.

"Then we'll do what we did as kids when we had peed our pants."

"I never peed my pants!" Anthony said. "That's disgusting."

"Well you missed a lot of fun, then," Bobby said. "I guess it's different on an estate wearing tweed suits and button shoes."

"I never wore either one and I never did what you said either."

"Well, it's a good thing one of us did, I guess, or we wouldn't know what to do now in order to protect your dignity," and, so saying, he had wrestled Anthony to the edge of the river and they had both rolled in.

Bobby felt three tears form. One in each eye and a third which made a little dot to the right of his fly. How can you want to cry and have a hard on at the same time, he wondered.

He awoke from his reverie with a start. The car was stopped. He looked over at Bill. Scruddy had a big smile and held his hand out. Remarkably Bobby took it.

"Have a good afternoon with your dad," Bill Scruddy said. "I usually do my business here on Wednesdays. Off to Thorpeness today. See you again, maybe."

"Maybe," Bobby said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Was this what it would be like, then, he wondered. Maybe he should have got the name of that place from Summers after all. He had an enormous desire to bathe himself.

He slung the pack on his back and checked his location. He was in the middle of the town. The tea shop should be around the corner beyond the bookshop. He crossed the street.

12. A Stroll On The Shingle

He stopped at the front of the tea shop and looked through the window. It was filled with recent produce from the small bakery at the back. The scones were always fresh, Katherine had told them once. And the sausage rolls. The lemon and date squares were pretty reliable. The shortbread was chancy. He had never tasted anything he didn't like except once a gooseberry fool. He couldn't understand why gooseberries were such a big favourite with everyone in England.

There were only two tables occupied within the shop. Katherine was not in sight. Perhaps she was in the back, he thought. He lingered a moment hoping to catch sight of her. If she was there he would have a cup of coffee with cream and four sugars. Or maybe three. He was trying to cut down. He rated tea just above gooseberry fool.

Were she to be there he would talk with her. He had decided that. And not just good morning how are you nice day isn't it talk, but more than that. She would see in his expression that something was wrong. Women had a capacity for doing that. And he would pass it off as nothing in particular, letting out at the same time, or as the opportunity of enquiry presented itself, the fact that he was not returning to St. Matthew's. And who knew where that might lead? He wasn't sure what he wanted or where he was going. He was in that frame of mind in which we ascribe conspiracy to circumstance and feel in our own hand a ghostly other.

"Hello."

It was a voice behind him. He turned, trying not to act too startled.

"I thought it was you," she said. She held a net bag which contained a white paper parcel.

"Oh, hello," he said. "I was just drooling over the pastries. I mean the cakes."

"You can call them pastries," she said, smiling. "Sausages," she said, following his eyes to the net bag. "Sausages are not considered sweets."

"My favourite thing," he said.

"These won't be ready for a while, but there are still some of yesterday's. Are you coming in?"

"Oh. Yes." He followed her into the shop and she put him at a table near the back. "Tea?" she asked.

"I'd rather have coffee, if it's no trouble."

"Sorry, I forgot. Back in a jiffy," she said.

She was dark, like Anthony. Maybe even Welsh. He wasn't well enough up on accents to be

sure. Tan Callahan's was Irish and hers was a little different from that.

People's voices were a turn-on for Bobby. Or a turn-off. It had taken him forever to discover something in Swann beneath that adenoidal wasteland. Or to believe that anyone with so hoarse a voice as Helter Skelter could have a heart.

Katherine was his own height, just above five foot five. Perhaps even a little taller. Small of feature as well as figure; a person one might expect to dart rather than glide, to step aside on the road rather than hold her course, anticipate a customer's wish even before it was expressed. But in reality her disposition and appearance were at odds with one another. He had discovered that when Small made a fresh remark to her one afternoon and got quickly and expertly bested. He couldn't now recall the incident. Something to do with sweets, cake, butterfingers. Something like that. They had all liked her after that. Even Small, who thought the only girls even worth discussing were Americans.

Seeing her similarity to Anthony, he felt a great and unaccountable tenderness. He could think of no way to express it, however; and when she came with the coffee, he merely thanked her.

"He is. Well, I guess he is. Not philosophical, exactly. Well, no, he's that too. Mainly he's a poet."

"Really!"

"And an artist. He has a picture on the wall of our room of his mother, Lady Fairchild, that looks like a professional did it."

"It's good, huh?"

"It's amazing. It really is. And he plays the 'cello, but not as well as he paints. In fact not very well at all, but don't say I told you."

"I guess you're pretty good chums."

"The best ever."

"That's nice."

"I guess it is." Bobby suddenly lost his appetite for the sausage roll and set it down.
"I guess I'm talking quite a lot."

"I like it."

"I like talking to you."

"I'm afraid I'm a little bit of a flirt."

"With everyone?"

She laughed. "You're supposed to disagree with me, you know. You're doing this all wrong."

"What else is new?"

"I was just kidding."

"I know."

"Want some more coffee?"

"Oh. Sure."

"I'll get it."

"Wait. Oh, nothing. You're coming back, aren't you?"

"With the coffee."

"I mean do you have to go back to work now?"

There was a jingle as the door opened and two elderly ladies entered.

"I guess so. I'll be back with the coffee."

She greeted the ladies by name and showed them to the table nearest the window where they immediately began to study the array. She knows her customers, he thought, including me. She set them up with tea and came back with the coffee pot.

"You really know your customers," he said, not having come up with any other thought in the intervening moments.

"How come?"

"A sausage roll?" she asked.

"Oh," he said. "I forgot. Of course. I mean yes. Please." "Right back," she said.

She wore flat shoes. If they had been a boy's they would have been broken down at the sides, he thought. As if a boy had always to walk faster than his clothing. They weren't new but they weren't shabby either. Her feet were small. He imagined them. He liked feet. He liked the rest of her too. Not that she aroused him. Not all that much, anyway. But he was drawn to her and put his regular four spoons of sugar in the coffee before thinking. He looked to see if anyone had noticed. It was very childish to have things so sweet, he knew; and now it mattered especially that he appear older than he was. It wouldn't be easy. Just the opposite was generally true. At fourteen, he was still taken for a year or two younger.

She returned with the roll and, looking back at the room to be sure nothing was going on, sat down opposite him. He smiled.

"They don't mind your mixing it up with the customers?" "Not when there's nobody here. Anyway it's my Auntie's shop. Do you mind?"

"Certainly not."

"Is it good?"

"What?"

"The sausage roll."

"Oh! Excellent. Really!" He was being over-enthusiastic. He took a bite and set it down.

"You're alone."

"Right."

"Where's your friend?"

"Anthony?"

"The pretty one."

Bobby felt several capillaries burst like small mortar shells in his cheeks and studied his sausage roll.

"I'm sorry. I guess that's not a compliment. I meant it as one. I should have said the dark one with the lovely eyelashes. He is your chum, isn't he?"

"Yes. I guess he would be pleased to think that you had noticed him. I don't think he'd mind about the being pretty." "He seems like a very deep boy."

He indicated the ladies with his head. Oblivious for the moment to one another, they watched the parade of cakes.

"Oh. The sisters Wentworth."

"Sisters?"

"Not really. People call them that. I guess actually they're not related, but they both have the same name. They're lesbians. They came with the music festival thirty years ago and never left.

"Music festival?"

"Back in the sixties. A composer from Aldeburgh had started one there and later a group decided to start one here as well. But it flopped after three years. The other one's still running. They go there instead, now, but they live here."

"How do you know they're lesbians?"

"No one does, really, I guess. But why shouldn't they be? I mean it's not a very unusual thing, is it?"

"Oh. No!" He hadn't the slightest idea, actually. It wasn't a subject on which he had ever thought to speculate. He felt the smallest regret, however, that they were not men; for the same remark made on that subject would have given him great reassurance. He had to believe that the depth of his passion for Anthony was more than what Mr. Skelton called a "transitional crush."

"I think it's sort of sweet. Anyway, I've got to get back to work."

"Wait."

She stood there and looked at him and he had no idea whatsoever what to say. His mind was as blank as the plate before him. "I'd like another sausage roll."

"Coming up." She picked up the plate and took it along with her.

This time when she turned her skirt turned less slowly and he was aware, really for the first time, of the body beneath it. The way it caught up with her and hung, then moved again as she walked. She was like a moving piece of statuary. He imagined a row of instant photographs of the sort he had once seen in a museum, each a portrait in itself. Her hair, too, had moved and then moved back and settled. All in slow motion, though not really so. Only in his mind. He felt a slight unease come over him. It was not an altogether unpleasant thing.

When she returned with the roll he looked up at her and smiled in what he imagined was a sort of wan way. He wasn't sure what wan really meant, but he had learned from Anthony that words should sometimes obey rather than dictate sentiment.

"Not anarchically," Anthony had said, "but the way Shakespeare used 'sicklied' for example in Hamlet's soliloquy.

Or the way Faulkner and Davenport use words." Anthony had recently adopted a new American novelist-poet named Guy Davenport as his model.

Probably it was not a wan smile after all, for she looked puzzled, then concerned and said, "You know, I can't remember your name."

He was crushed. He tried not to show it. "Ames," he said.

"No, wait," she said. "Bobby. Bobby Ames."

He smiled. "Yeah. And yours is Katherine."

"Katherine Anne."

"Katherine Anne."

"Are you running away?"

"What!?"

"Are you?"

"Running away from school?"

"Yes."

"Of course not."

"What are you doing, then?"

"I'm meeting my father in London."

"Oh." She seemed disappointed. He felt disappointed. Circumstance had walked up and he had looked the other way.

"What does your father do?"

"He's a captain in the navy. He's in London for the week and asked me to come up and meet him."

"Pretty cool dad."

"The coolest. We'll go to his private club and maybe see a soccer match. And go to some fancy restaurants. My dad loves good food."

"Hey, how about taking me along?"

"Sure. You want to come?"

"Don't I wish. Look, I've got to get back to work. Are you going to be around for an hour?"

"Sure. He's picking me up... later."

"How come he isn't picking you up at school?"

"It's complicated. My parents are divorced. The school thinks I'm visiting an aunt in Bury St. Edmunds."

"Are you making all of this up?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

"My God!"

"What?"

"How could you think I was running away? I mean I wouldn't be sitting here in full view, would I?"

"You might. Maybe you're the kind of person that would do that. Maybe you want them to stop you."

"You sound like a psychologist."

"That's what my mother says. She thinks I should go into it."

"Maybe you should. You're so good with people." He blushed again. He was beginning to feel like an aurora borealis.

"So are you?"

"What?"

"Running away."

"Would you think I was more interesting if I was?"

"I think you're pretty interesting as you are. But if you were running away it would be more fun."

"Why?"

"Well, it's an adventure, isn't it? And it's something you're not supposed to do. And I could be an accomplice."

"I don't think you can be an accomplice to a runaway."

"Of course you can."

"How?"

"Well, for one thing you can hide him."

"I guess that's true. But I don't need hiding."

"Too bad."

"What do you say, maybe we could take a walk after you finish here. If you'd like to."

"That would be nice. What time is it?"

"Four."

"I'm done at five. I'll meet you by the Moot Hall. Do you know where that is?"

"It's where the kids sail their boats."

"Right."

"I'll see you there at five."

"Okay."

He finished his tea and sausage roll and left a 50p piece on the table. She was in the kitchen when he left. He nodded to the sisters Wentworth. They smiled the same smile at the same moment and then returned to their tea.

He felt pleased with himself, especially about the invitation to London. It was the kind of corroborative detail that made a story really convincing. And it wasn't entirely made up. That was the other rule. Stay close enough to the truth so as not to lose your bearings. He was, after all, going to look for his father. And he could hardly have said Amsterdam. Still, he took little pleasure in his virtuosity. He would rather have told Katherine the truth. But there was too much of it to tell and if you started it would all unravel like a ball of string. Then he might unravel too and he didn't want that to happen. Above all things he didn't want that. He thought about Anthony. And then about Katherine. They seemed two sides of the same person. Male and female. Maybe he was bisexual like Summers. Summers told Bobby he was a surrogate. Summers would never let on that he liked him without doing something like that. Calling him names, or talking to him as if he were a girl. Or calling him a whore. Or this time a gypsy. But he had never made him cry. That was one thing. Not from words, anyway.

It was more than an hour. In the extra ten minutes he had decided to tell her. She explained that the drain had clogged in the kitchen and there was a mess. They walked along beside the water. The fishing boats lay slightly on their sides, winched up onto the top of the shingle, awaiting high tide. One or two people walked alone ahead of them, toward the mere.

"I am running away," he said.

"I thought so. Did they beat you?"

"No, it's not like that."

"What then?"

"It's really complicated. Are you sure you want to hear?" "Of course." She reached out and took his hand. "You don't mind, do you? I'll get lots of points if anyone sees us."

"Points?"

"You know. My friends think you're pretty cute."

"What do you think?"

"I thought you were shy."

"I think I am," Bobby said. "I try to get up my nerve now and then and say something like that."

"Well, since you've asked, I think you are incredibly sexy." "Not cute."

"Sexy is much better than cute. So tell me about running away." They had walked up to the wall overlooking the North Sea. There was a Coast Guard station behind them, and to their right a bench with one of those coin-operated binoculars mounted in front of it. "Let's sit here," she said. "I like to watch the boats come in."

"Well," he said, "it's complicated."

"You're complicated, too. I could tell that right away." "How could you tell that?"

"Women's intuition."

"I think you're right. I am. Sometimes too complicated for my own self."

"So your father is in London."

"Amsterdam."

"Amsterdam?"

"I think he is. The last letter he wrote to my mother was from there. That was before she died last month."

"Oh, how awful."

"Yeah. The boat burned up. In the harbour at Piraeus. I think she was drunk."

"Oh, you poor thing."

"Don't get hung up on that. She wasn't much of a mother. I'm not all broken up. Anyway that's

another story. I haven't seen my father for a long time."

He told the story as honestly as he could, what there was of it to tell, even down to the note he had written to Anthony, but not of course, its intimate nature. When he had finished, she was sitting nearer to him and had her arm hooked in his. He had decided, as she listened and responded, that he liked her very much. More than any girl he had ever known.

"How will you get to Amsterdam?" she asked.

"The ferry goes from right near here to something called Hoek van Holland or something like that. Then I guess I'll take a train."

"Harwich."

"That's it."

"You've missed the afternoon one. You'll have to wait till morning."

"Well, I can go there and wait, I guess."

"No. You're coming home with me."

"But your parents..."

"My parent. My father's dead and my mother's over at my Aunt's in Leicester for the weekend. She's got rheumatoid arthritis and my mum goes over every weekend to do the house cleaning and the shopping."

"Okay. If you don't mind, then."

"We'll stop and pick up some fish and chips for dinner. Do you like fish and chips?"

"Not the kind they have at school."

"You'll like these. They're the best on the coast. Unless you don't like fish."

"I like fish fine, just not sitting in a pool of grease."

She stood up and he followed. "There," she said, "you see that fellow with the red hat on?"

"Yes." A man was buying fish from one of the boats which had landed while they were talking.

"That's Billy from the fish and chips place. That's the difference. Fish has to be absolutely fresh."

They walked down from the sea-wall and back up the shingle. She started ahead of him and he turned to look at the sea. The North Sea was grey. And cold. Not at all like the Mediterranean.

All business. Wool and Wellingtons and pale people with dark hair. Like Katherine. Like Anthony. He turned and followed her.

She turned and looked at the sea. The breeze blew her hair and curled her skirt around her thighs. There was colour in her face. From the exertion probably. She smiled at the sea from some bond or birth that he couldn't know. She was the hardy one, not he.

She bought the fish. He stayed on the beach, just in case there should be a look-out for him. It was Katherine's idea. She was beginning to act a little bit like an accomplice. When she returned, she decided that they should walk to her house the back way and so they avoided the High Street and meandered through the old houses on the hill until they again descended away from the town where an old row of cottages looked out onto the river marsh. Hers was just across from the tidal flats. 'Lupin Cottage' was written on a ceramic tile by the gate. He said it out loud. She pointed to a row of spiky flowers in the garden.

"Those are lupins," she said, pointing. They had pale purple spikes that would become flowers. He had seen them before but hadn't known their name. There were six rooms, all very small. She turned on the gas heater and took two cans of soda from the refrigerator, handing him one. Then she took the phone book from the drawer.

"I wonder what you call it," she said.

"Is there a yellow pages?"

"Yes."

"Look under Ferries."

"Oh, here it is. North Sea Ferries. 223-7789."

She dialled the phone. There would be a ferry early the next morning. Bobby felt a slight twist in his belly as she said it. It suddenly seemed more final that he was leaving. He had forgotten for a while, in Katherine's company, what this was all about. She hung up the phone.

"You're a genius," he said.

"Not really," she said. "Just organised."

"And decisive."

"I guess I am."

"That's a good quality," he said. "I don't have it. I get up to the edge and change my mind. Anthony is decisive, though. You wouldn't think so to see him, but he is. 'You're a rock,' I told him once. 'No, just a small obsidian,' he said."

"What's obsidian?"

"It's a volcanic thing. Not really a stone, but very hard." "You love Anthony, don't you?"

"He's my best friend."

"I'm sorry." Puzzled, he looked at her and realised that he was blushing again. It could, he thought, develop into a chronic impairment. He stood up and looked out the front window. An incredibly small car was letting a large man out in front of the bookshop. He wondered if the person still in the car was as large.

"It's none of my business," she said.

"That's the smallest car I have ever seen," he said.

"What car?" she asked and came to stand beside him. "Oh, it's the Page-Morleys. Biggest people, smallest car. I don't know why it doesn't just collapse the way they do in cartoons. It should."

"I can't see her."

"She's at least as big as he is."

"Amazing." He turned to find Katherine looking not at the car but at him. He wrinkled his brows. "Well, I guess I'd better get going."

"We haven't had the fish and chips."

"Oh, I forgot."

"Look, I lied about the ferry. There is one tonight."

"I figured there probably was."

"Then you will stay?"

"I don't know if I should."

"You've never been with a girl, have you?"

"What?!"

"I don't do this all the time, you know."

"Do what?"

"Pick up boys and bring them home with me. I've never done it before. Just so you don't get the wrong idea about me."

"I never thought..."

"It's all right. I'll get the food."

Bobby remained speechless.

"I'm sorry I said that. I really am," she said, returning. "It's just that you're so terrifically shy."

"Look."

"Yes?"

"About staying tonight?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you supposed to have vinegar with fish and chips?"

13. Tears and Dusty Sherry

Anthony took Bobby's letter to Henry Skelton and then cried for a long time over two glasses of the dusty port poured from the dusty decanter. He had not had a second thought about showing it to the old man. Anthony had been a mouse on Sprinkles Three and Skelton was to him, as to many other boys, a grandfather, a caretaker, someone who treated all events in the lives of his boys with respect and thoughtful consideration, however mundane or inappropriate an outsider might think them.

That it was a love letter mattered not at all to Anthony, for Skelton had never given them cause for anything other than a more thoughtful circumspection about their shared affection. Indeed, he appeared to applaud it. That Helter Skelter himself was mentioned in the letter by his nickname gave Anthony a moment's pause, but no more than that.

Skelton had said "Well, well" no fewer than four times while Anthony wept. Perhaps even he would not know what to do. Anthony felt little relief as Helter Skelter paced the room and thought. But then perhaps he was only letting Anthony get it out of his system. Finally Skelton sat down again opposite him.

"Well, we aren't entirely surprised, are we, my boy?" he said.

"Yes," Anthony said. And then, more softly, "No."

"So now instead of one, we have two needles in the same haystack."

"I have to go and find him, sir."

"Three!"

"Sir?"

"No, Parker. That is not the solution, I assure you. You know, there's a rule when people get lost from one another."

"I know, sir, Bobby told me. Stay put."

"I could only wish he had followed his own advice."

"It's like some kind of addiction, isn't it, sir?"

"What is, my boy?"

"Having to go away like this. Not being able to stay put. It's like his mother got him hooked on some drug."

"Perhaps it's simply, as he says, that he feels he must find his father. It is a problem for him, you know, being without any family at all."

"I know, sir. He told me about your conversation with him. Would he have had to go away, sir? Into an institution for orphans?"

"Certainly not. What a horrible idea. Ames, in a place like that!"

"I didn't think so, sir, but he may have. I think he felt extremely lonely. He was very distant, you know, these last weeks."

"I recall one of your strategies for bringing him out of it. How is it, by the way — your shoulder?"

"Quite normal, sir. I'm not to throw things or lift things for another few weeks, but it works fine."

"It was your left arm, as I recall."

"Yes sir. This one." He raised it and the short sleeve of his shirt fell back. It was a small arm. Parker was a small-boned boy. Children were so fragile, Skelton thought. He wanted for just a moment to take him in his arms, but, of course, Anthony neither wanted nor needed that. Skelton had spent a lifetime not taking needy boys into his arms. It would have been a violation of their integrity, he felt. But now and then they would come to him. Sit on his lap. Want to be read to, comforted. Tucked into bed. The little ones did. Which was why he had made his life on Sprinkles Three. But the Parkers and Amesese were the ones whose young lives touched him the most deeply, remembering, as it seemed he must forever, the tragedy of his own nascent love in another school in another time.

"But you are right-handed."

"Actually I'm ambidextrous, sir. Except with the 'cello."

"Well, Parker. First you must promise me that you will not do anything at all without speaking with me first. Will you do that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I mean it, Parker. I don't want to have to send the militia to Amsterdam to hunt the two of you down."

"We could send the third and fourth forms. They'd do it for Bobby."

"Yes, I'm sure they would. Very willingly. It would be getting them back that would present the challenge. No, Parker, I think this is a situation in which less is more. Now, of course, I must inform the rector."

"You won't show him the letter, sir?"

"As you wish, my boy. But I will tell him the circumstances and, of course, it must be his decision what role the school will play in this. I rather suspect it will be none."

"None, sir? But surely someone will go after him?"

"If that becomes necessary I am sure someone will. But not `the school'. The school is bound by certain requirements."

"Then may I go with you, sir?"

"With me?"

"When you go, sir."

"Who said anything about my going anywhere?"

"Well, who then, sir?"

"Parker, you haven't much faith in your friend, it seems. Didn't I read in there something about his writing to you every day?"

"Every day he could, sir."

"Well, I should think that might be within the next two or three. He counts on your being here, Parker. Think how distressed he would be to think that he had no way of contacting you, that you might not get his letter? You are his terra firma, Parker. You wait until the mail has a chance to bring you word. And if it doesn't, then we shall talk about the militia. Now, I think it's time for you to retire. It's quite late."

"The letter was under my pillow, sir."

"Clever of him."

"Why sir?"

"So that you wouldn't find it in time to stop him." And had the boy thought through the corollary of that, Skelton wondered. Knowing Ames as well as he did, he thought so. To be so unsure when he was loved as much as this! What would it take to put him back on his feet? A father perhaps. A real one, that is.

"Good night, sir. And thanks."

Anthony stood awkwardly for a moment. Skelton extended his hand. Anthony started to meet it with his own and then put his arms around the bony old man who held him gratefully and firmly for a moment before showing him to the door.

It was eleven o'clock. Late for most people, but not for Soames-Winthrop whom Skelton knew to be, like himself, a night bird. Skelton put on his coat and turned off the light by his chair. The other he always left on so that the mice would have a sense of his presence there.

In the dormitory there was the sound of sleep, some almost silent, some garrulous, some perhaps troubled. There were stirrings and Ted Peavey said, "Definitely not!" in a very resolute voice.

He checked Adam on the way out the door. The boy seemed tranquil tonight. Drowned in sleep, and, of course, drowned.

The covers were askew. Skelton straightened them trying not to awaken him. He didn't want to stop now to change him. Later, when he returned, perhaps. He tucked the blankets firmly under the mattress and went out the door, leaving it open so that Sarah would hear if Adam had another of his nightmares. What would he make of all this in the morning, Skelton wondered. He wondered if the boy in Amsterdam had any idea of the number of people into whose lives he had made inroads.

Like poor old Bryce-Jones. Gone balmy over the boy. Schizo. With his predictions of doom. What a horrible shame! What a loss! Tight laces break, Skelton thought. And then there were the likes of Anthony Parker. How like Parker his own young amour had been ages and ages ago. Things had been different then. People had been... what? Frightened? Such retribution. And so dire an outcome. Dearly beloved Clive. Even now, so many years. Not years, decades later he could see him. See him in Parker most especially.

He walked the corridor of Sprinkles Two. There was a light on in Bledsoe's and Quin-Quiller's room. He knocked. Henry Skelton always knocked. Masters who didn't, he thought, should be put in institutions other than schools. There were such. Even here at St. Matthew's. It was apt to be mathematicians. Like Roger Felleway, for example, whom he had once seen crouching in the bushes. Crouching! Like a cat burglar. Half the people in the world were insane, he thought, playing out little plays with only the first act written. Playing it over and over again. He too, in his own way, was doing that, but trying to add to it, to write new parts. Sprinkles House was a new part.

"Come in."

He opened the door. They were playing chess on the floor. Bledsoe's feet were dirty. He was disinclined to bathe. Skelton looked at the board.

"Well, that shouldn't take more than another couple of minutes to finish, eh, Quin-Quiller?"

"I shouldn't think so, sir," the boy replied.

"What do you mean?" Bledsoe said, "I've got his queen on the run."

"Yes, I can see that. But chess is a game played by two people and it appears that while you have worked on your own strategy you have paid too little attention to Quin-Quiller's."

Bledsoe sat up and studied the board intently.

"Oh, damnation! Oh, beg your pardon, sir!"

"All right, now. Lights out."

"Sir? Will Ames be all right?"

"Why do you ask about Ames?"

"Oh, everyone knows, sir. Parker was real broken up, sir. Martin talked with him. And then it just got around."

"Of course. Well, I'm sure Ames is fine. He is a very resourceful boy."

"I wish I was in Amsterdam. Sir, maybe a few of us could just take a run over there this weekend and have a look around for his dad. You can get bicycles right on the street, you know. They're free. You just pick up one and take it where you're going and leave it."

"I'm not sure that things are still that free in Amsterdam, Bledsoe. The dark forces have been at work."

"The orcs?"

"No, the Americans. I'll tell you what. I have to go see the rector about this and I think Mrs. Grundle may be asleep. Since you boys seem wide awake and would probably fancy another game of chess, I'm going to leave you in charge. Leave your door open so that you can hear the third floor."

"Brilliant, sir. You can count on us."

"I'm sure I can. I am worried in particular about Spooner. His nightmares have been getting worse."

"We heard him, sir. The other night. It gave me the goose bumps."

"Well, Quin-Quiller, if you hear him tonight, come over to the headmaster's and knock on the front door. Softly."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I should be back in an hour."

Skelton continued his round. Parker's light was on as well and his door ajar. He knocked quietly and, when there was no answer, pushed it open. Parker was asleep on top of his bed, still fully

dressed. Ames' letter lay on the floor where he had dropped it. Skelton took the blankets from the other bed, covered him, and turned off the light.

Skelton could see as he walked down the path to the main house that the light was still on in the rector's study. Now that he was there he hesitated. The rector was a man of action. He had to be in his position. He bore responsibilities that were greater than Skelton's own. He could not have loyalties of the sort which now teased Skelton's resolution into hesitancy. Would he insist on calling the police and getting the boy back? Launching a search? What a humiliation it would be for the lad. Had it not been for the promise contained in the letter that he would write to Parker, this ambivalence would not have confused Skelton at this moment. But the thought that very soon Ames would establish contact, assure them of his safety, gave Skelton some assurance in the matter.

He could wait until the morning. He could say that Parker had brought him the letter only then; or that he had learned only in the morning that Bobby had not returned the previous night.

He could, but he was too old for telling tales — not disinclined, just too old.

14. The Best Kisser Among Bisexual Orphans

There were red rickets and sprays of spurge in the wallpaper. He studied it to find the edges of the repeating pattern. A cart stood with its handle on the ground next to a clay pot with a geranium. There were eight wagons on the wall beside the bed.

"I am in bed with a girl," he said to himself.

The sun was up, had been up for an hour, it appeared. The room was washed with sunlight, even though only a small window admitted it. He lay with his hands behind his head on the pillow. There were blue curtains the colour of one of Anthony's pullovers. Exactly the colour. But the fabric was different, of course. The curtains were almost sheer and the pullover was a heavy soft cotton.

'I must be bisexual,' he thought, pleased with himself. They hadn't actually done it because he wasn't "prepared." She wasn't going to take any "chances", she said. He didn't understand it all perfectly but he got the drift. The next time he would be prepared. It was those things that you bought at the chemist. Small had a couple in his wallet that he had got in the hols. "They won't keep for more than three years, you know, Small," Swami had said. But he wasn't sure even then how you used them. So it was just as well he didn't have one. He would have looked funny trying to figure it out.

He drifted back into reverie: Anthony sitting on his bed reading the note. Was he angry or was he crying; he couldn't tell. The sound of the iron gate and the dry feel of the rust on his fingers.

Then a dream: Not being able to get the rust off his hands and marking the things, the people that he touched. He took to wearing felt gloves which became a mark of distinction. He knew other people from the looks of their hands. He could tell everything about them from a careful study and quite a lot from a quick glance. Neville Summers' hands, for example, had long and sharp fingernails more like a woman's, and he wore a house coat. An old cotton one like the one his mother had had. He was smoking a large cigar. One of the little boys with asthma coughed. "Sorry," Bobby said. Neville had the little boys line up facing the refectory table and pull down their pants. Neville measured each boy with an expandable cork upon which you could read the diameter of his sphincter. Several others of the uppers sat at another table like a tribunal and recorded his findings. Katherine entered and they closed their books. She put a flower in each boy's bottom. There were two lupins but all the rest were different.

Then another reverie: Anthony lying in bed this morning, like Bobby, still asleep. The same dark hair, only Anthony's bubbling over his neck something between a curl and a mess. And a little wet spot maybe on the pillow by his lips. "I have a loose mouth," he had said once. "Poet's sometimes do. But it doesn't mean we're soft inside." Or outside, either, Bobby thought. Anthony's tight stomach, his delicate chest.

How could he get one of those things? Called a safe. She had called it a safety. Small had called it a safe. She said you could get them from dispensing machines.

He looked down at the bedclothes. There was a small mound over his erection. By concentrating, he could make it move. That was called auto-eroticism. A sexologist from Tillburn Brake had spoken in chapel. A good many boys, Wells had said later very soberly, had been chastened in the hearing.

"Bullpussy," Small had said.

"Yes, it's true." Wells had insisted. "I noticed a great many hands removed from pockets to a safer place."

"Like the lap next to them," Small said.

"Precisely," said Wells, who often let other people have the punch line. He got credit just the same.

The butt room crowd were always groping the younger boys in public, but not so they could be caught at it. There were worse things than being groped. Spratt Slade, for example, had the misfortune to have his chapel seat next to Benedict Lyons whose breath it was said could have been bottled for chemical warfare and who whispered asides throughout the sermon. He adored Spratt Slade, it was said, and there was no reason to doubt it. Wells said he and Spratt Slade had a contest once and Spratt Slade had done it ten times in a row. The patch on the quilt which he had erected was sectioned with hexagons. It had rays of alternate red and blue emanating from its centre. He tried to get the turtle right at the apex. He had to scrunch down under the covers which gave him some extra leverage.

This was not your average every morning stiffie, he thought. It was definitely enhanced by the soft and fragrant person next to him. He sidled over slightly, careful not to ruin the symmetry, and tucked his chin into Katherine's shoulder. Her shampoo was not one of those that got passed around at school. It was an aphrodisiac.

Of course there weren't really aphrodisiacs. The sexologist had answered questions over tea after his talk, and Mason had asked about rhinoceros horn. Mason was head of the environmental congress at school. They were focusing that month on animals endangered by social superstition. Like wolves, colourful snakes and rhinoceroses. The sexologist had laughed in a condescending way, which put everyone off. "No," he had said, "there is no such thing as an aphrodisiac." "Not even oysters?" Quin-Quiller besought. The boy had forced himself to develop a taste at his father's club over the winter hols because Bledsoe had said he was undersexed and underdeveloped. "No, not even oysters," the sexologist had said.

But Katherine's perfume had been. He ran it through his mind again while she slept.

"You're so fast," she had said.

"I can't help it."

"It won't be much fun for your girlfriend if you come before you get your safety on."

He had felt chastened. "Do it softer."

"I'm hardly touching you."

"Then do it harder." He felt himself drifting quickly down toward the waterfalls. Natives on the shore shook their spears and yelled curses — or warnings, he couldn't tell. The river turned into a velvet bedspread the size of a small moss-covered hill. The natives were naked boys and girls.

"Come on, Bobby," they cheered. 'But I don't want to,' he thought, being in the dream speechless. He groaned softly.

"What?" Katherine said.

"I'm sorry," he gasped.

"What?" she asked.

"Oh," he said.

"You've done it again," she said.

He put his mouth on her breast.

"Don't stop," he mumbled.

"You are so sweet!" She leaned over and kissed his head, holding it there against her.

"Mbbbb pbaanw," he said.

"What?"

"Ummmh!"

"You'll have to speak English," she said, holding his head against her so that he couldn't.

She started to giggle.

He pushed her hand away and lifted his head. "What's so funny?"

"You are."

"I can't help it," he said.

"Not that. You're like a puppy. All paws and floppy and wetting all over the carpet."

"That's not very nice," he said.

"I like puppies. You just need a little training."

"I do have to pee," he said. It seemed like an unnecessary indignity just at the moment.

He got up. Suddenly he felt shy, all naked.

When he had come back, she was asleep. Just like that. And then he as well.

Now she awoke and felt him there. Her hair enveloped them.

Maybe it was the hair and not the perfume, he thought. Hair was, of course, a turn on. Anthony's. But there was so much of this.

"Who are you?" she said. Then she kissed him. They had done a lot of that to make up for his not being "prepared." And a good many other things as well which he now remembered, feeling her breath again and the wetness of her mouth.

Allowing the hexagonal tent to collapse (without my ever having showed it to her, he thought), he rolled onto his side and reached for her breast. A nice little starter breast, he thought, in the voice of Bill Scruddy. He found her clitoris with his more experienced right hand. The left tended to cramp. Even when he masturbated with it. Anthony said it had to do with his right brain trying to break out and spanning in the attempt.

Her clitoris, he had discovered, was a wonderful thing. He had had no idea that girls could get so exhilarated. She was like a video game. The faster he moved the joy stick the harder she trembled. It was really quite eruptive, as Anthony would have said. And slick too. Not slick as a whistle, which Anthony was, but slick as a chute. Slick as a snicker.

He thought of doing it again, but instead she reached for him under the covers. He felt a shiver. He was determined to slow it down this time.

"You are incredibly beautiful," he said.

"You're incredibly sexy."

"I think I'm dried out."

"If you are, I'll let you do it in me the next time."

"The next time?!" he said incredulously. "What do you think I am."

"A sex maniac."

That was closer to the truth than she knew! Let's see. In the last 24 hours... No, better not to

add it up.

For all of the humour, there was a reserve about her that he couldn't figure out. Not like with boys who have no secrets from one another. As if she couldn't somehow be certain of him. Who could, for that matter? She was probably smart to keep her distance. "Love 'em and leave 'em Ames," he was known as.

"You don't have a single hair under your arms," she said. She had paused to do a thorough inspection of him in the morning light.

"I'll never be very hairy," he said. "I'm too light."

"Then I could never marry you," she said.

"Anthony's hairy," he said, before he had thought better of it. And then he said, "But not very," as if to extenuate the error.

"Do you and Anthony get it on together?"

"What?"

"Never mind," she said, as he hoped she would.

Then she went back to the turtle. One thing was for sure. She had done this before.

"Over the top," he said. She took him over the top and then gently down the slope on the other side.

"That was a dry one," she said.

"We could have used it," he said.

"But we didn't know."

"I'm beginning to hurt."

"Do you think of Anthony when I pull you off?"

"Of course not," he said. His indignation was real. He was very turned on by Katherine.

He kissed her. He was a terrific kisser. Whatever else he might be, he was that. On his grave stone it would say, "Best Kisser Among Bisexual Orphans". Then it dawned on him, right in the middle of the kiss, what she would say. He kept it going a little longer so he could think what to reply, and he decided.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" she asked.

"Where do you think?"

"With Anthony."

"That's right," he said nonchalantly. Too nonchalantly, he hoped.

"No, who did you really learn it with?"

"Just like you said. Anthony."

"That's not fair."

"What isn't?"

"You're not telling me."

"Why do I have to tell you?"

"So that I can know you."

"Like whether or not I'm a fag?"

"Oh, you're not a fag."

"Well, I'm glad to know that."

"No, really," she said, tracing his mouth with her finger.

"That's what I mean. Really."

"I've hurt your feelings."

"I don't believe this," he said.

"What?"

"Don't get mad, but you're like some kind of vacuum cleaner. First you suck in all the facts, then go back over just for sure to get the corners, and then you start on the feelings. Really. It's like standing in a tornado."

She laughed and rolled away from him. "I know," she said. "It's true. I think women are like that. I'm not mad. But you could have found something better to compare me with than a vacuum cleaner."

"What is it about women?"

"I don't know. My mother says we're housekeepers by nature and that relationships are like

houses. We work on them all the time."

"Like a vacuum cleaner."

"I guess so."

"Well, I don't mind, really."

"But you don't like me to ask about Anthony."

"That's right."

"I can respect that."

"Thanks."

"You are a good kisser."

"Thanks."

"Lucky Anthony." She was out of the bed before he could catch her, taking a pillow with her which, when he sat up to chase her, he got full in the face. She grabbed a robe and ran down stairs.

He smiled. "You're not a faggot," she had said. With real resolution, too. He went over the thing again. She had put the emphasis on "not" which was fine. "You may be other things but you're not that," she had said. That was the drift of it. There was something about him that she could sense, being a woman, that he could not, being a man. It gave him a great sense of relief. It was an unprejudiced and expert endorsement.

He was probably bisexual. He hoped so, otherwise Anthony would have been a mistake. Worse, if it was a passing thing that was a part of being almost fifteen, then his sensitivity to it might pass as well. He couldn't bear to think that what he felt for Anthony would become a matter of indifference to him.

It was happening again. Up and down. Up and down. Like a bloody kite. Hadn't he just felt good? Sure he had. He could still feel the tingle. But now he felt sad. Not just sad but horribly sad. It seemed that things were slipping away from him.

When she returned from the bathroom she could sense the difference in him. She sat down on the bed and he got up feeling naked now, as he had not earlier. He looked around for his underpants.

"They're here," she said, holding them up. He remembered then that he had worn them until they were in the bed and that she had taken them off. She held them up and looked at them.

"These are American," she said.

"Here," he said, holding out his hand.

"How come you have American underpants when you haven't even ever been there?"

"You can buy them in the Caribbean."

"You've really been around, haven't you?"

"Please." He didn't want to struggle for his underpants. Not now. Maybe earlier it would have been fun but now he felt sorry for them. It was possible to feel sorry for underpants. It was possible to feel sorry for anything if you thought about it for a moment.

She tucked them back under the covers.

He stood there, suddenly afraid of her. It surprised him to think it. She must have seen it in his face for she relented and held them out. When he reached she held his hand and drew him back to the bed. He sat beside her.

"What's wrong," she said. "I hurt your feelings."

"No," he said.

"Then what?" she asked.

Helplessly he started to cry. He turned away. She moved over on the bed to make room, and sat up against the backboard. "Come on," she said. She pulled on his shoulder. He wiped his eyes.

"I better go." he said.

"Please," she said. "Not like this. Come on."

He sat awkwardly then beside her, pulling the sheet over himself. She pulled his head onto her shoulder.

"Tell the vacuum cleaner," she said.

"There's nothing," he said.

"Are you sorry for what we did?"

"Oh, no," he said.

"I'm not. I wish you didn't have to go away."

"So do I."

"I'd like us to be friends."

"I'm not a very good friend," he said.

"I don't believe that."

"It's true."

"You didn't tell Anthony?"

"I left a note," he said and stopped.

"I'm going to cook us some breakfast. It will make you feel better."

A deluge covered his vocal apparatus. He held his breath and looked for the surface. "Look for the sun," a diver had said once on television. "And come up slowly." He held his tears tightly behind his lids. Then he felt her get off of the bed. He heard her put on some clothes and then she kissed him on the forehead.

"If you weren't such a good friend you wouldn't feel so bad," she said. "I think you are a very nice person."

More than breakfast or friendship, he wanted her to say that he was a good lover. He couldn't have said why, and in his circumstance of imminent asphyxiation it seemed irrelevant. But he clung to the thought.

She left the room and he opened his eyes to find the light. He saw through a sheet of salt water the patchwork of the quilt. He filled his lungs with fresh air and choked. Then he wept.

It was like walking through a mirror into the other side of things. All the resolutions which he had isolated from his mind, the import of his decision were now exposed. The bleak interior of his loneliness appeared before him like the procession of empty carts on the wall. The mountains he would have scaled lost the dimension through which he had planned his ascent and were no more than cut-outs on a child's table. The idea of finding his father he saw now as preposterous, and he was angry at his own eager gullibility.

He was angry too that he should want to find him, need to, a person who had barely intruded upon his thoughts for years.

When he had left it had been with the thought that all the past months were safely tucked away in his memory like winter clothing; he had felt lighter, unburdened, and not only of the past but of imminences and repetitions. St. Matthew's School, at first so unwelcoming, so unachievable, had finally lain tame at his feet like one of Mt Soames-Winthrop's Pomeranians. He had felt freed, for example, of Neville Summers, and of being a burden to those he had come to love. Until the moment of resolve he had held onto St. Matthew's with a white-knuckled grip like a child holding its mother's skirt in a crowd. But something had happened and his hand had

relaxed.

He mattered to his friends, he told himself. They would not forget him and therefore he would not cease to exist at St. Matthew's. A part of him would stay behind, as if in safe keeping. Like a savings account. The new part which was no longer frightened and which even craved adventure would then be safe outside these walls. That's what he had told himself.

It had all been a facade, a put-on. His mind had done its old sleight of hand again as it had so many other times when he had to leave behind what was familiar. Relatively familiar. Not happiness. He hadn't had much of that. Not security. He had learned to live without it. But habit, familiarity. Always he had found reasons to embrace the change, to own, perhaps, what he could not change.

And now he had done it again.

How could he have left Anthony with only a scribbled note? Was his love no more than that? Was Anthony, too, expendable in this necessary transience?

"Breakfast is ready!" she called from the bottom of the stairs.

"Okay," he said, in what he hoped was a strong enough voice. He got up and stood in front of the mirror. 'Who would think, to look at you, that you are such a fucked up kid,' he thought. 'You're a fake, a lousy friend, a gypsy, and you can't even come right.' The magnitude of it all was simply too great for despair. It verged on comedy.

He pulled on his underpants. Anthony's underpants. Or were they? There was really no way of knowing any more. He checked his face carefully for zits. The English called them 'spots'. So far so good. He struck a pose and then caught himself. There were still tears on his cheeks. "You can always go back," he said to the boy in the mirror.

"I know." "Well?"

"Let's have some breakfast."

"Hey." "What?"

"Button your pants."

"Button your own."

15. A Sympathy of Sensibilities

Approaching the rector's house, Skelton could see that the light in the study was still on and that Dr. Soames-Winthrop was alone, reading. He walked around to the front and used the knocker rather than the bell so as not to awaken Mrs. Soames-Winthrop or the Pomeranians. In this he was successful. The rector greeted him cordially. He was tired of Strachey; it was, after all, the fourth time he had read the book. He thought it instructive now and again to spend time with the great reformer. Strachey's depiction of Dr. Arnold, detached and ironic as it sometimes was, endeared him both to the learned doctor and the profession they shared. There was a portrait of Dr. Arnold hanging in the entrance hall. A copy, actually. One could not enter the rector's house without paying one's respects.

Skelton did so now. "We have a problem," he said, still looking at the portrait.

"Yes. So I supposed."

"Do you imagine that Arnold had any Americans in Rugby?" "I should imagine a few. They have been around for some time now, you know."

"But not orphans, I should think. They had orphanages back then."

"Work houses, probably," Dr. Soames-Winthrop said.

"Still? I should have thought Dickens would have put an end to them."

"To the idea of them, yes, but not to the fact. Reform follows tardily the path of intention."

"Corporal punishment went out in the sixties."

"Officially. But as we well know..." Dr. Soames-Winthrop abandoned the sentence, if not the thought.

"Yes. Which brings us back to young Ames."

"It is Ames, then."

"Yes."

"Brandy?"

"I wouldn't mind a tot."

The rector led the way back to the study and Skelton, nodding his respects to the good Doctor, followed. From habit, he settled himself into the eldest and therefore most comfortable of the room's overstuffed chairs. Upholstered in burgundy velvet, it was the sort from which one

withdrew with regret, having enjoyed for some minutes a memory of more organic enclosure. Soames-Winthrop offered a cigar and Skelton accepted, settling himself then in the chair opposite, situated so as to give its occupant optimal command of the room and, during the morning hours, excellent light for reading — and, if there were a visitor and occasion warranted, for appearing in that sort of aura which confounds the viewer's wish to read his partner's eyes while leaving his own exposed. It was not something that the rector did with boys, rather in a situation where he might have been considered not to have the natural advantage — with an opinionated and boorish parent who might, for example own a brewery or a furniture store.

Few societies are as encoded as those of England's public schools. Made up as they are of men who are themselves the products of that establishment — perhaps from as early an age as seven or eight years — the argot of intercourse is as arcane to the outsider as perhaps one of those clicking dialects of Africa or the language of dolphins. All the more arcane because it does not appear so. To an outsider the conversation at a table of bachelor housemasters in one of Great Britain's great schools appears merely banal. At least as it touches the boys, in whom those gathered appear to have only an ironic and amused interest.

This distance is in part the distance an actor develops in a role after, say, the three hundredth performance, after he has exhausted within the ensemble of his fellow cast such apparently extemporaneous variations as the script might allow and finds it difficult to bring new life to the performance. So too the schoolmaster who comes to apprehend each young life as predictable repetition of others lived before it.

But it is also a distance of discretion, a variation on that discretion which the master learned as a boy of fourteen or fifteen swept up in those same passions over which now he keeps a superintendency. As a boy one did not speak, except in argot, of one's loves; as a man one need not speak, for all is known and understood.

It might be said that these superintendents do not live lives of their own at all, but replay earlier lives through the agency of the boys in their charge. So saying, one might better understand this reticence, for who would want to approach too directly that bright and often painful memory?

Occasionally, to one's surprise, there is a boy who does not know this argot and for whom both the scene and the part are unfamiliar. A boy who behaves unpredictably and who, like the breath of a cedar closet, old memories and uncached notes, reminds one of what might have been.

Such was the experience of the two good men who sat now at a late and private hour postponing, it would almost seem, the pleasure of their conversation. The circumstance of Bobby Ames, worrisome as it might be, nonetheless represented novelty, a thing upon which these two quite devoted colleagues rarely stumbled.

When Bobby Ames had dislocated his roommate's shoulder two weeks earlier, Skelton had thought it fit to bring that anomaly to the rector's attention. Had he been the perpetrator of the act, or the victim, Soames-Winthrop had asked. The boy and Skelton had spent two or three brandies on the subject. It appeared that young Parker had provoked him. Intentionally?

Probably. Masochistically? Possibly. But one would hope not. And what had been the outcome? For the one boy, a temporary and minor invalidity. For the other an apparent recovery from a mild depression.

Now Skelton settled his glass on the arm of the chair and smiled. "Our young man has gone to Amsterdam."

"I anticipated as much. I assume we have learned about this too late to stop him."

"It appears so. He left a note under Parker's pillow which Parker discovered an hour ago. I am entrusted with a certain measure of discretion in the matter."

"It was a love letter."

"A quite remarkable one, actually. Ames isn't much of a writer, you know."

"And strong emotion is generally not much of an aid to the lyric impulse."

"In this case it appears to have been more so."

"You don't have the letter?"

"I assume it is back under Parker's pillow."

"What does he say?"

"That he will communicate; that's the most important thing, I should think. And all we have to go on. Oh, I suppose he could still be intercepted at the boat."

"But you'd prefer that we don't."

"Of course that's not my decision."

"I appreciate your telling me. I should have appreciated it even more had you not. At least until tomorrow."

"I thought of that."

"You are right, of course. Well, what shall we do?"

"What does counsel say? What's his name?"

"Partridge."

"Yes."

"Mr. Partridge advised that the best thing that could happen for all concerned, from his point of

view, was this precisely.”

"That Ames run away from the school?"

"Preposterous, isn't it?"

"I can't believe it."

"Nor could I. You see, it's this business of his being without a caretaker."

Skelton made a move as if to protest, and Soames-Winthrop interrupted him with a gesture of his glass.

"An official caretaker, Henry. One recognised by the state."

"The bloody bureaucracy."

"Precisely."

"The school becomes vulnerable, of course, the longer we keep him. While I ran the announcement in the papers and had a correspondence with Brightly we could have been considered temporary custodians."

"But not now."

"I was under pressure to notify immigration. The Lord only knows what sort of surrealist scenario that would have created for the boy."

"Pentland prison, I should suspect."

"It was not out of the question."

"You aren't serious."

"Well, you remember Tasker. What was he by birth?"

"I don't recall. One of those African countries. And his mother was what? Australian and his father South African. Something like that. And then the country got eaten up by some other African country."

"Right. And the boy had no papers."

"Pentland prison?"

"Until his father got it straightened out."

"I don't think I knew that."

"No one did."

"I wouldn't allow them to take Ames. Nor would you." "That is very grand of you to say, Henry, but who are we? A couple of rural academics."

"What did Partridge say would happen if we were mum on the matter?"

"He couldn't allow it, he said. You see, he's in the employ of the governors, not the rector. He imagined a worst case situation, of course, as he must. That the boy would run amuck, or have an accident, for which the school would be liable. You see, he's uninsurable, that's the meat of the matter."

"It always is, isn't it?"

"I should like to think not always."

"Surely there must be some risk as well in knowing that a fourteen-year-old boy has rim off and not doing anything about it."

"Oh, there is and I shall do something about it. First thing in the morning, when you tell me, I will call the authorities." "I could wait until the afternoon," said Skelton.

"No, I should think that we won't be too criticised for your having a sleepless night about your promise to Parker to keep this in confidence. But more than that might be a problem. The morning, I should think."

"What about the letter?"

"I don't know. I wish there weren't one. What do you think?" "I certainly don't like including young Parker in our subterfuge," said Henry Skelton.

"No, that wouldn't do."

"I think perhaps that it's something which will have to stay with me. After all it wouldn't be at all out of character for me to keep faith with young Parker. Or with Ames, for that matter. I shouldn't think they'd do any more than pity me if they found out."

"Very well then," said the rector. "You have told me that the boy is gone and that's it. If anything comes up about a note I shall have to be very stem with you."

"Very."

"But also sympathetic."

"I should appreciate that indulgence."

"It's all a little like being there, isn't it?"

"Being there?"

"You know, back at school. Hide hare and all after. In the loft."

"Do you remember the secret society?"

"The Vigilant Detective Service."

"That was a lark," said Skelton. "I wonder if any of our coded reports are still up there in the loft. Under the false bottom of a harness chest or some such thing."

"Hmmm. Well, what do you say? Will you have another brandy?"

"Just a drop. Have to check on the mice."

"I should think they'd be well pickled by now," Soames-Winthrop mused. "I say, you don't get them up and change them every night, do you?"

"I've only got three bedwetters this term. And the answer is 'No'. Spooner's another matter. He kicks off the covers and I'm afraid he'll get a chill."

"What are we going to do about Spooner?"

"He's been having night terrors again."

"I sometimes wonder if we're equipped for that boy. I don't mean to take away from your work at all, Henry. God knows — and you as well, I hope — how much I respect it. But there's such a history there!"

"I think there will come a time when he'll be too much for us. Maybe sooner rather than later. Ames's departure may even provoke it."

"They're that close?"

"Spooner worships the boy. He even called for him in his dream the other night."

"Did Ames know this?"

"He knew as much as he could observe. I haven't wanted to burden him with more. He has a life to live too."

"Looking for a lost father. God, Henry. How did we ever get through it?"

"Adolescence?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps we didn't, entirely."

"Don't get started on that," Soames-Winthrop said. "It's too late in the evening. What do you think of his father naming him Amius?"

"I think it's marvellous. I only hope he meant it."

"Or still means it."

"The boy will never find him, of course. Not in a city the size of Amsterdam."

"He's a pretty clever lad."

"Still. I'll run that announcement again. It's the least we can do."

"Amsterdam is a very unpredictable city."

"You spent time there, didn't you? After we got out of college?"

"Once, a long time ago. Another life."

"Other vistas. Other times. Other lives. A toast. To other lives, past, passing and to come."

"And one in particular."

"To Ames."

"To Amius Ames"

"May the god of travellers be with him."

They drank off the brandy and set their glasses down.

Soames-Winthrop scratched his head. "Just who is the god of travellers, Henry?"

"I'm not sure there is one."

"There's Saint Christopher, of course."

"Perhaps that's whom I was thinking of."

"There should be a god."

"I suppose one could argue that Athena might be the goddess," Henry said. "She did keep an eye on Odysseus. But of course she kept her hands off."

"What do you mean by that? She laid the whole thing out for him."

"No, she observed. And occasionally she struck a bargain with a fellow demiurge to smooth his path. But she certainly didn't lay the thing on. If she had there'd be no reason for the story."

"Well, to tell you the truth," Soames-Winthrop confessed, "I've never thought there was much of one."

"What, in the Odyssey?"

"Yes."

"The greatest epic of Western man?"

"I say, there's just enough left in this brandy bottle to wash out our glasses. What do you say?"

"Well, just a splash."

"As I recall, you don't give the ghost of old Hamlet much credit either."

"For what happens in the play?"

"Precisely."

"Not a bit of it. I suppose you're going to tell me that he sets young Hamlet up the same way Athena set up Odysseus."

"It had occurred to me to do so."

At Sprinkles House Bledsoe and Quin-Quiller, with their door faithfully open, slept soundly through the weeping from the third floor, but Anthony Parker didn't. He had shed a few more tears himself and roused himself at the sound. He saw Skelton's light on and observed that he was not there.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Spooner sniffled.

"Yes," Anthony said.

"I dreamed he flew off on the back of a bird. He thought it was a good bird but it wasn't."

"Actually, I think he hitchhiked."

"Where did he go?"

"It's a secret."

"You can tell me."

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

"Ames wouldn't mind. I'm his friend too, you know."

"I know."

"Everyone goes away." Spooner's teeth chattered as he spoke.

He was probably soaked, Anthony thought.

"Have you peed your bed, Spooner?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to help you change it?"

"No."

"What do you want?"

"I want to sleep in Ames's bed."

"That's out of the question." "Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I'll take a rubber sheet."

There was no real reason that Anthony could think of. And the thought of having company was, he realised, in part what had brought him up here in the first place.

"Do you have some dry pyjamas?"

"In the cupboard."

Anthony got them out.

"Okay." Spooner peeled expertly out of his sodden PJs and donned the proffered pair. Then he walked to the shelves where the sheets were stored and took a rubber sheet.

"There are plenty of these," he said.

"Yes, I recall," Anthony said.

"I'm ready."

"We'd better leave a note for Helter Skelter."

Spooner provided a pen and paper and Anthony left the message on the top of the bed.

"There's one thing, Spooner."

"What?"

"It's a bargain. No peeing your pants tomorrow. That's the price of one night in my room."

"It's Bobby's room, too."

"Is it a deal?"

"I don't do it on purpose, you know."

"I said, is it a deal?"

"Good boy."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." "You've caught me at a weak moment."

"You love Bobby, don't you?"

"Yes."

"So do I."

"He loves you too, Spooner." "Thanks, Parker."

16. At Sea

Michael Drury Bryce-Jones sat down to a late breakfast on the first class deck of the S. S. Jan Bruegel. The service of his master's breakfast denied him, Judson instead brought the papers which he had picked up at dockside and placed them on the table.

"Thank you, Judson," the young man said, taking them gratefully.

"And a pen, sir."

"Excellent, Judson. I would never get on without you." "Thank you, sir."

Michael had thought of saying something about their arrangements, how much more natural it would be, for example, if they could overcome these old habits and travel as companions. But in truth he was as awkward about the thing as the old man and perhaps, his modern views notwithstanding, as habituated to old forms. In any case, since Judson was intended, undercover, to play precisely the role in which life had cast him, it was probably not a wise thing now to introduce new elements. Michael had called them an "investigative team" in explaining his mission to Judson the day before and Judson had been quick to put his mind to the challenges of that assignment.

"It is my experience, sir," he explained over tea, "small though it is, that people who are on the take are generally in search of new sources of revenue. There's never quite enough, if you see what I mean, sir, to keep up with expenses."

Michael nodded.

"Then perhaps it would be worth our while if we might be helpful to them in that respect, sir." Seeing his master's confusion, Judson continued. "I mean, sir, that we might want to appear not quite on the up and up, if you take my point, sir."

"I think so," Michael replied, albeit a little uneasily. They would have to get the lie of the land first, he thought, but he did not want to discourage Judson: he liked the old man's enterprise. He put the papers down beside his plate. He carried a pen, of course, at all times. Several in fact. But not wanting his attendant to think that he took the consideration of this additional implement lightly, he pocketed it carefully in the other breast pocket of his suit.

"It is an erasable pen, Master Michael," Judson said. "I found it in the ship's store. I don't believe I have seen one before. I thought it would complement your collection for those problems that are a little testier and less certain of solution."

"How terribly thoughtful of you, Judson. Indeed, is it really?" He made a mark on the cover of *Der Spiegel* and then applied the eraser. "Amazing. Really quite amazing. I shall keep it in this pocket so as not to confuse it with the others." How stupid of himself, he thought. Of course Judson would know what was in his pockets. There wasn't an article of his wardrobe to which

the kindly servant hadn't given the closest scrutiny and care.

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

"I can think of nothing at all. You anticipate my needs even before I myself have felt them. You know, the closer we draw to the other shore the more strongly I feel the rightness of this, Judson. I cannot yet say why I am needed there or what I must do — quite apart from my father's requirements, I mean. There will be more of it in these, I am quite certain." He tapped the newspapers. "There is an immanency of it all coming together for me. It may be a more perilous adventure than the one upon which we are already set."

"I think we are prepared for whatever circumstance may offer, sir, if I may presume to say so."

Michael gathered his papers and walked to the door leading out onto the deck. He stood at the rail and breathed the fresh sea air. It was good to be on an adventure. He had been cooped up in one way or another, it seemed, for years rather than a few weeks. Things would be quite different now, he thought, feeling suddenly the burden as well as the excitement of his calling. It was the not knowing which gave the edge to the thing. The pieces were still missing. There was Amsterdam and there were young people, boys and girls his own age and younger. They had leapt from the pages at him. At first he had denied what he was seeing, but again and again his decipherings led him to the one reference on an entire page to a person of his own generation. And there was something which he must do. But what it was he knew not.

He leaned out over the rail and looked down to see the water foam out from the bow of the ship. As a child he had watched from the deck of his father's yacht as the water curled and folded perpetually, rolling back into tranquillity as they passed. He could see little now. The bow was too far under the decks. He leaned out. He was not the only looker, he noticed. Below him a boy stood, his head in his hands, looking out at the vastness. The midmorning sun played in his hair. It was the colour of honey. It moved slightly in the breeze. Suddenly Michael felt saddened. He had not thought of St. Matthew's for some time now. That had been another life. There were parts which had unaccountably become lost. Or misplaced. His memory was like a jigsaw puzzle laid out upon a card table, the way they were in summer hotels. Bits done here and there. A piece of border, a face, a pattern that might become a dress or a carpet. You never knew if the pieces were all there or not. Some might have become lost. You wouldn't know until you did it, and there was never the time. The head below him moved, turned to look over its shoulder. Perhaps his mother had called. For a moment he saw a profile, like a piece of border glimpsed upon passing, but he could not find its place. Then the boy walked away.

The sea was reasonably calm. Bobby knew seas well. Swells of four to six feet, he thought. Wind out of the West at about eight knots. Clear skies. Visibility good. He stood as far forward on the ship as his second-class ticket would allow. First class passengers, he noticed, had an advantage in that their deck extended to the front of the pilot house while his ended abruptly at the crew's quarters. Well, if he couldn't look ahead he certainly wasn't going to look back. So he stood at the rail and watched to the side. There was a small power boat passing. He waved and the pilot waved back. Contact! And he was only minutes away from shore. He felt a thrill of adventure at the back of his neck. And a great satisfaction.

He and Katherine had done it the right way, finally, and he felt more sure of himself because of it. He'd postponed his departure twenty-four hours. He liked Katherine, and not just for that; but because with her he had not been ashamed of crying. He had explained firmly that he was a terrible crybaby, that Anthony said so. "You are capable of deep feeling, that's all," she had said. That was true, he thought. Sometimes he wished that they weren't quite so deep or so high. But now he was mellow. This was going to be all right, he thought.

He did not love Katherine, not in the way he loved Anthony. But he might have come to. It was another possibility. Life was filled with possibilities. Almost too many. It would be different when he went back. He knew that; but how different he did not want to consider too closely.

The boat was not very full at all, nor among those aboard were there any who seemed particularly interested in him. No one smiled, winked, offered a greeting, asked the time. He was a little bit hurt, for he had taken a particularly careful time in the bath at Katherine's and thought he looked worth at least someone's attention.

He considered what kind of someone that might be. Not another Katherine. Not right yet, anyway. And not an Anthony. There couldn't be another Anthony. What about Neville Summers? He wondered if Neville had put the card in his mailbox as he had said he would. If things were really bad in Amsterdam he might ask Anthony to get it out and read it to him. He hoped he was over Neville. What was it about him, anyway, that turned him on? Summers was beautiful to look at, that was certainly part of it. And he liked Bobby, that too was part. There had been once or twice when he had almost been tender. But it wasn't the tenderness that made the sex feel like he had stuck it into a light socket. Maybe it was the unpredictability, never knowing what Neville might do. Once Neville had pinched him so hard that he had a big black and blue mark on his thigh. He told Anthony that Summers had pinched him on the way into chapel.

No, not Neville Summers. He wouldn't want to run into him now. Maybe Michael, if he hadn't gone too loony. A loony would just be a burden. A friend would be best. Not someone to make out with, just to walk around with and do things with. Someone like Quin-Q or Wells.

He felt bad about Spooner. He would have to send him a letter, too, maybe in with the one he would send to Anthony. Just to let him know that he was for sure coming back and so he wouldn't go into a total pee-sodden collapse.

There was a nice middle-aged English couple who looked at him and smiled as the boat neared The Hook. He smiled back and the woman asked him if he was travelling to meet someone.

"I'm meeting my dad," he said.

"You're quite young to be sailing all alone," the woman said. "I look younger than I am," he said. "Anyway I've done it lots of times before. My dad has a boat on one of the canals."

"Does he live on it?" the woman asked, and Bobby told her that his dad did, when he wasn't diving for wrecks. His dad was a salvage man, Bobby said. Spanish galleons mostly. There had been one south of Antigua, he started to explain, and then there was a bump and the boat stopped. People started pushing toward the exits and his new acquaintances were swallowed

in the crowd. He might have told them the truth, he thought. Maybe they would have taken him with them and let him stay in their hotel. He could have run errands in exchange for his meals.

He followed the crocodile of passengers through the immigration process and from there into the railway station. No one checked his passport or paid the least attention to his pack.

That was a novelty. Whenever he and his mother had docked the boat they were gone over with a fine comb. As if they might be smuggling something into the country. For all he knew they had been. It wouldn't be out of character. Perhaps it was she and not his father who was the smuggler. Perhaps his father was really a banker, or a businessman, or a hotel keeper. Or even a school teacher like Henry Skelton.

Finally he was out and into the morning air of Holland. A limousine stood at the curve and a man who looked as though he might be someone's butler held the door while a man got in.

A man or a boy — Bobby couldn't tell from the back. He wanted to imagine it was a boy. That would be the way to travel!

The door closed and the car started off. A man bumped him from the back and said something in what must have been Dutch. It wasn't a pleasant thing. He had apparently been in the way. He stood at the side of the gangway to let people pass. Then he took a deep breath and walked into a new world.

17. Transported

Judson had arranged for a limousine which met them at the other side of the customs house and spirited them noiselessly from the throng of tourists to the steps of the hotel.

A doorman in blue, adorned tastefully in gold braid, opened the car door and several porters, under Judson's close supervision, removed the baggage. As the two visitors entered the foyer Michael noticed a young man smoking a cigarette and leaning, with no obvious purpose, against one of the small Corinthian pillars that defined the hotel's lounge. The youth smiled at him and he, in the natural reflex of courtesy, smiled back. It was a mistake, Michael saw at once, for the youth's simple smile now distorted, it seemed, to something vaguely lewd. Michael looked away. Probably it was that sort who hang around hotels in the hopes of some transaction, he thought. A tour of the city, or a visit to some shop whose proprietor has exactly what the lady is looking for. In short, a hustler. Middle-men his father called them. Lord Bryce-Jones had no use for middle-men.

Michael tried to study the interior of the hotel with an idle curiosity, but the youth's forwardness had put him out of sorts. He felt watched and in that feeling, annoyed. He turned as if to inspect the traffic on the sidewalk and observed that the young man's eyes were still upon him. It might have been a matter of indifference were it not for his newly discovered sense of proprietorship. He had been surprised to discriminate that feeling among the others which had crowded his imagination during the limousine ride to the city. It was a sense of both proprietorship and responsibility, and to those sentiments the youth's arrogant tenancy represented a defiance. It was Bryce-Jones' natural instinct to speak out. He had been raised in a world where, if people forgot their places, it was appropriate to remind them. But he told himself that the purposes of his being here were more complex than could be administered to by mere instinct and salved his indignation with thoughts of his secret work and hidden power.

The porters, having set down the baggage, looked idly about. One chatted with a waitress who carried a tea tray to a waiting client. Another idly perused a newspaper which had been left by some guest on the arm of a chair. The staff were a part of the problem; he could see that easily enough. There was no discipline, no crispness to their work. They filled space instead of occupying it. That was another of his father's axioms, that one must command space. "He who commands space commands those within it," Lord Bryce-Jones was fond of saying. At six feet three and 240 pounds, his father commanded space more convincingly than his son. When Michael tried, it was always with the anticipation of an anonymous snicker.

The lobby was nondescript, he observed. This was not in itself a bad thing. Michael had begun to form opinions of the sort that his father held and one of these was that unless a place was going to be particularly rewarding of an observer's attention he had best leave it alone. Unfortunately the lobby did not achieve that modest goal. Post modern furnishings sat in conflict with a Regency interior. And silk plants. Good ones but nonetheless silk. The oriental was not an oriental at all. Observing these things he also noticed that the arrogant young man had abandoned his post and was now conversing with the doorman, outside. So they were in cahoots. He made a note of it.

There were altogether seven or eight guests in the lobby. All men. And men of means, it appeared at first glance. Still, they were not dressed as if they were about to transact business as one might have expected on a week day afternoon in a commercial city, but in a leisurely way. And there were no women. None at all.

One of the men attracted his attention. He was good-looking — tanned, fair-haired, fortyish. He sat in one of the overstuffed chairs under a lamp with a newspaper he wasn't reading. He seemed preoccupied, perhaps even sad. It was unaccountably comforting to see him. The man looked at him and smiled.

Michael nodded a greeting. The smile was disarming, not as in the case of the youth for its presumption but for its familiarity. He had seen it before. No, that wasn't it. He had seen one like it. Some facial characteristic that longed for association. Someone else he knew.

Judson and their entourage of baggage handlers made their way in his direction. He turned.

"Well, Judson, everything taken care of?" he asked, more for the benefit of the porters, he realised, than from any necessity of gaining information. They saw this, of course; he could sense it at once, but they had the control not to snicker. One of the porters pressed the button and the lift door opened. Michael turned and looked at the man on the sofa once more and then entered. Yes, it was a matter of resemblance. Not the man himself but someone he resembled, someone pleasant to think about. Seeing him had been, in all of this confusion, comforting.

Before he could puzzle the association through to its end, they arrived at the sixth floor and were shown into the royal suite. It was nicely, even tastefully, appointed. That discovery, together with the pleasant but vague association inspired by the man in the chair, put Michael in a better frame of mind and he inquired of Judson more dispassionately than he might have earlier concerning the young man with the lewd smile.

"Ah, yes, sir. I noticed him," Judson responded.

"Well, what did you make of him?"

"His type are a standard appointment in Amsterdam, I am afraid, sir."

"Is he a hustler of some sort?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, sir. I am not entirely surprised to have found him here."

"I should think the hotel would do something about it." "Yes, I agree sir. One might think so. Unless... Do you recall the conversation we were having aboard the boat, sir?" "About strategies?"

"Precisely, sir," the old gentleman replied, testing the bald spot on the back of his head with his finger-tips. It was a habit he had had for years, Bryce-Jones thought. An endearing one.

"I believe that you suggested we might want to pose as unsavoury characters," Bryce-Jones said, "in order to get to the bottom of things here. Draw the management into our own sphere instead of poking around theirs. It seemed to me a first rate idea."

"Thank you sir. Well, I think that young man represents, if I may say so, the stratagem through which we may accomplish our purposes."

"Proceed by all means. And please do sit down, Judson." "If I may, sir."

Michael was relaxed on a large white velour sofa. Judson selected a Queen Anne chair, pulled it to within a respectful distance and sat with his hands folded upon his knees. One would not have known immediately whether to listen to him or to paint him, Michael thought. He was a very attractive man. It was something which Bryce-Jones had not previously noticed.

"I have visited Amsterdam before, sir."

"Have you?"

"A number of times, sir. It is a most unusual city."

The Central Station at which Bobby finally arrived was like most through which he had travelled in Europe. It neither frightened nor, for very long, confused him. You walked down from the tracks to the main underground passage and from there to the front of the station. The thing was that he had forgotten to use the toilet on the train. The urge had come and then some thought had got in its way and it had passed.

When he had gone off to his first school at the age of nine it had been a rude shock to discover his reflexes needed a good deal of sharpening up; and there were a couple of embarrassing episodes before he had adopted the iron clad rule: Always pay attention to the first signal!

He studied the corridors for a sign that looked familiar. WC, Toilette, a silhouette of a man, but could find nothing. When he got to the main terminal he walked from one end to the other, without success. He began to look desperately for a cul de sac, some place where he could turn his back, and at that moment a man approached him.

"Toilette?" the man asked.

"S'il vous plait," he said in demotic French, forgetting he was in Amsterdam and the man pointed back to the tunnel which connected the tracks.

"At the top of track number two," he said and, it seemed, took a step back in case Bobby wanted to sprint.

On the way into the mens' room an elderly woman behind glass shouted him, "Een kwartje, jongen!"

"What's that?" he gasped.

The old woman looked disgusted but, to Bobby's great relief, grunted, "Ga door," and waved him through.

When he returned the man was gone. Bobby would otherwise have thanked him. Never again, he thought. What had been humiliating about it was that he had just hours ago screwed his first girl. It seemed like some sort of punishment to then have visited on him this childhood terror. But he had handled it. He had handled her, too, he thought once again with pleasure.

Outside the station the city opened up to him in a more intimate way than he recalled other cities doing. There were 138 trolleys everywhere. And just beyond them, stores and streets. As though it were really a small town and not a city at all. But where was he to go?

A hotel, of course, was a possibility. Or a hostel. He had heard about them but knew nothing that would be very useful to him now. Martin had gone on a biking trip through Scotland and they had stayed in them. They're all over the world, Martin had said. And so they must be in Amsterdam as well, Bobby concluded. There was a small building across the trolley tracks that said VVV on it. There were tourists milling around. He crossed over to it.

There was a long line and service was slow. He stood there hoping that someone would greet him. Someone he might have met at Fairchild Hall. 'Aren't you Bobby Ames?' the person would say. 'Weren't you at the Hall last summer? I'm Lady Milktoast and that is my son Toby. Toby is, as you can see, a particularly fat and stupid little boy and I would be delighted if you would spend your visit with us at our house on the canal just for the opportunity of having a truly handsome and distinguished looking young man for the neighbours to admire. Toby gives us such a bad reputation. None of the other boys even want to play with his dick.

"Excuse me."

He turned. There was a man at his elbow. He wore a three-piece suit and carried an umbrella.

"Do you have the time?" the man asked.

"Oh sure. It's five o'clock," Bobby said.

"Thanks. These damned public clocks are never right," the man said, casting an eye to the wall at the back of the room.

Bobby looked in that direction. The clock said a quarter to twelve. It was built into the wall and looked very old.

The woman ahead of him moved and Bobby took a step nearer the counter.

The man in the three-piece suit, who appeared not actually to be in the line, moved with him. "Is this your first visit to Amsterdam?" he asked.

"Yes," Bobby replied.

"You're American, aren't you?"

"Yes. But I've never lived there."

"But you do have an American accent."

"I guess so. So do you."

"Yes, I'm an expatriate," the man said.

Bobby was glad in one sense for this conversation but in another he was not. His recent experience of Bill Scruddy was still fresh. Where had this fellow come from, anyway; and why had he picked Bobby of all the people in the VVV to talk with? The other thing was the man's suit. It was too fresh and costly for a place like this where everyone looked travel-worn and ready for a shower. He decided not to ask the man about his being an expatriate. There were three people now between him and the counter.

"Are you looking for a hotel?" the man asked.

"A hostel," Bobby said. "I can't afford a hotel."

"On your own, are you?"

"I'm meeting my father here in a couple days," Bobby replied, sorry now to have said anything at all. "He has a boat. I'll move on to that when he arrives."

"The hostels here aren't very nice, you know." The man seemed suddenly more impatient. There were now only two people between Bobby and the counter.

"It'll be okay for a night or two," Bobby said. "Are you looking for a hotel?"

"Oh no. I'm supposed to meet someone here. A young man about your age, actually."

"I didn't see anyone my age get off the boat."

"That's too bad."

The woman behind them, a large person wearing lederhosen and a cap covered with medals, said something in another language and pointed toward the counter. Bobby lifted his pack and moved up.

"Of course he doesn't know he's being met," the man said. "That's the difficult thing."

"The boy doesn't?" Bobby asked.

"No, his name was given to me by a friend of his. Actually he's a runaway."

Bobby was glad he had had a pee because he felt all his muscles suddenly go loose. He turned away.

"His friend knew that he might want a place to stay and called me up. I'm with an organisation that looks out for young people. It's so dangerous for them here, you know."

"Really?" Bobby said, trying to appear nonchalant.

"Oh, yes," the man said.

"Can I help you?" Bobby turned, startled. There was a woman behind the counter smiling at him. She was pretty. He felt very short before the window. And small."

"Yes ma'am. I was wondering if there was room at one of the youth hostels or not."

"For how long?"

He turned to see if the man was there but he had disappeared completely.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked.

"There was a man here," Bobby said. "He's disappeared. He said the hostels were dangerous."

"Oh, no. They are quite nice. I will find you a nice one." She looked at her chart and picked up the phone. Bobby turned around and examined the room. There was no sign of the man in the suit. But he had to be somewhere. Had Summers called him? But Summers wouldn't even know he had left yet. Who then? Or was he being paranoid?

"Nothing good can happen to a fourteen-year-old boy on his own," Mr. Skelton had said. Bobby would have loved a sip of his dusty sherry.

"You must be careful of strangers," the woman said when he turned back. "You are very young."

"I'm seventeen," Bobby said.

"Here," the woman said, writing on a piece of paper. "This is the address. Take any of those trams on the other side of the bridge and get off at Martelaarsgracht. You'll need a ticket. They start at eight guilders."

"Oh, God. I forgot to get guilders."

"You'll need them."

"I know."

"Are you sure you're all right ? You look a little pale." "I'm fine, really."

"I hope so," she said, reaching into her purse. "Take this. It's a strip card. Just give it to the driver to stamp and tell him you want to get off at Martelaarsgracht."

"Gee, thanks." Bobby took the card.

"It's okay," his benefactress said, smiling. "You can buy me a coke some day."

"Okay, I will."

"Go there directly. Take my advice and don't talk to any other strangers. Ask for Pieter."

"Okay. Thanks."

He walked out of the building cautiously. He didn't see the man in the three-piece suit, but he suspected the man could see him. It was not a pleasant thought. He walked toward the trams.

18. Lodgings

Bryce-Jones had been working on his newspapers but with a distracted air. Images from the morning past moved through his concentration like persons ambling idly about a gallery.

First it was the boy on the boat. No more than a head catching the sun. He saw it again now. And the leer of the young man in the lobby. Had it been a leer? Surely not. But now it was turning almost audibly into a snicker. Then the attractive gentleman sitting by himself.

He put down his pen and rubbed his eyes.

"Judson?"

Judson was unpacking. He came into the room with a pair of corduroy trousers over his arm, straightening out the wrinkles.

"That young man just inside the hotel when we arrived."

"Yes, sir."

"What do you suppose he was hustling?"

"Himself, I should suppose, sir."

"As a guide?"

"If I am not mistaken, sir, he is a prostitute."

"A male prostitute?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose he would have to be, wouldn't he? I mean, I didn't know there were male prostitutes."

"Oh, there are in most cities, sir, but here they are a little more in the open."

"He seemed pretty confident of himself, didn't he?"

"I noticed that as well, sir."

"Almost surly."

"He seemed accustomed to the place, sir."

"Do you suppose he is?"

"Yes, sir, I should think so. This is probably his beat."

"They have beats?"

"Well, sir, I think most are contacted through one or another of the bordellos and come on call."

"There are male bordellos as well?"

"Oh, yes, sir, quite a few."

"Remarkable. Is this common knowledge, Judson? What I mean to say is, if I had been here a number of times would I know that?"

"I shouldn't think so, sir."

"But you do."

"It was an interest of my last employer, sir. Before I joined your household. That would have been about fifteen years ago." "He was interested in boys?"

"Young men, sir. The legal age for prostitution, I believe, is twenty-one in Holland, though that may have changed since my time, but it was not uncommon, at least so my master said, to find boys of eighteen. The police appeared to wink at it."

"I'm eighteen, Judson."

"So you are, sir."

"It's an odd thing to think of, but I suppose it shouldn't be, no more than being a bank clerk or a labourer. I guess most people have some kind of employment by that age. How did these young men think of themselves."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I just think of that fellow downstairs. He seemed quite cocky. I mean you'd think they might skulk around a little more."

"Some of them were quite nice young men, sir. Not skulkers at all, I should say, sir. But not like that one downstairs either." "The Amstelhoek is expensive as hotels go, isn't it, Judson?" "Quite dear, sir."

"That's what seems strange to me. I mean, at a cheap hotel it would be one thing, but here..."

"Quite, sir."

"What do you make of it?"

"If I may be so bold, sir, I have been working up a little theory while unpacking the trunks."

"Go ahead, by all means."

"I was thinking sir, that it might also have something to do with your father's problem with the hotel. Assume, sir, that the young man whom you observed had reason to think you would know who and what he was, and might want to — how shall I say it — do business."

"With him?"

"Or with someone else."

"You mean, he might be a go-between?"

"Possibly, sir."

"Operating without the knowledge of the hotel?"

"Or possibly with, sir."

"And those other men?"

"Possibly, sir."

"But — to be quite crass for a moment, Judson — if that were the case, then you might expect the hotel to be making rather than losing money."

"Well of course it might be making a great deal, sir. Someone might be, I mean. All we know is that it shows a loss, not that it has one."

"Of course, you're right. If the manager were complicit." "Or even if he weren't, sir."

"I don't follow you, Judson."

"Blackmail, sir."

"You believe someone is blackmailing the manager?"

"I don't believe anything, sir. It is too early for that. But, as I said, I have been trying out a few hypotheses to see which ones might fit. I think we should treat these ideas as theories, however, and keep our eyes open. And now if I may suggest. Perhaps I should do the unpacking and you return to your researches and we should wait to see what happens."

Bryce-Jones went to the desk and unfolded the copy of *Le Monde* which he had been studying on the boat. The financial pages were particularly rich in coded references that morning, and he

had already discovered three entirely different foci which would, when converted, recommend to his attention certain other sections of the paper where the important messages would be found. He took out his new erasable pen, smiled, and returned it to his jacket. He was not in a mood this afternoon to be equivocal. He took out his ball-point. Then he stopped and stood up.

"Judson!"

Judson appeared from around the corner to the bedroom.

"Sir?"

"If it is as you say, I mean, if this hotel is considered to be of a special sort, the sort for people like your last employer..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Then they must think that we are..."

"Precisely, sir."

"And that means that someone will probably..."

"I should think so, sir."

"And that we should probably have to play along."

"That would be the best course, sir."

"I say, Judson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aren't you afraid we might get in over our heads?"

"That is a possibility, sir."

"It could be deucedly awkward."

"Yes, sir."

"You say you have had experience."

"A little, sir. And your researches will give us some advantage, I should think."

"Ah, my researches. Yes. You know, Judson, they seem to point to this very kind of thing. Young people, immorality, danger but on a larger scale than this. I had the sense of something much more diabolical than a simple prostitution ring and a little blackmail."

"Who knows what we shall find, sir. Perhaps what we have here is the proverbial iceberg under the tip."

"And we are the Titanic."

"I hope not sir."

Bobby was not the only expatriate teenager in Amsterdam, but he felt he might be one of the youngest. And perhaps one of the least prepared. That is to say, least provisioned. For he observed a number of youths three or four years older than himself carrying what appeared to all their worldly possessions on their backs and looking as though, to endure such a burden, they might have entered some trance, the kind, for example, that a yogi might adopt prior to lying down on a bed of nails. Certainly they did not look carefree, which was what he had imagined such people must be without chapters to read and equations to work.

His own pack was, by comparison, inconsequential. It was his purpose which weighed upon him. Should he achieve it he would have accomplished much; should he fail he would have lost even the hope that he had carried all these years. That was not something which he wanted to consider too carefully, for when he did a great airless space opened in his imagination.

He found the hostel without difficulty. The entrance was above the street. He walked up the stairs and over to the counter. A man was repairing one of the chairs. He had it turned upside down and had bound the legs with twine, presumably after re-gluing. Bobby could smell the glue. There was some history to it that he could not name, lost in his childhood.

The man looked up and smiled. "Goede morgen," he said.

"Hooede morhen," Bobby replied, giving it his best try.

"You are English?" the man said.

"American. You could tell, huh?"

"I was expecting you. The woman from the VVV called."

"Are you Pieter?"

"Yes."

"Then it wasn't my accent."

"Well, maybe a little. So, you would like a bed?"

"I guess so." Bobby was a little puzzled at the expression.

"You don't want a bed?"

"Does that mean a room?"

"No, we don't have rooms here. It is a dormitory. We have only bunk beds in large rooms."

"Oh."

"So, do you want a bed?"

"Yes."

"Good." Pieter got up and walked behind the desk. "We have no one here who is your age or I would put you in with him."

"I'm older than I look."

"You look... hmmm... would you like me to lie?"

"You can lie a little."

"Then you look sixteen."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"How many years did you lie?"

"One or two only."

"You've got me, then. Sometimes people think I'm still thirteen."

"It's hard to look young when you are older inside. I was a scallop until I was sixteen."

"I think you mean a shrimp."

"That's it. A little shrimp. Oh, I almost forgot. I am to call the woman at the railway tourist office. She made me promise to let her know if you arrived safely. I think you have made your first conquer in Amsterdam."

"Really? No kidding?"

"No kidding." Pieter picked up the phone and dialled.

"Hallo, Mevrouw Groen? Ja, met Pieter in de herberg. De jongen is net binnengekomen. Ja. Ja. Ik zal hem vertellen. Dag, Mevrouw." He hung up the phone. "She says that you must some

afternoon stop and have that cola you have promised with her."

"I will. Most of the rooms are full, huh?"

"No. There are not very many people. But you know I try to divide guests up so that there is the same number in all the rooms. And I try to put you with fellows who will be better for you to be with."

Bobby wondered about the meaning of that. Certainly it wasn't sinister, but after his experience with the man at the VVV he was a little on edge. Pieter took some keys and Bobby followed him up a narrow and very steep staircase.

"What do you mean, better?" Bobby asked.

"Not too loud. And don't stay up too late. There are some Swedes in one room now who get too drunk. So not that mom. And in the third room there are a piece of two boys who work at one of the clubs, so I think I will put you in room number one. Here it is." Pieter opened a door to the right of the staircase and flipped on the light. The room had seven bunk beds in it. Two or three appeared to be occupied. There were personal belongings in the cubby-holes above them. "I recommend an above bed," Pieter said. "There is more air. It is not so, how do you say, closed in?"

"Claustrophobic."

"That's it."

Bobby threw his pack on the top bunk nearest the window. It looked out onto a combination of storage sheds and roofs. Not picturesque, but there would be fresh air. Pieter had figured him right on that one: he had a dread of closed places.

"Oh, I forgot to have you sign. Just come back with me for a minute and bring your passport. By the way, you can use these three drawers." Pieter indicated a dresser on the wall. "If you have anything valuable, like money, give it to me and I will give you a receipt. So, come along, now."

Bobby followed Pieter back down the steep staircase to the desk. He handed over his passport. Pieter opened it and nodded.

"So, you are Dutch."

"No, I don't think so."

"You are called Amius."

"No, I use my first name."

"Amius is a Dutch name. But Ames I think is not. Hmm."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. It is just a coincidence."

"What is?"

"There was a houseboat at on the Prinsengracht for a while with a name like that. I noticed it because it was very nice. Not many of the boats on the canals are so nice.

"It was called the Amius?" Bobby asked.

"No, I think it was called the Amius A, just like your name."

Bobby's heart dropped into his sneakers. He put his hands on the counter.

"What was its registry?"

"Registry?"

"There's always the name of a city below the name of the boat."

"Amsterdam."

"You said it was there for a while."

Pieter looked up from his registration book and handed Bobby his passport. There was no mistaking the effect this news had had upon Bobby. The boy had gone quite pale. Pieter stood up.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. But I must find that boat. I think it belongs to my father."

"You think it does?"

"It's a very long story. Can you show me where you saw it?"

"Yes, but it was two or three weeks ago."

"But you said it had an Amsterdam registry."

"Yes, but I think it lives somewhere else. What do you call that?"

"Its berth?"

"Yes. I think it was not at its berth. It was just resting there, I think, because there is a working

boat there now."

"But if it is an Amsterdam houseboat it must have a berth somewhere."

"I do not know very much about boats. But perhaps you could ask at the working boat and they might know."

"Can you show me where it is?"

"Of course. But right now I can't leave. This evening I will show you."

"Can you show me on a map? I could walk there."

"Yes. It's not very far, really. I can show you." Pieter took a city map from under the counter and spread it out. "We are here," he said and made a point with his pen. The phone rang. Pieter answered it and began talking in Dutch. Bobby studied the map. There was water everywhere. The Amius A. could be any place in the city. Or, for that matter, any place in Holland. And it might not be his father's ship at all. After all, Pieter had said that Amius was a Dutch name. Pieter looked at him and raised his eyebrows. It was a universal gesture, meaning that the phone conversation would take a while. Bobby walked to the window and looked down onto the street. A man stood opposite examining the CDs in the window of a record shop. Then he walked on and Bobby realised that it was the man in the three-piece suit who had spoken to him at the VVV. He nearly jumped back from the window, now clearly seeing his own reflection in the shop window opposite. It was that which the man had been observing.

"What is the matter?" Pieter asked.

"That man," Bobby said.

Pieter joined him at the window, just as the man turned the corner.

"He's gone," Bobby said. "He spoke to me at the VVV. He said he was meeting someone who had run away. I think he followed me here."

"You must be very careful," Pieter said.

"Do you know who he was?"

"No, but I can guess what he wanted."

"What?"

"It is not a very nice thing."

"Sex?" Bobby asked.

"Yes, I think so. Do you know about this, then?"

"You said there were two boys upstairs who worked at a club."

"It is not good for you to be here alone, I think."

"Nothing good can happen to a fourteen-year-old boy at large in the world." Bobby recited. He didn't finish Skelton's admonition, although he could have, "...a boy at large in the world with no one to care for him." All at once he felt enormously tired.

"Have you run away, then?" Pieter asked.

"From home?"

"Yes."

"Not from home."

"From school maybe perhaps?"

"They know where I am."

"And the man?"

"Maybe he knew, too," Bobby said. He looked out the window. He felt he had said too much, but there was a lot more he would like to have said. Still, it would have been the wrong thing to do, as much as his instincts told him he could trust a man who repaired chairs. He didn't need sympathy now as much as he needed practical help. "I'm not as green as I look," he said finally. "I've been on my own a lot." He looked at Pieter and smiled. "Really, I have. I can take care of myself. But I do need to find the boat."

"Because then you have found your father."

"Yes. I think so."

"Then I will help you." Pieter walked back to the counter and picked up his pen. Bobby followed. "We are here, and the Amius A. was tied up here." Pieter made another dot. It was very tiny. Bobby knew that if he were to move his eyes for a moment, he would never find it again. Pieter drew a circle. The dot was at the centre of the circle and the circle was at the centre of a city in which, it seemed, he was not the only searcher.

19. One Step At A Time

The milk of human kindness, which Michael had imagined himself ladling out to the spiritually starved population of Amsterdam, had soured by the end of his first day at the Amstelhoek Villa Hotel. Judson had instructed him further in the nature of the underground to which it appeared he must now descend. Michael had asked to be instructed, as one asks in a boxing match for one more round when pride outstrips the common sense grasp of one's capacities. He felt battered by the information. It was as if what he had observed among his contemporaries at St. Matthew's, and which had inspired in him such revulsion, were here an institutionalised fact of life. As if that experience, which had so defeated him for a time, were but a dumb show of what he must now endure.

He had continued, as best he could under the burden of unpleasant expectation, to work upon the day's numbers. They remained nonetheless vivid for all of his misgivings. For example, he had been led to the name Caravaggio, and had asked Judson if the name had any other meaning for him than the obvious. The servant had replied that it had and had wondered indeed if he had not mentioned it earlier in the day. Michael had thought not. Well, it was one of the clubs, Judson explained. Years ago, when he had accompanied another young man to Amsterdam.

That too had disturbed Michael. The fact of the similarity. Of Judson having come to another hotel at a time before he had been born with another young man. And that the same subject, though with an entirely different slant to it, had occupied their attention.

Judson was arranging the last of his own clothing in the smaller bedroom when there was a knock at the door. It was one of the younger members of staff whom Michael had noticed earlier in the lobby.

"Yes?"

"Compliments of the management, sir." The young man presented a basket of fruit done up in coloured papers. "May I, sir?"

"May the gentleman deliver a basket of fruit, compliments of the management, sir?" Judson asked.

"Of course," Michael replied, covering the cross-hatched paper upon which he was working. "Put it there for me, thanks." He indicated a library table standing back from the large windows which opened onto the balcony. The young man deposited his burden and then withdrew to the door.

"If there is anything at all, sir, which would make your stay more comfortable, please don't hesitate to ring for me. My name is Emil and it will be my pleasure to serve you during your stay with us."

"That's fine; there's nothing we require," Bryce-Jones said hurriedly. He was eager to get back to his work, and the young man seemed to have that same supercilious arrogance, despite the prepared text of his remarks, which Michael had observed in the hustler earlier in the lobby. "Is there, Judson?"

Judson looked at him with what possibly — no, definitely — was reproof.

"Well, sir, there was the matter we discussed earlier concerning this evening."

"Ah, yes."

"The club, sir."

"The club. Yes."

"Is the young gentleman interested in a night club?" the man in uniform asked.

"You take care of it, will you, Judson. Whatever you recommend I'm sure will be fine."

"Certainly, sir." Judson indicated that the two of them should move into the hall, which they did, closing the door behind them.

"Damn!" Bryce-Jones said aloud. "I shall never get the hang of this cloak and dagger work."

He felt unaccountably tired. Just the thought of that young man in the lobby made him dizzy with discomfort. And now this other one fawning about and Judson reproving him.

He stared at his work. It looked, for a moment, like total nonsense. Perhaps the power will leave me, he thought, finding me unworthy. It was not an entirely unpleasant prospect at that moment, but then he chided himself. If he were to be equal to the task, he must reform his mind. He must open it to new experience. Not for himself but for the powers that worked through him. What was he, after all, but a vessel? What did his personal aversions matter in the general picture? It was a test of his resolution. As the vision of Ames sitting in the chapel in a beam of sunlight had once been a test.

Judson returned, closing the door quietly behind him.

"It's all right, Judson. I've finished. I'm tired. All the strain of this. Well, what did you learn?"

"There is a private club, sir, into which you may be invited.

I sense that there is some affiliation with the hotel."

"A boy club, I suppose."

"You'll be quite pleased, sir."

Bryce-Jones must have shown the indignation he suddenly felt, for the old man continued in a calming vein.

"I mean, sir, that it is the very one of which we only just now spoke."

"Caravaggio?"

"Yes, sir. Not the same one, it appears. That one the young man had never heard of. This one is in a different place. Not very far from here. On Spui Straat. Your information, sir, if I may say so, appears to be rather exact."

"So it seems, Judson. What must we do?"

"I recommend that we go there together, sir, if you don't mind the presumption of my suggesting the inclusion of my own person."

"I'm not about to go into one of those places without you, Judson."

"I thought not, sir, so I have arranged an invitation for us both."

"An invitation?"

"This one is a private club, sir."

"I see. For this evening?"

"No, tomorrow evening, sir. The young man wanted to be sure that we wouldn't be disappointed, he said. It appears that it's better to plan ahead."

"I can't see why."

"Well, I gather that not all of the boys are there all of the time. The young man wasn't entirely forthcoming, sir."

"I must say, Judson, it seems terribly odd to me that a person of my age would be seeking companionship in a place like that.

I mean, presumably I could find it among my own class, couldn't I?"

"I should think that you could. Yes, sir."

"And they won't think me odd?"

"Oh, but sir, you aren't interested in people of your own age." "You can be most assured on that account, Judson."

"No, sir. You are interested in boys a little younger. Perhaps fourteen or fifteen. The age of the boys you might have admired at school."

"I see. By the way, Judson. If you wouldn't mind, I mean if it doesn't interfere with our spying, I would prefer your using a more hypothetical manner of speech in reference to this matter. It is at best a painful part for me to play, as you may imagine."

"Of course, sir."

"And I am to express an interest in younger boys?"

"I have already done that in your behalf, sir. I hope you won't think it too forward of me, but I thought it best to prepare the way."

"Do you suppose they'll have one?"

"I shouldn't think so, sir. Not in the club itself."

"You think we'll be shown into some small back room or something? I'm damned if I know what I'll do if I should be left alone with one of these people."

"My nose tells me, sir, that what we will discover eventually will be something rather larger than a small back room." "You think this is a big operation."

"It doesn't make sense to me, sir, that a hotel of this size should be under the influence of someone who has a small bordello. Rather like the tail wagging the dog, if you take my meaning."

"I do. You think this club, Caravaggio's, is a front."

"Probably, sir. I shouldn't think that actually very much will happen there, sir. I wouldn't be worried. I think they are probably giving us the once-over."

"Yes, that would make sense. Well, I must say I am somewhat relieved to hear you say so. One step at a time, eh, Judson?" "Slow and easy, sir"

"This whole thing of sex with one's fellows is particularly repugnant to me, Judson."

"You are showing great fortitude, sir. I think your father would be most pleased."

"I've seen things that would turn your stomach, Judson." "At school, sir?"

"That is what private schools do to one, Judson. You are fortunate to have grown up in... an alternative culture."

"Yes, sir, I have often been grateful."

"I don't mind telling you that my decision to leave the school, quite apart from the mission which I have been given, was related to the very subject of which we speak."

"I had no idea, sir!"

"Yes, Judson. There was a boy."

"Oh, sir!"

"No, Judson not what you think. The boy was younger than I, an American. A remarkable boy really. A boy of great gifts and great promise. And pure, Judson. Pure as driven snow on the Wyoming range. Have you ever been to Wyoming, Judson."

"I can't say that I have, sir."

"Beautiful. Vast. Unspoiled. Untouched. My Aunt Lydia has a ranch there. Thousands of acres. We visited when I was a child. Daddy was buying oil wells."

"Memorable, I should think, sir."

"Memorable? Etched forever in my mind. His head bowed in prayer. Illuminated."

"Illuminated, sir?"

"Yes, Judson. I suppose you could call it coincidence. There was a chip of glass missing from one of the coloured glass windows. A part of St. George's leg and on that day a beam of light came through that chink and fell directly on the boy."

"Like Stonehenge, sir at the equinox."

"Precisely, Judson. But this was not the work of man. I think this was meant for me, Judson. I hope you won't think me foolish saying so, but it was a religious experience. I think the vision was given to firm up my belief. It was a little shaky right then. All the filthy talk among my fellows, you know, and self doubts. And then there was this boy. Not from our own damp and pale land, Judson but from a land far away."

"Wyoming, sir?"

"Perhaps, Judson. Perhaps he had been born there. I think probably he must have. And my faith was given back to me that there was still a hope for innocence, for purity."

"It is a very moving story, sir."

"His hair was the colour of chestnuts. No, lighter, much lighter."

"Almonds, perhaps, sir."

"Not truly blond, you see, with this deepness in it. Perhaps an acorn."

"Yes, sir, that would be deeper than an almond."

"His complexion was ruddier than our English complexions, Judson. Not quite robust, but vibrant. One could feel the life in him, the pulse of his being."

"What happened, sir?"

"He fell, Judson. Dragged into corruption by that loathsome place. You see he was unprotected. Uninoculated, one might almost say, against the English public school virus."

"I am sorry to hear it sir."

"It had an effect on me, Judson. You see, I tried to protect him but I wasn't strong enough. All of that to contend with."

"Too much for one person, sir."

"And now this."

"One step at a time sir."

"Yes, Judson."

20. The Man in the Three-Piece Suit

The owners of the barge that was now moored where Pieter had made his dot on the map knew nothing of the Amius A. except what their neighbours had told them. It was owned by two men, probably English, who had needed a temporary mooring and had leased this one for two months. Where they and their boat were now, no one could say.

There are, according to proverb, 88 lovely canals in Amsterdam. By the end of the fourth day Bobby had walked those within the 'centrum', the ancient part of the city, inquiring, when the opportunity offered itself, whether anyone might have seen a boat named the Amius A.

It was a melancholy project for Bobby to look at so many boats, to imagine so many lives lived within their confines and to also remember his own. These were more spacious craft than the one he and his mother had lived on, most of them not really serviceable boats at all, but houses built on barges and in that respect not very different from other houses.

He was weary of his search and his money was almost gone. The hostel, or 'jeugd herberg' as it was called in Dutch, was less expensive than a hotel but it did cost him 36 guilders every night. And there was food. And there was the fifty pounds which had been stolen from under the lining of his shoe while he slept. He hadn't known it until hours afterwards, for he had not thought of looking and the thief had been clever enough to replace his notes with some folded paper which gave him the tactile confidence that it was still there. He hadn't the heart to tell Pieter who seemed to feel responsible for everything and everyone in the hostel and took any problem as a personal failure.

He had written to Anthony the first night, after a long afternoon walk and imagined that by now he must have received the letter. It eased his heart to think so. He thought of little now except Anthony and of his father. Even poor Adam Spooner was far from his thoughts. And Helter Skelter as well. He had told Anthony about the boat and his search, but he hadn't mentioned the money. There was no way he could without appearing to ask for some, which he did not want to do. He thought of Katherine as well, especially on the day he had stopped by the VVV to make a date with Miss Groen, his first Dutch admirer. But she wasn't there. She was on her holiday, another employee said. Did he need to reach her? No, he didn't need to, he said. It was only to thank her for helping him out. Well, she'd be back in a couple weeks if he was still around. He said that if he was he'd definitely come back. He was disappointed. So he bought himself a coke which he could not afford and sat out in the sun in Rembrantsplein watching the people go by and thinking about what he would do if he didn't find the boat.

As he sat there he noticed again the man from the VVV whom he suspected had followed him to the hostel. The man was dressed much the same as before, only now, standing among businessmen at a nearby tram stop, he looked less out of place. A tram came and shut the man from his view. Bobby hoped the fellow would get on it, but when the tram moved on the man was still there, and now he was looking right at Bobby and smiling. Bobby looked back. I can play this game, too, Mister, he thought. Bobby could always win staring matches. Especially with Anthony. Or with dogs. You could always stare down a dog.

Bobby lost the game. He finished his coke and got up. When he walked away he was aware that the man had abandoned the tram stop and was coming after him. Bobby stopped to look into the window of a clothing store and the man walked up beside him.

"I have been following you," the man said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"No kidding."

"You haven't tried very hard to lose me."

"I wasn't paying any attention."

"Would you like to have a coke with me?" "Why?"

"So that we can discuss something which might be of profit to you."

"I don't think we have anything to discuss."

"I don't think you would be talking with me now if we didn't, do you?"

"I'm just standing here."

"Well, I'll tell you then. I am going over to that bar just by the park to have a cup of coffee. If you decide you are interested in hearing some more, I will be there. If not, then I will be sorry to have disturbed you."

The man gave a slight bow which seemed utterly out of place, even comical, and did precisely as he said he would.

Bobby examined a rack of T-shirts and then studied the souvenirs in the shop next door, his mind the whole time on the man whom he imagined now to be watching him. Then he walked around the block and along the flower market which stretched down one of Amsterdam's 88 canals. The fresh smell of hyacinths masked for a while the thought of the man in the pin-striped suit.

Bobby still had ten pounds left. He could make it for another couple of days. Maybe he would have some luck.

He gave it long enough so that there was a good chance the man would be gone. He often shared decisions with fate this way to lighten the burden. After all, he had walked all the way to the Dam and back, and idly, too. He had looked in shops; he had watched some men move a piano. He had watched a boy and a girl kiss. They saw him observing them and the girl smiled.

When he returned to Rembrantsplein the man was where he said he would be. What was he — about forty? Bobby was no good at ages. The man certainly wasn't going to grope him in

public, or stuff him into a car and kidnap him. He probably would want Bobby to go to a hotel with him. Or his house. Bobby wouldn't do a house, that was for sure — some place off in the suburbs where the guy would chain him up and lock him in the cellar. He had read about things like that. But a hotel wouldn't be so bad. What could you get away with in a hotel? And what would the guy want of him, anyway? Something like Bill Scruddy, probably, and he had managed him pretty well.

Fifty pounds would make a big difference right now, he thought. He had circled the block. The man would probably be gone by now. If he was, well then it was out of his hands. If he was still there, then what could he lose in having a coke? He'd ask for a Pepsi instead. You had to let people know you had a mind of your own.

21. A Seafaring Man

At more or less the same time as Bobby Ames ended his meander and turned back towards the Rembrantsplein, Henry Skelton hung his academic gown on the peg inside his apartment and, sniffing an odoriferous anomaly in the dormitory, made a quick inspection. It was Carl Lanaghan's turtle which, though never very active, appeared now even less so. Skelton found a plastic bag in the linen closet in which he deposited the dead reptile, tying the opening securely. Then he returned it to the terrarium with a note. "BURY ME" it said. It would not have done to deposit it in the trash. Pet funerals were important events for boys. Carl had had several already that year. He was an adept at undertaking.

The room was more disorderly than usual; Skelton's attentions during the last week had been elsewhere. He worried about Bobby Ames more than common sense warranted. He knew quite well that if any boy in the school was capable of looking out for himself, it was Ames. And the boy had communicated with Parker so they did know where he was, but still Skelton worried. The boy's mission had so little likelihood of success, and when he did fail to find his father, what then? Hadn't he crawled out further on a limb now than anyone could reach, including his housemaster? And where must his inevitable disappointment lead him?

The housemaster walked among the beds gathering the various articles of clothing which circumstance had deprived temporarily of a hanger, hook or drawer. Depositing the sartorial detritus in the collective hamper, he washed his hands and prepared to grade the fourth form's maps of East Africa, but just as he sat down the phone rang.

It was Dr. Soames-Winthrop. He had a visitor, he said, in response to his newspaper advert. The rector sounded quite pleased, even happily agitated, and invited Skelton to join them. Was it Clayton Ames, Skelton asked? No, but someone who knew him. Skelton replied that he would be over in a minute or two and replaced the receiver. So then, he thought, there is someone out there. The boy is not so alone as he or we imagined. That's good. But as Helter Skelter reached for his hat it wasn't relief he felt but an unaccountable bereavement.

The visitor stood examining a Hogarth print when the Rector escorted Henry into his study, a glass of whiskey comfortably settled in his large and garrulous hand. He turned.

"Mr. Raddock, Mr. Skelton."

"Pleased to meet you, Skelton." The man offered his other hand. The hand was as firm and weathered as its owner, a man of about six feet, deeply tanned, probably in his early forties. His light brown hair had been further lightened by the sun, it appeared, and was greying slightly over the temples. Raddock resumed his seat and the rector took the one opposite.

Skelton sat down in a straight-backed chair by the fire and accepted, without having been asked, a tumbler of Dewars. He noticed that, while Raddock took up more space than either of them and seemed to have an expansive sort of nature, he used his space frugally, as, for example, in the way he kept his tumbler of whiskey by the side of his chair rather than on the

table which was an arm's length away. Raddock was used to small spaces, perhaps even spaces in which things were apt to move suddenly and surprisingly out of one's reach. Perhaps even a ship.

The rector spoke.

"Mr. Raddock is acquainted with our friend, Ames, Henry." He turned to their guest. "I believe you said you met at University."

"That was a long time ago," Raddock said. "He was three classes ahead of me. We were both on the crew."

"You rowed?" the rector responded, pleased to have found so quickly a point of familiar ground from which he might assess his visitor.

"Yes. In fact, I rowed at Henley in my last year. Ames was abroad by then, of course."

"Really! You hear that, Skelton. Henley!"

"We did not distinguish ourselves," Raddock added.

"You rowed at Henley once or twice as I recall, Henry," the rector said. He was not one to rush into a serious conversation without accomplishing the preliminaries.

"Oh, aeons ago," Skelton responded with a wave of his hand. And then, as if to quiet his own impatience, "You wouldn't think it to look at me today." He indicated his meagre frame with upturned hands and an apologetic glance. But he could contribute no more to this small talk and leaned ahead in his chair, placing his whiskey on the end table. "Do you know where Bobby Ames's father is, Mr. Raddock?"

"No. Not right at this minute, Mr. Skelton. But I know that he is, and I can expect to hear from him within the next several weeks."

"I see. He doesn't know about the boy, then, being at St. Matthew's?" Skelton continued.

"No, I think we can assume that he does not. In fact I'm sure of it."

"Why is that?"

"Because he would be here himself."

"He cares for the boy?" Skelton asked, his scepticism barely hidden.

"A great deal."

"Even though he hasn't seen him in... how many years?" "Twelve, I believe. Bobby was two when Dot left us."

"His mother." Soames-Winthrop said. Actually he hadn't remembered that her name was Dot. It seemed to him that it had been more out of the ordinary, as she had been.

"Yes," Raddock confirmed.

"You said that she left 'us,'" Skelton observed.

"Clay and me," Raddock said, smiling. "It's rather complicated."

"Young Ames seemed to think it was his father who had left," the rector remarked.

"That's the way she would have described it," Raddock said. He appeared to consider the thought carefully. He had not known, until his telephone conversation with the rector three hours earlier, of her death. The rector had observed that Raddock did not seem particularly distressed to hear it. Rather he appeared to consider its consequences in some context known only at that moment to himself.

"The boy has no official caretaker," the rector said. "I think I explained that. There appears to be no extended family at all on either side. Should you not have seen my announcement, young Ames might well have become a ward of the state."

"That won't be necessary," Raddock responded.

"Then you are confident that Clayton Ames will make an appearance and that he will want the responsibility of his son."

"There is nothing in the world of which I am more confident," Raddock replied. "Clayton Ames wants his son very much."

"What kind of a man is he?" Skelton asked. It was all very good to talk about wanting the boy, he thought. But why? And in what way? He had known altogether too many divorced parents for whom the child was no more than a prize won in combat.

"He's a good man," Raddock replied.

"I'm sure, Mr. Raddock," Skelton interrupted. "But I have to confess to a modicum of confusion."

"Because of Clay's absence all these years?"

"Precisely."

"It's a long story."

Skelton extended his palms as if palpably to receive the story in manuscript and looked at his

host.

"I think we would both be glad to hear it, Mr. Raddock," Soames-Winthrop said, smiling at Skelton. "It's a matter upon which we have speculated without the assistance of fact."

"And perhaps even to the gentleman's discredit," Skelton said.

Raddock nodded and studied his glass for a moment. "We became friends during the spring of Clay's last year at Harvard,"

he began, "It was the end of my third. It was very intense. And very short. That summer Clay went to the Caribbean and the next fall he met a boat with a girl on it."

"Ah," Soames-Winthrop said with that complicity those in middle age express so readily in reminiscence of their past.

"He got taken on as first mate," Will continued. "It was her father's boat and the old man liked him. There was no mother. She had died when Dot was a kid. That's probably important. I always thought it was. Clay wasn't so sure. Anyway, one thing led to another and in December Clay called me to say they were getting married. I went down for the wedding. It was a pretty simple affair. About twenty friends. I liked Dot Remsen — that was her name. She was a knockout. I guess you've met her."

"Yes. She came here with Bobby last October. We had a conversation," the rector acknowledged. "She was still a knockout."

"Lots of people thought so. And Dot enjoyed that. That was the problem."

"Other men," the rector inserted.

"Right," Will said. He continued. "Two weeks after the wedding old man Remsen went out with some friends for a weekend sail. Clay and Dot stayed in Charlotte Amalie. They were setting up an apartment. The old man's boat went down in a storm. The coast guard found the lifeboat but no passengers. No one knows to this day what happened. My guess is they were all three sheets to the wind."

"Which, I assume, not being myself a sailor, is a bad tactic in a heavy wind," the rector added.

Will laughed. "Yes, it would be. And maybe they were, but that's not what the expression means. Or at least not the way I used it."

"It means pissed," Skelton added, with a note of finality.

"Right," Will said. "The old man was a heavy drinker. It had worried Clay. Anyway, there were Clay and Dot without any means of support, newlyweds, her father dead, no other relatives that she knew of and she pregnant."

"With Bobby."

"Right."

"After he was born Clay says she began to change. She got depressed. Clinically. Postpartum whatever it is. She didn't want the baby. She didn't want to nurse him, or even hold him. She got into the bottle."

"So Clayton was father and mother," Skelton interrupted. "He was."

"And named him Amius," Soames-Winthrop added.

Amius was a name Clay had carried from junior high school, Raddock explained. The name of his best friend. The best friend with the perfect family. "You know?" Raddock ended.

"Yes, I had one," the rector mused. "Billy Tartary. His father was a mason."

"Please, rector," Skelton interrupted, "Another time."

"I wasn't going to say any more than that, Henry. Sony, Mr. Raddock. So Bobby was named after the perfect child in the perfect family."

"Giving the name to his kid was a kind of promise, if you know what I mean."

"One which he was apparently unable to keep," Skelton observed. "Sorry."

"I played a part in that, I'm afraid," Raddock continued. "Clay called me that Spring. He was at his wit's end. I skipped graduation and flew to Charlotte Amalie. Dot was pretty bad. It was one long party. She was sleeping around, too. Things weren't good between them at all. As you may have guessed it was a shot-gun marriage. Clay wasn't ready for it. Dot certainly wasn't. Clay wasn't much of a lover, I guess, at least that's what Dot complained to me about. It was a bad scene.

"The boat had been insured and they bought a new one. It took the rest of their money and they gave up the apartment. With the kid and all they couldn't charter it, so Clay hired out on another boat. I got on as a hand. We did four or five charters and then came back one weekend and Dot was gone. Dot, the boat, the kid and some guy she had been shacking up with.

"She took Bobby," Skelton mused. "How odd."

"It was in one sense, but not in another. She had gotten a hate on Clay. For being a not very good lover, I guess. For caring more about the kid than her. And because of me."

"Because you stayed by Clay?"

"Yes. And Dot had a thing for me. Well, she did for anyone in pants. But I didn't respond."

"Hell hath no fury like a woman spurned," Soames-Winthrop recited, careful not to intercept Skelton's gaze.

"There was another thing."

"Yes?" the rector said.

"Clay and I were lovers."

"I see," the rector responded, with a more stoic than convincing charm.

"She had told someone that she didn't want her kid brought up by a couple of fags."

"Yes. Well," Soames-Winthrop said, looking at Skelton.

"I'm telling you more than you want to know."

"Not at all. Please go on," Skelton said. He was less surprised by Raddock's revelation than the rector had been.

"Well, there isn't a lot more. We bought a schooner. Clay's father's will — he'd just died — it was a bad time for the older generation — provided the money. He named her after his son, the Amius. It means beloved."

"I had guessed he might have intended that," the rector said. "The Latin of course isn't what one might..."

"Forbear, Jack!" Skelton said. "I have a class shortly. I would like to hear the end of this. With all respect."

"You are right. Not another word. Please go on, Mr. Raddock."

"We did charters for twelve years — the Mediterranean, Caribbean, even the Pacific islands. And all the time Clay was looking for his son. We learned later that Dot had re-registered her boat. And that was it, essentially: whenever Clay got any word of Dot or Bobby at all, he'd leave me with the schooner, fly to wherever and try to catch up. He never did."

"But what about the law?"

"It's one thing," Raddock said, "to chase an abducting parent from one state to another, doing it from one country to another is pretty impossible."

"So he never even saw Bobby."

"Once, by chance he ran into a fellow in Palermo," Raddock said. "He knew Dot and said Bobby was in school somewhere in the Levant. Clay called all of the international schools he

could find over the next week and finally connected. It was the Woodrow Wilson school in Istanbul. They wouldn't release any information, though, until the bill was paid. Clay wired the money and learned that the boy had disappeared two months earlier. They sent Clay a note Bobby had left behind addressed to one of his teachers. He still carries the note in his wallet." "What did it say?" Soames-Winthrop asked.

"You know, I've never seen it," Raddock confessed. "I think it was just a 'don't worry about me, I'll be fine and so long' kind of note to a couple of people who had been nice to him at the school."

"And that was the only time he got near to the boy?" Skelton asked.

"No," Raddock responded. "I came into some money a couple of years ago. Quite a lot, actually, and we started taking it easy."

The charter business is tougher than it sounds. We docked the Amius at The Hague and now use her summers for school trips up and down the Norway coast. And for the rest of the year we live in Amsterdam. I've always liked Amsterdam. But we now had enough money so that Clay could hire a good lawyer. The lawyer hired a detective who traced Dot to Carthage. That was almost a year ago. The lawyer advised Clay — unwisely, I think — to employ a local solicitor to serve her with papers."

"So Clayton Ames didn't go himself?"

"We flew from Amsterdam the next day. But by the time we got there she had received the papers, torn them up and hauled anchor."

"That would have been the incident that Mark Brightly reported," Skelton observed. The rector nodded.

"He had no idea where she had gone. We were back to 'go'." "Greece, we can assume," Skelton said.

"Is that where the boat burned?" Raddock asked.

"Dr. Soames-Winthrop told you?" Skelton asked.

"On the phone, when I called."

"Does Clayton Ames know?"

"Not as far as I know," Raddock replied. He stood up holding his empty glass. "May I?"

"Oh here, let me," the rector said, standing up. Will handed him the glass. "Henry, how about you?"

"I'd better not. I've one more class. Thanks just the same. You are no longer in touch with

Ames, I gather, Mr. Raddock?"

Soames-Winthrop topped up his guest's glass and returned to his seat. Raddock remained standing. He walked to the window and looked out at the playing field past Sprinkles. It was 4 pm and there was a game of cricket in progress.

"We are at present out of touch," their guest replied, "and that's a yet more complicated story." He gestured at the cricket players with his glass. "Clay found a world very different from this one. Kids just like those out there, but poor and not cared for as yours are. Kids being used for profit by adults."

"It sounds a little like Oliver Twist," the rector said, immediately sorry to have trivialised the subject. It was a nervous habit. The conversation was beginning to make him uneasy.

"Not far from that, actually, but big time," Raddock said. "Very big time. Clay was looking at what may turn out to be very big and very nasty indeed." He resumed his seat. "I'll spare you the details. They're not entirely savoury. What matters is that he met some of these kids, and through them some others, and he started piecing together a story that he knew no one would believe. Let me put that another way. He believed it was a story that lots of people knew but weren't telling."

"We are sheltered here, Mr. Raddock, but not entirely unworldly," Skelton said. "What he found was a prostitution ring."

"Yes, Mr. Skelton. But it would seem to operate on a global scale."

"How, for goodness sake?" the rector asked.

"That I can't tell you," Raddock replied. He noticed an impatient gesture on Skelton's part and quickly added, "Because I don't know. Nor does Clay. At least he didn't when we last talked. Maybe by now he knows more."

"So he is investigating this operation?" the rector asked.

"He has done nothing else for the past ten months. It's an obsession with him. Partly it's Bobby, of course. His frustration in not being able to find him. He's become like the mother whose child disappears and who spends the rest of her life making speeches about child abductors. He says that he knows Bobby could be one of those kids."

"But surely he doesn't imagine his wife could be complicit in a thing like that, whatever opinion he might have of her," the rector said.

"No, that's not what I mean. It's that he sees Bobby in those kids. There was one kid he met in Bombay — an English kid — who had been abducted when he was four or five. He couldn't remember his name. They'd given him a new one. So of course he had no idea where to look for his parents. That they might still be looking for him was what got to Clay."

"As he was looking for Bobby."

"Yes."

"And you have no idea where he might be?"

"Up until three weeks ago he kept in touch. He was travelling all over the place: London, Kiev, Frankfurt, Helsinki, Hong Kong and back to Amsterdam. The last time we spoke he was in Naples. He had had a break, he said, and was going underground."

"And you've heard nothing since then?" Skelton asked.

"No. I had a note shortly after the call with a key to a lock box in Naples. If he didn't get in touch by the end of May I was to open the box and put the contents in the hands of Interpol."

"It sounds as if your friend may have jumped in a little deeper than he had planned," Soames-Winthrop observed, now with guarded admiration.

"I hope not. At least not deeper than he can climb out."

"So we can do nothing but wait," Skelton concluded.

Raddock drained his glass and set it on the table. "I think we ought to tell Bobby. It's time he heard some of the truth. I'd like to tell him about Clay."

"I wish you could," Soames-Winthrop said, rising from his chair and turning toward the window.

Will Raddock looked at Skelton for enlightenment, wrinkling his brows.

"The boy has gone to Amsterdam, Mr. Raddock, in search of his father," Skelton said. "The chap who was living with Mrs. Ames at the time of her death told us about the letter that was delivered in Carthage. That it had an Amsterdam postmark."

Will seemed to consider for a moment and then, as if discarding the thought, went to another: "There's no way the boy could possibly find Clay in Amsterdam," he said, "even if he were there."

"Because he's under cover," Skelton said.

"Yes."

"And another thing," Soames-Winthrop said. "Your fine craft, the Amius, which plied the high seas from the Caribbean to Tahiti, seems to have lost its masts and was recently seen parked — docked, is it? — in one of the city's famous canals."

Will Raddock laughed. "No, no. That would be our houseboat — we live on a houseboat — not the schooner. But the names are similar. We call the houseboat the Amius A. A is for Ames and

the Absent member of the family."

"Ah, I see," said the rector. "In any event, somebody told Bobby he'd seen it, so the boy is searching all the canals of Amsterdam, one by one."

"But how do you know that?"

"He has kept in touch with his roommate here at St. Matthew's. We know where he is staying in Amsterdam."

"Then I think we should call him," Raddock suggested. "If that's possible, I mean? Is he in a place with a phone?"

"Yes, he's at one of the youth hostels," Soames-Winthrop said.

"Because Clay, when he went underground, instructed me to move the Amius A., to get her out of Amsterdam altogether. She's now moored quite a ways up the Amstel river."

"I have the number of the hostel in my office and if you will refresh your drinks I will fetch it. Henry, please see to Mr. Raddock's glass."

Soames-Winthrop walked to the door and out of the study. Raddock declined to have his glass topped up and Skelton, after considering for a moment, decided likewise.

"This organisation sounds quite formidable," Skelton said. "Prostitution isn't a thing much thought of in your school, I suppose," Raddock said. "This is such a bright and airy place." "You might be surprised," Skelton said. "Not everything in the English character is Apollonian."

"How do you mean?"

"We British, you know, are a race of prudes," Skelton replied, "and you must always be suspicious of those who are suspicious. We have appointed ourselves the gatekeepers of Albion and are shocked by the naughtiness of the world at large. And especially places like Bangkok and Amsterdam."

"But Thailand and Holland are full of Englishmen."

"Precisely. We commit our indecencies abroad so as to provide evidence of the practices which we then condemn. It's all very economic."

"I'm afraid Henry is a bit of an Anglophobe, Mr. Raddock," the rector said, re-entering the room.

"I am nothing of the kind" Skelton responded.

The rector walked to his desk to make the call. Things were more complicated than people made them, he thought. People like Raddock, for example, an acknowledged homosexual. He

realised it was the first time another man had ever admitted in his presence to such a thing, let alone discussed the subject. A part of him looked forward to a time when this would all be over. He realised that he was tired. He had been elated and now he was tired. But elated at what? And tired at what? He dialled the number and waited. He wanted to say something to lighten the atmosphere but was at a loss to find it. He did not like Henry's speeches, much as he agreed in spirit with his colleague's position. He didn't like the excess of them. Especially when Skelton got in a row with another of the masters and it fell upon his shoulders as rector to make peace.

There was a voice at the other end.

"Hello. Excuse me but do you speak English? Thank you very much. I am trying to reach a young man named Robert Ames. An American boy of... fifteen?" he looked at Skelton.

"Fourteen."

"Fourteen. I believe he is staying with you. ... Yes that's he. Excellent. Is he by any chance available to the phone? ... Oh, I see. ... When? ... I see. ... Well, it's most urgent that we reach him. ... Yes, I know he is. ... The point is that we have found his father. ... If he should return for any reason, will you please tell him to call Dr. Soames-Winthrop. ... What? ... Look, just tell him to call his school. Tell him it's about his father. ... Yes, I understand. I appreciate it. Thank you. Good-bye."

"Well?" Skelton said. He had read the rector's tone as well as Raddock. It was a request for an unwanted confirmation.

"He's gone," the rector said.

"Where?" Raddock asked.

"The man doesn't know. He left no address. He said he would be staying with a friend."

"But he doesn't know anyone in Amsterdam," Skelton said. "Presumably now he does," the rector' said.

"But he will have told Parker," Skelton said. "Surely he wouldn't move without telling his friend."

"We can hope so," Soames-Winthrop said. "I guess it's all we can do."

22. Cyril Smoot

Cyril Smoot, as Bobby's host introduced himself, appeared taller sitting than standing. He had stood up and extended his hand and Bobby had taken it.

"Billy Lee Deacon," Bobby said and took the chair opposite.

Smoot had a short curly crop of brown hair which started at some distance back from his forehead. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and spoke with a studied but caressing voice.

He was, he explained, in the employ of the Alumnus Foundation, a global network of youth agencies whose aims were to provide the world's neglected youth with opportunities for economic advancement. The founder of the organisation, a Doctor of Economics, was herself an important and highly regarded scholar in her field, he explained. She believed that the greatest untapped resource in the world today was its youth.

"People like you, Billy," he said.

The waiter brought the coffee he had ordered. The restaurant didn't have Pepsi on the menu. He put in one lump of sugar and stirred it.

"What does it do?" Bobby asked.

"It turns the lost into the found," his host said, and waited for a reaction, but before Bobby could give one, he continued, "It helps those who wander find a goal. It finds the purpose that is within them and gives it a voice. We create enterprisers, Billy."

"What's that?"

"A person who puts the world to work for him, who is tired of not being taken seriously and gets serious himself."

Bobby tasted the coffee. It was very strong. Stronger than the coffee at the tea shop. "I take myself seriously," he said.

"I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you if I thought otherwise."

But how could you know so soon, Bobby wondered.

Smoot continued. "An enterpriser, Billy, is a young person who wants a place in the world and is willing to do what is necessary in order to claim that place."

"Like what kind of place?"

"The kind to which his talents and desires suit him."

"But what if he doesn't know what they are?"

"We expect that he won't. The whole concept of our placement programme is built on that expectation."

"What's that?"

"The placement programme?"

"Yeah."

"It is a short residency during which a candidate takes certain tests — don't worry, they aren't very hard —, has interviews and is physiologically indicated."

"Huh?"

"It's a big word. We call it the PNI, the physiological index. It's a very brilliant invention. The Doctor's, in fact. It's an epidermal sensor — in other words a couple of wires — which are attached to the skin just over your arteries at the side of your neck and which send impulses to a machine while you answer a set of questions. The result is a profile which lets us know the things that will make you happy and to which you have a deep dedication."

Anthony! Bobby thought.

"Then we and you know what you want and it is simply a matter of finding the best way for you to achieve those goals." "I know what I want," Bobby said.

"Knowing what you want and going after it," his companion said, "is the difference between a fourteen-year-old and an enterpriser." Smoot picked up one of the sugar lumps off his own saucer and dropped it in Bobby's coffee.

"Thanks," Bobby said, noticing that he had two more lumps on his own saucer. "It's strong over here."

"Life is strong over here, Billy. Opportunity is strong. And frightening all by yourself sometimes. It's easier with people who have been around, who know the ropes. People who can say, 'There's nothing wrong with feeling that life is bitter and wanting to sweeten it; here, let me give you a hand.'" And to Bobby's utter amazement, the man moved his hand across the table, took Bobby's and squeezed it. Not in a shake, but from the side, quickly as if to show just how close help was. Then he withdrew it. It had all happened without Bobby having to choose one thing or another.

"I don't get the enterpriser part," Bobby said.

"The Doctor has certain beliefs," Smoot said, sitting back. His tone became now more analytic. This was phase two. "The main thing is people — that is, older people, adults — don't take kids

seriously. You know what I mean. They condescend, they preach, they set up rules and spy on you. They ask what you're doing and why, always as if it were something wrong. And they use kids."

"Use them?" The coffee was quite drinkable now.

"Kids get used all the time, Billy. Mostly because kids don't have any power to defend themselves. They get moved around like furniture, pulled out of one room and thrown any which way into another. Bullied into doing things they don't want to do. Beaten if they refuse." Smoot paused to see if the approach which had been recommended for Bobby Ames was the right one. Or Billy Lee Deacon, as the boy called himself. Really quite a clever name, Smoot thought. Really quite a remarkable boy. Solid gold. Smoot didn't want to take this particular line beyond what the Doctor called basic magnetism. Smoot wanted emotion, but only the smallest amount. More might bring a candidate to a point of losing his self-respect or to an over-identification with things past. The whole strategy was to build the sense of self-importance and move his attention to the future.

He would have to play it right. He saw now that the boy's eyes were just the least bit misty. He looked at his coffee cup, still not sweet enough, Smoot thought. A child.

"But the important thing, Billy..." He had almost said Bobby. He could ruin this in a second with a blunder like that. He paused as if in awe at the magnitude of the thought he was about to express. "...the important thing, Billy, is economic. Kids are used without being paid. The entire economy of the Western world is designed to deprive kids of economic power. Did you know that in America public schools went only through the eighth grade before the great depression?"

"I've heard of the depression," Bobby said, suddenly feeling more like a school boy in class than an enterpriser, if that was the word. "It was what caused the World War."

"You are a knowledgeable young man. Yes, it caused a war, but it also caused the invention of compulsory high school. Do you know why?"

"So that kids wouldn't join the army?"

"You hit the nail right on the head. But not the army so much as the work force in total. They did it to keep kids out of the workplace, Billy, to deprive them of the rights they had always had to earn money. They invented adolescence and made kids powerless. They turned them into zombies walking the halls of hermetically sealed high schools carrying little pink slips of paper."

"Why didn't they do something about it?" Bobby asked. It did seem unreasonable. This was interesting stuff. He would have done something, he knew that.

Smoot smiled and tented his hands on his chest.

"Because they had no organisation, Billy. Because they had no organisation."

"But now they do," Bobby said. "I mean if they want it." He felt an obligation now to let Smoot

know that he had followed all of this, that he was no less a person than the man had adjudged him.

"Yes, Billy. In a nutshell. That's what the Alumnus Foundation is all about."

"How does it work?"

"In many ways, Billy. It is all over the world and it works in the ways that are best for the kids in each part of the world. Here in Europe it is mainly what we call an alumnus agency. Of course, that's where it got its name. The word 'alumnus' was used by the Romans to describe a boy who had been discarded by his natal parents — natal means the ones who gave him life — and adopted by other parents who were probably childless."

"Discarded?"

"Yes, Billy. Back then it was much more straightforward because it was accepted. Parents who were too poor to have another child took the infant to some public place and left it. Other people who were looking for a child would come by and take it. Very simple. Very uncomplicated."

"What if no one did?"

"Oh, usually someone did. Because you see, Billy, children had economic value. I can't emphasise the importance of that too much."

"But how could they?"

"Because they could work when they were old enough and earn money, first for their adoptive parents and then for themselves. And they could inherit. Often foundlings were picked up to become sons who would inherit a man's estate."

"We learned in ancient history that the Spartans put babies out on the mountain for wolves."

"That, my boy, is what is called a bowdlerisation. No, forget the word. You'll never hear it again. What it means is that a big and unpleasant truth is hidden behind a small and acceptable lie. The truth is that it was acceptable even by church edict well into the High Middle Ages for parents to abandon children.

There were rules governing the whole process. No, my boy, it wasn't a few barbarian Spartans, it was your and my ancestors. And there weren't many wolves, I suspect, either."

"So your organisation takes in abandoned kids and gives them new homes?"

"In effect, yes. But abandonment means a different thing today. Stuffing a baby in a trash can or leaving four kids locked up in a house for years and years. Or simply ignoring them. There are lots of ways kids are abandoned today. And many of them find their way to us. Runaways, for example."

"And then what?"

"We screen them, as I said. And then we look for the right sponsor for them."

"Like someone to adopt them?"

"That's it. But it is more businesslike than that. Remember that one of our principles is to make kids independent. We work from a contract between the sponsor and the candidate."

It was time to move on, Smoot thought. Bobby's eyes were beginning to wander to other tables. Enough theory. Creditability had been established. Young Bobby Ames was interested. The waiter came by. Smoot ordered a coke. Bobby said he would have one too.

"A young man like yourself," Smoot continued, "might find the Foundation very useful. You are here in Amsterdam alone, aren't you?"

And before he had thought, perhaps because there were so many other things in his head right then, Bobby nodded.

Try as he might, his host could not, by suddenly addressing a piece of fluff on his jacket, hide what looked like a smile of satisfaction. It gave Bobby a shiver. The edifice of the past ten minutes seemed suddenly very shaky. Or was it just in his mind? Was it just that he felt so alone all of a sudden?

"I'm not running away," Bobby said.

"Excuse me. I think I upset you by smiling. It wasn't at any thought of your vulnerability. You mistake me if you think that. We have no place in the Foundation for boys who aren't prepared to be on their own. No, I was smiling because for such a young-looking boy — I hope you don't mind my saying so — you are remarkably self-possessed and, though I do not like this word I will use it, mature."

"Thanks."

"I think our programme would suit you well. That is why I approached you. You evidently thought it was for some other reason."

Bobby blushed. The thought had not entirely vanished. He felt caught in an unjust suspicion.

"In most cities your suspicions would have been well-founded. But not here in Amsterdam. You see, men who want to go with boys can do that without picking them up at railway stations."

It was not a topic which was going to leave his prospect tongue-tied. Smoot could see that at once. He had successfully moved on to the next topic.

"In fact prostitution for young men as well as young women is a quite respectable profession

here. There are clubs, very nice ones where people can go to have dates." The word 'date' was one which Smoot had found particularly effective with candidates. It was what the Doctor called a transition word. "Not boys of your age, of course. Not sixteen. But boys of eighteen or nineteen."

"I'm not quite sixteen," Bobby confessed.

"It's your poise, I guess," Smoot said. "You handle yourself like someone older. I could see that at once. I rarely make a mistake."

And Smoot could also see at once, after having unsuccessfully met the evening boat, that Neville Summers had sent them a winner. "Fourteen but he looks younger," Summers had said. "Just look for an angel."

"I couldn't do that," Bobby said.

"I should think not. It would be an enormous waste of talent. But one mustn't look down upon the boys who do choose that particular line of work. They are good at what they do and they are honest. Not like the street hustlers. There are those here as well."

"I didn't mean I thought they were bad. It's just..."

"Of course, I understand. And I don't mean to dwell on the subject, but you must understand that the principles of the Foundation include respect for any enterpriser. And also for personal freedom. Personal freedom and economic power go hand in hand." It was necessary to pause here, for the next step was the biggest in this first session. He wanted to be very sure of his subject. But he could not tell. The boy was not as easy to read as he had been earlier. There was something new. He hesitated. It would be a shame not to get the session concluded. But it would be a bigger shame to lose the boy now. He motioned the waiter for the check.

In fact, Cyril Smoot had read his subject well. The idea of being used that way, of actually choosing to, was too big a thought for Bobby to handle. It was not something he wanted to hear more about, or to think about. He pined suddenly for his friends and the security of the small room he shared with Anthony and then wondered at that as well, for the room as it appeared to him seemed to float in space, insubstantial. It was the effect of being at such a distance, he thought. You needed to have it around you, otherwise the walls became like a movie set. He wondered suddenly why he was listening to all of this, what he was doing here. But when Smoot called for the check he thought, well, this is at least someone — and didn't know what he ought to do.

"Thanks for the coke," he said. "And the coffee."

"My pleasure." Smoot handed a credit card to the waiter. Bobby suddenly remembered that he had only 25 guilders in his pocket and his heart sank. What would he do? Go to the railway station? He had at least learned that from Smoot. Maybe Bill Scruddy would be there, coming over for a meeting of estate agents. He had felt much more daring in Scruddy's car than he felt now.

"I'm looking for my father," he said.

Smoot looked puzzled.

"He has a boat here in Amsterdam some place. It's called the Amius A. I don't suppose you've seen it."

"No, I don't think I have. I'm not sure I understand. Why are you looking for him?"

Because he went away when I was a little kid and now I need him, he wanted to say; but an enterpriser wouldn't say that. He would be more independent than that.

"Because I left my school and he doesn't know that I did, so he doesn't know I'm here." It wasn't, he thought, entirely as clear as he had hoped to make it, but Smoot nodded.

"I see. And you're sure the boat is in Amsterdam?"

"Not really. I've walked about half of the canals, I think. He could have left."

"And in that case he might be any place at all."

"Yes," Bobby said. He made himself look right at Smoot because he knew if he did that he wouldn't start to cry which was what he wanted to do. Smoot, he could see, was not the sort of man who liked to have boys cry. He hoped nonetheless that his host might appreciate his restraint and give him some credit for it.

He was quite right in his assessment of the man signing the chit for their beverages. Cyril Smoot did not like to see boys cry. It was his greatest weakness. He should have been indifferent. His work demanded that he be indifferent. The Doctor expected him to be indifferent. But he wasn't. Not that it softened his heart. It simply disgusted him, and to show disgust in the presence of a candidate was fatal. He took what he hoped would be an effective tack.

"Of course, even the world isn't so big if you have the right sort of network."

"How is that?"

"Well, people in ports, people who own boats, people who know where boats have been and where they are going, people in customs offices."

"Do you know people like that?"

"The Foundation is world-wide, Billy. Of course we do."

"Boy, that's quite a network that could find a boat anywhere." He dared not hope, and yet...

"But probably he is here in Amsterdam. You will probably find him."

"I guess so."

"I'll tell you what. If you don't, then give me a call and we'll see what we can do." Smoot produced a card from a pocket of his wallet and handed it to Bobby. "I'm at the Amstelhoek Villas Hotel. We have our European offices there."

"Thanks." Bobby looked at the card. It was very official. It was his second business card in one week; he was already becoming an enterpriser. He thought that Smoot had been going to ask him if he wanted to be one of their candidates. But, of course, now that Smoot knew he had a father he wouldn't see him that way. But what if he didn't have a father? Not one that he could find?

Smoot took a one hundred guilder note out of his wallet and handed it to Bobby. "In the foundation we believe that time is money. I have taken a good deal of yours. You take this."

"I couldn't do that. You bought me a coke. And coffee."

"Never turn down money, Billy, unless it has strings attached. And if there are strings attached, look at them closely before you make up your mind. There are no strings attached to this guilder note. Even if you don't need it now..."

"Oh, but I do... I mean.... I got robbed, you see. But still..."

"Look, you take this and when some day you are as rich and Successful, as I know you will be, then you can give it to some young man who is also looking for something."

Bobby took the note. "Thanks."

"Well, then." Smoot stood up and extended his hand.

Bobby took it. "It sounds like you have a pretty good foundation. It was very interesting."

"Perhaps some day we will be of use to you."

"Sure."

"Good luck in your search."

"Thanks."

Smoot walked to the corner and turned in the direction away from the river. That would be where the hotel was, Bobby thought. He'd have to wait some time to see what it looked like. He pocketed the money and walked across the square and down the side street to the Amstel. There was a boy of about his own age sitting against a tree. Bobby suddenly felt an enormous ache of desire for his own kind. He wanted to talk to the boy, but when he looked again he

noticed that the boy was in a kind of trance. He was also very dirty. Yet he was attractive. He even reminded him of Anthony.

"It sucks, man," the kid said.

"What does?"

"Life, man. Fuckin' life, man."

"I know."

"No you don't. You don't know nothin'!" The boy turned and looked at the river. Bobby took the card from his pocket and looked at it. "A World of Opportunities For the Young and Enterprising," it said. He put it in his wallet for safe keeping.

23. Diamonds Are a Boy's Best Friend

Bryce-Jones found the ambience at Caravaggio less intimidating than he had anticipated. The other clients looked not unlike those one might expect to see shopping for clothing at a good store, or sitting on the train to Lincolnshire. The boys were much like himself in deportment and age. One claimed to be from Eton, though their guide — the young man from the hotel — advised them to believe nothing at all of what they were told. Names and histories were usually made up, he said. In fact it was one of the pastimes of the boys in these clubs to invent their own histories. Perhaps several, so that they could have one ready for each customer as they sized him up.

Playing along to the best of his ability, Bryce-Jones struck up a conversation with a young man who appeared to be well below the requisite age. Apart from the fact that his nose seemed once to have been broken, he was, Jones decided, a pleasant enough chap. And he could imagine that men who enjoyed the company of their own sex, or males younger than themselves, might find him attractive. He had a confidential way of speaking about himself which was, in fact, quite disarming.

They had taken a table in the corner, away from the others, at the boy's suggestion. Bryce-Jones was having a whiskey, a taste he had only recently acquired. Andrew, as the boy called himself, was having a coke.

"Jan has been very good to me," he said, indicating the man with a proprietary air whom their guide had engaged in conversation.

"The owner?"

"Yes. It's his second place, really. Much cosier than the first.

The rooms are very nice. Private baths and showers. Good beds. We can go into one later if you'd like to?"

"Perhaps," Bryce-Jones said, overcoming a sudden urge to bolt for the door. In fact he found that he had quite firmly taken hold of the chair on which he sat as if this intention might get the better of him. He relaxed his fingers.

"You were speaking of the boys who got into drugs," Bryce Jones observed, picking up the tail of their conversation at the bar.

"They can't work here. Actually in any of the good clubs.

The owners won't have anything to do with them. Trouble.

Know what I mean?"

"Rather," Bryce-Jones said in what he hoped wasn't too condescending a manner. He didn't want to condescend to the young man at all. Andrew was much too nice. And vulnerable, Michael thought. Terribly vulnerable. Andrew had told him his story when they were sitting at the bar earlier. How he had been on a holiday with his parents from Suffolk. He was fourteen at the time. He had got into a fight with them. They didn't like him staying out with his friends. There had been a lot of fights. His father was something of a bully and drank, which made it worse. He had been knocked around a bit, as he explained. "You've noticed my nose? You'd have to. My old man broke it. Some day I'm going to get it fixed."

This was no story. Bryce-Jones was enough of a student of human nature to know the truth when he heard it. The boy did have a Suffolk accent. And there was his nose for all to see. What a shame, Jones thought; he would have been such an attractive boy. Small. Very small. That was part of what made him vulnerable. And his hands were like those of a child. There was a ring on one of his fingers. Bryce Jones used the excuse of it to touch the boy.

"What a handsome ring," he said. The boy allowed him to pick up his hand and examine the stone. It appeared to be a diamond.

"Is it?"

"Yes. I buy diamonds. They are my security. I have nine now. One larger than this. It's nice, isn't it?"

"How interesting. To buy diamonds."

"They are easy to hide, easy to carry, hold their value. Jan put me on to the idea. You see, I make quite a lot of money here. I'm Jan's number one boy. Most of his customers ask for me."

The boy said it with such undisguised pride that Jones was quite taken aback. He might have been speaking of his work as a waiter or an insurance agent. It was quite remarkable.

He let go of the boy's hand, reluctantly. He had held very few hands in his eighteen years. Oh, of course as a child he had held his nurse's, and once or twice that he could remember his father's. And with other little boys. But not when he was older. He had wanted to. When he was younger and knew little of the kinds of things to which it might lead. To which he had seen it lead! Boys of his own age, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen. Every year boys were sent down from the school. He warned them, but they were weak. And from the example of their weakness he gained his strength. Still it would have been nice, once or twice, to have held a hand like this.

"I can tell that you are a very sensitive person," Andrew said. Now he had put his hand on Bryce-Jones's who, for fear of rudeness, did not withdraw it. "You are a person of great strength. Not ordinary strength, I can tell that. And you have power, power over things, people, but you use it gently, for you feel deeply. Am I right? Usually I am."

"Well, I don't know, really," Bryce-Jones apologised, knowing, in fact, quite well. It was uncanny. A poor runaway boy in a brothel with that kind of insight! What an exceptional young

man! Forced to sell his body to survive in the world! Had only someone been there at the time to appreciate him after that father, that primitive unfeeling cretin, had struck him! Had he himself been there things would be quite different.

"How long have you been with Jan?" Bryce-Jones asked.

"I met him after I left my parents in Hamburg. Then I was fourteen. I came here with a businessman from Belgium. He had an apartment and I lived with him for a year. Then I left him and sort of looked around and one day I met Jan. I've been with him two years, now."

Bryce-Jones did some quick mental arithmetic. Fourteen plus three wasn't eighteen. The boy had made a slip.

"Isn't it dangerous for Jan that you are under age?"

"I'm not. I'm eighteen. I'm very small for my age."

"Yes, very small."

Michael guessed that he would have the papers to prove it if they were required, but he could read in the boy's face a more 'honest document. The boy laughed. "You tricked me, didn't you?"

"I guess I did."

"Well, don't tell on me."

"Don't worry."

Bryce-Jones was curious about the boys who didn't get into Clubs like this one. He asked about them.

"You don't want to mess with those boys," Andrew said, his tone admonishing of even the curiosity.

"I don't expect to. I was just wondering how they got on?" "I have friends who do that," Andrew said, and an entirely different mood seemed to engulf him like a cold snow. "My friend who came with me from Hamburg died this winter. He was sleeping in a doorway. They found him. He was stupid. He had plenty of money. He worked for another club, but then he got into drugs. He spent all his money. He didn't even have a room. Just himself, and then people wouldn't go with him any 'more. You know, boys on drugs are dangerous. They can pull a knife on you. They aren't in their right mind. It's very sad. Every month someone dies. I've known several. It is the bad side of all this." He looked at his ring and twisted the stone so that it caught the light from the candle on the table. "I save my money," he said. "I don't piss it away on drugs."

Michael wanted to know still more about these other boys and their world, but now was not the time to ask. The inquiry had been an unwelcome one. It was not something Andrew liked to talk about, obviously, or wanted to think about. He felt guilty now for ruining what had been a happy

mood.

Without thinking, he took the boy's hand. Andrew put his other over it and leaned forward as if to tell him something. He moved his head. The boy kissed him on the lips. Michael pulled away, startled. Horrified? Disgusted? Oh, God he should have been. He looked across the room. Judson was not there.

"I'm terribly sorry," Michael began.

"You don't like me," Andrew said.

"Oh, but I do. But, you see, I'm not really..."

"Homosexual?"

"Yes."

"Neither am I."

"You aren't?!"

"No. Well, maybe a little, but I don't think so, really."

"But you are working here. I mean..."

"This is my profession."

"Your profession?"

"You don't think it should be called a profession?"

"Oh, I don't mean that. It's just that it is all so new to me."

"Why don't you kiss me back? It could be very nice. Here." He took Bryce-Jones's head between his hands and gently drew it towards him. The unlikely thought which went through Michael's mind was that this could, in an investigation, be called doing research or setting up a front. These next few seconds could give him the poise that he would need in the days ahead. The poise of experience.

That is not to say that all of these thoughts in this particular order arranged themselves in neat little formulaic patterns, but they did allow him to disregard in some measure the sensations which accompanied this first kiss of his life. It had been, he would decide in retrospect, illuminating; even, if one discounted the circumstances, pleasurable.

"Why don't you come into one of the rooms with me?" the boy said. "I think you are very nice."

"No. I can't do that."

"All right, we can sit here."

"If you don't mind."

"I don't do anything kinky, you know. Just masturbate. I don't let people fuck me. One man wanted to last week. He was at the bar and he was drunk. He kept saying things, so I went over and poured a beer on his head. It was very funny.

It seemed to Michael Drury Bryce-Jones not only funny but wildly amusing. He laughed. Heartily. It was hysterical. This boy, hardly five and a half feet tall, pouring a beer on the head of a man who wanted to sodomise him in a boy bordello in Amsterdam. He laughed until tears came to his eyes.

24. An Immaculate Ejaculation

The gang on Sprinkles Two accepted Adam Spooner's appearance there without many questions being asked. That he had stopped peeing his pants was, they understood, without inquiring too deeply into the matter, somehow attributable to this temporary residency and they shared, as boys do for whom palpable and dramatic achievement is not an everyday occurrence, some pride in the reformation — as if it were not Anthony or circumstances but "the floor" which had somehow accomplished this. To say more than that, however, would be to enlarge unreasonably on their sense either of complicity or empathy.

They missed their friend Ames and yet his absence and the adventure upon which he had set out gave vicarious refreshment to their routines and opened new vistas to their imaginations. They were the homebound, supporting the troops in the field with their patriotism and prayers and to this arrangement Spooner's refugee status lent authenticity.

From Anthony's point of view, allowing Spooner to occupy the bed next to his was a matter of duty, like caring for a friend's pet while he is away. It gave him a sense of being useful in a way that Bobby would have appreciated — and, he had to admit, it was nice to have someone in the room.

Skelton had at first questioned the move on principles of precedence. But the facts of Spooner's not having terrors now for two nights and that his lucky Batman tennis shoes — he would wear no others — had ceased leaving tracks, persuaded the housemaster to a more liberal view. It also seemed to Skelton that Spooner had somehow matured. Not inappropriately. Not to the point of a precocious demeanour, of which Skelton would not have approved, but in the sense of being reasonable. Spooner understood, for example, that he was still a "citizen" of Sprinkles Three.

Each morning Spooner arose, stripped his bed and returned to the third floor before second Sprinkles was socially active. When Anthony awoke there was no sign that the bed next to his had been occupied. It was neatly made and vacant. He could hardly have asked more consideration of the boy.

So profound was the sense of brotherhood among those who followed in their imaginations and conversations the adventures of their picaresque friend in Amsterdam that they developed a sort of chivalry out of it. Thus it was that Quin-Quiller who had one morning teased Spooner about his sodden bundle of laundry later sought him out to apologise.

"He's a pretty game little fellow," he had said that Saturday evening in Martin's room when this society of cavaliers gathered after the weekly film to advance, through a concerted and affectionate repartee, the relative state of their civilisation.

Small had done an imitation of Les Dawson doing an imitation of Margaret Thatcher pouring tea for Ronald Reagan. Small showed a letter he had had from a girl in San Bernadino, California, whose name he had got from a pen-pal magazine and who wanted to swap underwear.

Tully had suddenly and to his very great and proud satisfaction entered "the change." At the general invitation of the group and with Martin's permission, he showed his first seven hairs and was applauded. He thought his voice was changing too, he said, but on this evolutionary manifestation the group demurred. "I like it exactly as it is," Carstairs said. "You may read *The Wind In The Willows* to me any night, my dear," he added to hoots of appreciative disapproval.

In fact everyone was acting a little bit unnaturally, for they were aware of Parker's concern and were trying in their awkward way to cheer him up.

"Summers asked about Ames at lunch today," Wells said. "Summers?" Swann said.

"That sleeze bag!"

"You didn't tell him anything, did you?" asked Small, who had unilaterally appointed himself head of the Amsterdam secret service.

"No. I said no one knew where he was. But Summers laughed. 'Everyone knows where he is,' he said. 'Where, then?' I said. 'He's in Amsterdam; I've set him up with a business partner of mine,' he said. And he rubbed his crotch and winked."

"What did you say?"

"I told him he was an asshole."

"Then what?"

"He just smiled. You know how he does. Like he wants you to come up and see his etchings or something. He gives me the creeps."

"Why would he say something like that?" Parker asked. Just to get my goat. He knows Ames and I are pals and knows what we think of him and the butt room crowd."

"But how did he know about Amsterdam?"

...Everyone does, Parker. You can't keep a secret like that in lace like this," Quin-Quiller said, who had himself told at five people.

"I guess not. It just galls me to think of Summers even saying his name, let alone making up stories. What do you suppose he meant?"

"He meant to have you sit here as you are right now asking, Hmmm, I wonder what he meant," said Bledsoe who had been pried up to this point cutting his calluses with Small's -nail clipper.

"You're stupid to do that, Bledsoe," Mason said. "I had an aunt who had blood poisoning from the same thing."

"What happened to her?" Bledsoe asked.

"She had to have jabs."

"Did she die?"

"Yes, but not of that. She fell off a Ferris wheel at a fair."

I'm afraid of heights, actually, so I'm in no danger," Bledsoe said.

But he had done with the clipper anyway and put his slippers back on.

Slippers were the fashion on Saturday nights in Sprinkles House. Pyjamas and robes as well. No boy would be found fully dressed after eight o'clock. It was Skelton's innovation. He believed that the week, which began on Sunday mornings with jackets and ties for chapel, should end with a return to more informal ways. He might have preferred an even more casual arrangement than the one which had caught on, but it sufficed to make his point. Clara would pop popcorn, games would be put out, the telly turned on and Skelton would oversee the activities, now and then stopping to play a game of chess or act out a charade. As the evening wore on boys would retire in smaller groups to one another's rooms as Parker and his friends had. There they might do as they pleased until midnight when it would be time for lights out. Some of these gatherings were more notorious than others. Martin's gang, as it was called, inclined to a middle road, being solely dedicated neither to Matters of the mind nor of the flesh but open to whatever spirit might enter into its midst.

Anthony had named it "La Soirée des Jeunes Hommes en Pyjamas" which had been simplified quickly to "The PJ Soirée." Martin had wanted to make it into a proper society with covenants and officers and had made a sign which was hung on the door Saturday nights with the full name in gothic lettering and underneath it, NE TROUBLER PAS! Carstairs, at the opposite extreme, thought it should be a Salon Vivre, a living exhibition in which one was allowed to see more of one's friends than one usually did.

Small and Martin sported plain, light blue poplin pyjamas from Aquascutum and white terry cloth robes with no particular distinction other than that Martin's initials appeared on both of them. Bledsoe, who was just the littlest bit overweight, inclined to a similar costume, though in thin blue stripes and a nondescript brown broadcloth robe. Quin-Quiller, who preferred a jogging suit to bedware, appeared to be dressed more for the gym than for a pyjama party. Being a redhead, he wore colours well and had been persuaded by Carstairs one day in Tuppington-on-Smart to purchase a very inspiring outfit in magenta with ribbed cuffs and a ribbed neck in scarlet. Carstairs would have dressed all of his friends if he had been invited to. He had not given up on the idea of a Salon Vivre and drew his inspiration from an illustrated copy of the Arabian Nights.

Swann, who had not been blessed with the capacity to be improved in his appearance by any particular clothing, wore grey sweat clothes from the school store. For colour he wore a wool robe in the MacGregor tartan which his Aunt Helen had given him. Tully sported French cut

pyjamas with a wide collar and stripes down the leg, over which he did not wear a robe. "You look like a little Russian Prince," Carstairs had said the first time Tully had worn them, and Tully had sworn never to wear them again. But he did. Every Saturday. And then folded them carefully and replaced them in his drawer until the next PJ Soiree.

Wells wore plain boxer shorts because he liked to show off his legs which were beginning to reveal some fine golden hairs around his calves.

Mason and Parker wore ski pyjamas — not their own, peculiarly, but the ones which had come to school in their partners' trunks.

Martin had not been successful in persuading the others that they should have rules and rituals, but he did urge that people be sensitive to one another's "limits of tolerance." By this he meant his own embarrassment at seeing other boys' privates. One could say what he wished; Martin was prepared to hear about "dirty things" and even to join in the repartee, but one did not touch another member's member, or one's own publicly. This was not a society for exhibitionism. The others agreed but did as they pleased, always careful not to offend Martin, for it was his room and they did defer to him, prude though he sometimes was.

Carstairs, who wore apricot-coloured silk pyjamas and a burgundy silk robe, was one of the few boys in Sprinkles House to have a room by himself, a privilege accorded him because of an extreme case of asthma which called for the perpetual operation of an air cleansing machine and a minimum of dust-raising activity. In fact Carstairs hadn't had an asthma attack for two years and rarely ran the machine; his only real disorder, if it should indeed be called that, was an insatiable sexual appetite. Carstairs was not one of those exhibitionistic young men who turns out to be all talk.

Neither was he as superficial as his witty conversation might have indicated; in fact he was a very affectionate and devoted lover who took an almost maternal interest in his partners, which meant in effect in much of Sprinkles House. It was not considered in bad taste to have shared Carstairs' bed; in fact it was one of the ways that one established a kinship with other boys. Neither was it considered unfaithful to one's partner if one was fortunate to have a partner. Carstairs' affections were not of a possessive or competitive sort; in asking for less, he achieved more.

The night after Ames's departure Carstairs had come into Anthony's room and expressed his concern. He was good at that and Anthony was glad for it. But Anthony had not accepted Carstairs's invitation to share his bed. He could not have done that to Bobby, he explained, and Carstairs understood. Now he sat on Martin's bed with Carstairs next to him. From purely maternal affection Carstairs had put his arm behind Anthony who had leaned gladly into his shoulder. Every so often Carstairs gave him a little squeeze of reassurance. But these squeezes were beginning to have an effect. Anthony had abstained for nearly a week.

"I'm going to talk to Summers," Anthony said, attempting perhaps to terrify his penis into a less determined and inevitably catastrophic course of action. Carstairs had now begun to lightly massage the back of Anthony's neck and Anthony was beginning to feel like the Battleship Potemkin. Neither did he want Carstairs to stop, for he craved physical affection and his entire

nervous system was promoting an insurrection with which he could feel more than political sympathy.

"What good will that do?" Wells asked.

"I want to know what he was talking about."

"I told you, Parker, he was just trying to get my goat."

"Not a bad way either," said Bledsoe, "suggesting some sort of sex ring. It's just the sort of thing that would occur to Summers."

"I hear Summers gets off on pinching your fits," Small said. "Where'd you hear that?" Bledsoe asked.

"A kid told me."

"From experience?"

"Not his own."

"Sure, sure."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Wells said.

Inspired by the conversation, Carstairs had moved his hand to Anthony's breast and had begun to massage his left nipple. All sense of society, propriety and decorum which Anthony Parker possessed had been put for the moment out with the cat. His nipples were the second most sensitive part of his anatomy. He closed his eyes which necessity persuaded him was a sure way not to be a party to what was going to happen.

Conversation in the room slowed and then died as first one then another of the boys observed Carstairs pull down the waist of Parker's somewhat wetted pyjamas to expose an erection of which any boy in the room would have been proud. Because it was Parker, one of the most modest of them all and certainly the most beautiful, even Martin held his tongue.

The fact of their host's silent acquiescence was sufficient to engender an overall empathy with the event on the bed which quickly turned to a genital insurrection. Wells and Mason, who had sworn off masturbation, took hold of one another. Small did himself. Martin did nobody but appeared nonetheless interested. Bledsoe and Quin-Quiller traded off. Swami did Tully, but only after the smaller boy had removed his designer pyjama pants. It was the smaller boy's first time at one of these soirees and he found the sights around him exhilarating.

Do it with your mind, Parker," Wells said. "You can if you concentrate."

"You can do it this time, Parker," Mason urged. "I know you can."

"Yes, Parker, think about it," Quin-Quiller urged for not entirely altruistic reasons: he was a little slower than the others and for that reason never competed in the shower room Olympics.

"Think about Ames," Small said, whose pace of activity would have ignited a more flammable material than his own flesh.

Anthony reached for himself with his free hand. The other was buried behind Carstairs.

"Don't let him, Carstairs," Wells insisted. "Anthony, no. You can do it. Concentrate! Concentrate! Now, do his other tit, Carstairs."

In fact the flagrant foursome, as Wells, Mason, Ames and Parker were known for their habit of holding hands in public, had discussed on more than one occasion what Wells called 'ejaculatory telekinesis' — the ability to erupt without the end of your dick being touched. It was a theory he had explained to others in the PJ Soiree as well, so they knew now what he was on about. Wells had known a kid who said he knew a kid who could. "Just think," Anthony had said, "An immaculate ejaculation." They had all tried but without success. Parker had come the closest, however, precisely for the reason of his super sensitive tits.

Carstairs intercepted Parker's hand which had now come under the command of some other agency than might be appealed to in the name of science.

"Sorry Mason," Wells said, dropping his friend's dick. "This is our chance."

He crossed to the bed and pulled up Parker's pyjama shirt.

"I know how to do this, Carstairs, if you don't mind." So self-possessed and serious was Wells's application of science that Carstairs was for once in his life lost for words and returned to a light massaging of the back of Parker's neck. Wells spat on each of Parker's tits and then started massaging them, very gently and, as it appeared, effectively, for the middle of Parker's body levitated slightly off the bed and his throat made a sound which afterwards none of them was able to reproduce and therefore must remain unrecorded in this narrative.

"Go, Parker," Bledsoe yelled.

"Do it, Parker," said Small in a small voice as he erupted. "Do it for Ames!" said Quin-Quiller.

"Do it for science," said Mason who had broken his and Wells's self-imposed fast, though probably not consciously or in a way which would later subject him to his friend's censure.

"Do it for the Queen!" Carstairs commanded in his deepest and most compelling voice.

"I came!" Bret Tully screamed, "I came!" but his first-in-a lifetime achievement was missed by those present, for at that precise moment Anthony Parker burst like old faithful, his first shot, some later said, ascending a full three feet in the air. Others thought somewhat less than that, but, since no one had had the foresight to bring a metre stick, to say nothing of putting it in a place where it would have done some good, they would never know.

But what they did know, with the certainty of their own eyes, was that Anthony Parker, son of Lady Fairchild, heir to Fairchild Hall, poet, artist and aspiring 'cellist, had accomplished an immaculate ejaculation.

Even Martin was scientifically impressed and said so more or less.

Anthony covered his tits with his cupped hands and moaned. Then he cleaned up like a mother who has just produced a child and looked down at himself. There were a few dribblets here and there. He was aware, more than anything else, that he was not embarrassed. Being naked in a group of other boys would have been enough to make him uncomfortable, but this... He had to smile at the thought of all these boys standing around with their cocks in their hands congratulating him.

"Thanks, fellows," he said. "I really appreciate your support. I want to thank my coach here, Tom Carstairs."

Applause.

"And my trainer, Tommy Wells."

Applause.

"And all of you out there who believed in me. Thanks a million."

Applause.

"Hey mates, I came," Brett Tully said. He held out his hand with the evidence. There wasn't much of it.

"It's the real thing," Swann said, somewhat proprietarily, for it was his pumping which had brought the well to production.

"Sure enough, Tully," Mason said, his own hand a little messier than the one now presented to him with its small dab of watery something.

"Here's a towel," Quin-Quiller said.

"Hey, that's mine," Swann said, and realised it was too late. "It's okay. I'll stand it up in the corner as a souvenir."

The boys cleaned themselves up and withdrew one by one behind the various fabrics which choice, circumstance or their Aunt Helen had provided and resumed the society from which only moments before they had escaped. All except 'hilly, whose own special event had inspired a temporary fit of exhibitionism. No one complained.

"I think someone should write it to the Guinness Book of Records," Bledsoe, said. "Why don't

you, Martin? You're one of their best customers."

"I don't think they print things like that."

"I think there's money in this, fellows," Small said. "We could put Parker on the road. People would pay a lot to see something like that."

"Trump House would pay a good price all by itself," Bledsoe said. "But I think we should keep it to ourselves. The world has a way of trivialising things."

"Well said, Bledsoe," Carstairs said. "I do think, however that the event should somehow be institutionalised, if only among the members of the PJ Soirée."

"We could make a plaque," Tully suggested in total sincerity. "How about naming a day?" Mason said.

"Or commemorating this one," Wells said.

"How would we do that?" Small asked.

"What is this, the third Saturday of May?" Carstairs asked. Swann looked at his calendar. "Yes."

"Then the third Saturday of May shall henceforth and for all time be called the Day of the Immaculate Ejaculation. Now, as we all know, what we saw qualifies as a miracle and we could nominate Parker to the Vatican Council. But since there's already a Saint Anthony we shall instead call this Saint Bobby Day, in recognition of the one most responsible for pulling this off."

"You mean pulling Anthony off?" Tully giggled.

"In spirit, yes. There had to be an invisible hand, and over all that distance the spirit of Bobby Ames entered into this august and holy place."

"Were you thinking about Ames, Parker?" Bledsoe asked.

Carstairs interposed. "Bledsoe, that is a tactless and outrageous question." While Carstairs was ready enough to give Ames theoretical credit, he was not willing to have his own role in the event, which had already been somewhat compromised by Wells, diminished further.

"Well, it's no good naming it St. Bobby Day if his spirit wasn't in the room, is it?"

"It was in the room," Wells said.

They looked at him. He had got more serious. They weren't sure but that he might take the thing in a wrong direction but were reassured to see that he had his hand in Mason's pyjamas and was probably therefore not in a holier than thou frame of mind.

"He is the person we were talking about before this happened, isn't he? And it was his idea in the first place that there could be such a thing. And whether Parker was getting off on him or not, Ames was certainly in his thoughts, wasn't he, Parker?"

Parker nodded.

"I was thinking of him," Martin said to everyone's surprise. "I was thinking, when you all started going crazy, how much he would have enjoyed being here, because he's crazier than any of us."

"You see?" Carstairs said.

It appeared that they did.

"Okay, then. I proclaim the third Saturday in May shall henceforth be called the Feast of the Immaculate Ejaculation to honour Saint Bobby, Saint of... what?"

"Does he have to be the saint of something?" "Yeah, most saints are."

"Of ejaculation."

"No, Small. This is serious."

"It wasn't serious a minute ago."

"That was a minute ago."

"How about the saint of travellers?" Martin said.

"There is one already. I think it's Saint Anthony," Bledsoe said. "Isn't that right, Parker?"

"I'm not sure," Parker said.

"Hey, Parker, you haven't said anything about all of this.

"You decide."

"Yeah, Parker."

"Parker should be the one to say."

"What do you say, Parker?" Martin asked.

"How about the saint of lost boys?" Anthony said.

"That has a nice ring to it."

"Like Never Never Land?"

"I guess it could be those boys, too. Just boys who are lost."

"I like it."

"Does he help them get found?" Tully asked.

"He tries to," Parker said.

There didn't seem much to talk about after that. Bledsoe stood and yawned.

"I want to say before we all leave," Wells began, "that this wasn't just kidding here. And I want everyone to hold hands and be quiet and send our thoughts out to Ames. Okay?"

"And our prayers, if we want to," Tully said.

"Those, too," Wells said.

He stood up. The rest followed. One by one they took the hand of another until they made a circle. Then Wells closed his eyes and the others did the same.

"Parker?" Wells said.

"I love you, Bobby," Anthony said.

25. Letters From Amsterdam

May 22, Tuesday

My Beloved Anthony,

Nothing since I last wrote. I'm getting discouraged. I haven't found out anything at all. Nothing. There was a boat once like I told you, but I can't find it and no one seems to know about it. I know it was my father. It had to be. Who else would put Amius A. on his boat. But where is he now?

I have been reading Keats at night because it makes me think of you. I can actually hear your voice and see your lips moving. Don't worry, I'm not going crazy. There is a light in the middle of the room which goes out at eleven o'clock. If I want to go to sleep before then I can't because of the light. At least not very well. Sometimes I put my pillow over my head but it doesn't smell very good and so then I can't sleep because of that. Then there's the problem of this guy who never talks. He's sort of fat and maybe a little retarded. He walks with his hands at his side, like an ape and sort of like a soft robot, if you know what I mean. Sometimes he sits for hours on his bunk next to mine and stares at me like I'm a movie or something. Once I asked him not to but he doesn't understand English. Maybe he understands some other language, but I don't think so. He really seems nice enough and I don't want to be mean so I don't yell stop it or anything like that. I turn on my side the other way and look at the empty bunk and of course that makes me think of you. When they finally turn out the light I have to go to sleep fast because the guys over in the corner start snoring. Out of both ends! They must live on beans. It's like chemical weapons must be, but it doesn't actually kill you. I don't think it does, anyway.

I didn't tell you before, but I had my money stolen. It's okay. Don't worry. I got some more. From this guy I met who works for this organization for kids. It sounds pretty neat. They give you these tests to find out where your interests and skills are and then they try to match you with someone in business. Don't worry, that doesn't mean that I'm going to stay here and go into business. I'm coming back to you as soon as I can.

*XXXXXXX
0000000
Bobby*

Tuesday May 20th — later

My Beloved Anthony,

I have moved out of the youth hostel but you can write to me at the Amstelhoek Villa Hotel. The address is on the stationery. Can you believe I am staying in a place with stationery? I even have shampoo in a little bottle and some bubble-bath stuff and a shower cap. Of course

I don't use the shower cap. I don't know why they'd give you both shampoo and a shower cap but they do. The bed is a king-sized one, and me there all alone. It seems a waste. Maybe I'll have to see if I can find someone who likes to read Keats and has long eyelashes. Ha Ha. Just kidding.

I loved your letter. It's okay with me that Adam is sleeping in my bed as long as it doesn't get yellow! You are a good guy. Give him a hug for me. I wish I was having as much fun as Wells seems to think I am. Under the circumstances, Amsterdam would be a cool place, but...

Remember I told you about the guy who gave me the money? Well, this is where his organization is. They're giving me these tests and tomorrow. They're going to hook me up to this complicated modem machine that tells what really makes me happy. No, not that kind of a machine — you have a dirty mind, Anthony Parker!

"Time is money," the guy with this youth organization says. So I get paid for the time I am spending here, if you can believe it. One of the things you do is learn to have interviews, so I'm going to be talking to people as well.

The reason I'm going along with this is that I need some help finding my dad. Yes, I've started calling him that in my mind. I don't think it's very smart of me because I know I'm just setting myself up to crash. But I can't help it. When you're not here and I feel alone I imagine him. Anyway, I think Cyril can help me. He said he could. They deal with influential and powerful people, he says, and they may know something about the boat or even my father. So that's why I'm playing along. And of course the room is nice, too. Oh, by the way there's a swimming pool. I've got to buy a pair of trunks, though.

How is everybody? Tell Adam I miss him. Tell Helter Skelter that I am okay and I hope with the help of these people that I can get this thing over with one way or another pretty soon and come back. With my dad! Wouldn't that be great?

I love you, Anthony. I don't think I ever knew how much until now. By the way, if you go into Tuppington-on-Smart this weekend and go to the tea shop, say hello to Katherine for me.

She was very nice to me when I was leaving. She might want to know that I am all right.

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Bobby

Thursday May 24th

My Beloved Anthony,

Sorry I didn't write to you yesterday. A lot happened. The good news is that for the first time since I've been here I have some hope of finding my dad! This guy who interviewed me yesterday from London said he knows the boat. He has seen it on the Thames River there.

But not recently. He has contacts of some sort in the merchant marine (I think that's what he called it) and may be able to find out where it is now. Apparently boats make a note when they spot one another and some countries require you to register, so there are those ways of looking which he's going to have his friends do. That is just why I came here. It's really good to have some adults helping me out. I was beginning to feel a little puny. That's hard to explain, but there are so many canals here you wouldn't believe it. Cyril thinks that I should keep looking. He thinks you should finish what you start out to do, and since I really don't have any leads yet, why not? He got me a bicycle and I'm pretty far out of the city now in my search, but it's easier than on foot.

We went shopping for clothes. I have a suit now that makes me look like a business guy. I even impress myself when I look in the mirror. And other clothes, too. And, of course, a bathing slip for the hotel swimming pool. That's what they call them here. Slips. It cost sixty guilders and it's the smallest thing I ever wore, I'm not kidding. You would love it. It is very sexy. I spent the afternoon at the pool. There were some other kids there, too, which was really nice. They're candidates too. That's what they call us. And the guys who do the interviewing (there were some of them as well) they call sponsors. I asked the only kid who spoke English, a boy from India, where the girls were and he didn't know. So I asked Cyril when he came to talk to one of the sponsors and he said that the girls were in a different place. Girls and boys in the same place get into trouble, he said. I had to laugh but not out loud. I guess he doesn't know much about boys and boys. I don't really think he knows much about sex of any kind, to tell you the truth. You never saw so many good looking kids! Of course not as good looking as me. Ha Ha. Don't worry. I only have eyes for you.

Then in the evening we had this talk by this kid about seventeen and his sponsor. The kid said how he was an orphan and ran away from a bad foster home in New Jersey and went to New York City where he met a guy from the Foundation who told him about the programme and got him into it. That was two years ago and now he had a sponsor who is sending him to college so that he could become a partner in his nursery business. Then the sponsor spoke about what a good learner the boy was and how good the Foundation was, and then we got to ask questions. One kid asked if the boy had a car and he did. It was an MG! Do you believe it?

I have to admit it all sounded pretty good. Anyway, it doesn't matter to me. Even if I don't find my dad I have you and Helter Skelter and the gang. It isn't the same for me as for these other kids. But an MG!

"Early to bed, early to rise, makes a boy healthy, wealthy and wise." That's one of the sayings in my room. There are sayings all over this place, most of them from the chick who runs all of this. Doctor No, or something.

What am I missing in school? Will I ever be able to catch up? Please write all the news.

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Bobby

My Beloved Anthony,

No letter from you yet. I dropped by the hostel yesterday and got one that you wrote four days ago. Maybe there's another one here. I'll check later.

Not much to report. The guy who was going to check on the boat had an emergency meeting in Germany or somewhere and he hasn't done anything yet, Cyril says. But I guess he has asked some of the people who work for him to. He's supposed to be back here in a day or two.

Let's see, what is my day like? I get up about seven-thirty and have breakfast in my room. It's got salami and cheese instead of sausages and eggs. And lots of kinds of bread, and fruit and cereal. It's fine but I'd rather have a plate of scrambled eggs — even the kind Mulrooney cooks! Still, I shouldn't complain. Then I get on my bike and go out to the back of the city. I am almost done with the canals. Sometimes Cyril has something for me to do like take more tests or have my picture taken or have an interview. Actually I've had only two interviews so far.

The first one was with a guy who makes movies. What kind, I asked Cyril. I'm not totally dumb. "They're not really movies," he says. "They're advertisements for TV." "What," I say, "of underpants?" "They could be," he says, "but more likely some soft drink or hamburgers or something like that." You never know with Cyril. So I said, "Well, I couldn't model underpants anyway," and he said, "Why?" and I said, "Because I'd get a boner with people looking at me like that." I said it to see how he'd react. He sort of grinned. I can't tell whether he likes boys or not. He sure acts gay, but he never lets on.

I feel bad sometimes, like I'm taking advantage of him and this Foundation thing. But he says it is worth their while and that everyone needs alternatives. Just in case. "Just in case of what?" I say, and he says in case I don't find my father after all, which I know is a possibility. "But I have friends at school," I tell him. "But no money," he says, which is true and he says that some sponsors actually send boys to schools like St. Matthew's. So I say that if he doesn't mind my eating his Sugar Pops I guess I shouldn't.

Are you still looking after Adam? Tell him I'm proud he's no longer peeing his bed. You are a champ, Anthony. I love you so much. Give Clara a hug for me. Well, as much of a hug as you can, and tell the gang that the skirts get shorter here as the weather gets warmer.

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Bobby

26. The Alumnus Foundation

Dr. Claude Grabner, founder and president of The Alumnus Foundation, sat in her office on the top floor of the Amstelhoek Villas Hotel behind an imposing renaissance library table which, it was said, had been commissioned by the Pazzi family before the ill-timed conspiracy. Cyril Smoot sat across from her in a wing-tipped chair. "There is nothing but timing," Dr. Claude was fond of reminding her subalterns. "Being at the right place is absolutely useless at the wrong time. Sometimes disastrous." The table's history provided the opportunity for sharing this advice with new associates.

"And after the Pozzi, Cardinal Salvaneli," she would say, laying her large somewhat purple hands on the centrepiece of the desk's inlay, parenthetically indicating the image of two children standing beneath a lime tree looking very much like Hansel and Gretel. They were not, of course, Hansel and Gretel, who came much later than the Cardinal, but their circumstance of abandonment appeared to be much the same.

The daughter of a scrap iron dealer in Fort Lauderdale, she had put the past behind her, including part of the name with which she had been christened. She preferred Claude to Claudine and Dr. Claude to Dr. Grabner. The past had been a mistake. The future would not be. Those who followed her learned to do so at a safe distance. Only Cyril Smoot had survived a more intimate partnership, a thing not easily explained, for Doctor Claude liked men least of the human species and had good reason: her father had been one. She made an exception in the case of Cyril Smooth whose persistent misanthropy endeared him to the Doctor and qualified him for his work.

Dr. Claude was a larger woman than necessary, but she was not as large as she appeared. A mistaken impression was gained from the size of her coiffure which, out of style in 1980, had become by 1990 totally anachronistic. But so was she, and the two went reasonably well together.

She had built the Alumnus Foundation upon a sound economic base and thus far no blemish had marred its public countenance. It was a different kind of youth advocacy organisation, one built upon the principle that the young deserved, indeed required, no less respect as an economic force in the world than their elders. Lack of self-respect was at the heart of the world's youth problems, Doctor Claude had written in one of her articles entitled An Economic Manifesto for Today's Youth. Self respect was a matter of self worth, she argued, and worth was and had always been an economic phenomenon. It was time to give work, worth and dignity back to the world's youth.

Most controversial of all was Dr. Claude's article entitled The Child as Commodity. Even among her most ardent admirers, who argued that she had meant no more than to dignify the child's status by assigning a value, there was an uneasiness. Others felt the chapter was nothing less than a proposal to legitimise child barter.

In defence of her argument, however, she produced a history of the economics of childhood

which even her detractors had to admire, so painstakingly and carefully researched was it. Here she elaborated the centuries in which children had been brought into the world for the value they would add, be they princes or paupers, and drew a pretty convincing portrait of a time when children not only "knew their place but knew that they had a place" — a line much quoted in her circle.

It was time for a new idea, and if there was one thing Doctor Claude had it was a sense of timing. Already she had put the homeless, the delinquent, the dispossessed, the refugee youth of the world to work, with the help of one or two like-minded and less than fastidious philanthropists. In Bombay first. Then Manilla and later Bangkok.

She provided cheap labour where it was needed. She created cottage industries. The children of the Foundation could be found in all parts of the world now, offering services which people came gradually to rely upon.

But it turned out that there was something else in which her clients were interested, and it was in this new market that The Foundation discovered its greatest possibilities and Doctor Claude her métier.

She had made this discovery by accident. The Foundation had been invited in by the government of a small Asian country to do something about the child prostitution which marred its public image and threatened the foreign aid upon which the people (or, perhaps more correctly, the government) depended. The only major requirement of the Foundation was that the "clean-up" be done quietly. This was precisely the Doctor's kind of challenge.

Instead of closing the bordellos, Dr. Claude bought them. It was a bold move and was not accomplished without the financial help of some far-sighted benefactors. The Doctor then redeployed those who had staffed the bordellos into her other youth enterprises and started a new cottage industry which manufactured small concrete statuary for private gardens.

It seemed a great success, until several months later government officials discovered that the clientele which had patronised the bordellos had not been so successfully "retrained," and, according to the first economic law, demand was again creating supply. The Doctor was recalled and put her mind to the challenge. In a moment it was clear to her where the solution lay, as well as the future of the Alumnus Foundation.

Paraphrasing Isaac Newton on the conservation of energy, Doctor Claude observed to Cyril Smoot and certain other of her close associates that it was not only nuclear waste and Trenton New Jersey's garbage which must occupy space somewhere on the planet but other unsightly things as well. An enterpriser who turns his back on a client is not an enterpriser, she said. "If you are selling carts and your clients want wheelbarrows, you take away three wheels and add one handle. You come out three wheels and a client ahead."

She turned her attention to the clientele and provided a programme of re-education — not of the sort which changes one's tastes, but which refines and disciplines them. If there were people who desired the company of individuals younger than themselves, then that company would be provided — but on the Doctor's terms and at her prices. Discretion, isolation and "the

client dossier" became the three legs of the Foundation's new initiative.

For the creme de la creme of these children the doctor created a different kind of opportunity. The "apprenticeship" amounted to pairing "candidates" with "sponsors" in a contractual arrangement through which the candidate would be an apprentice in the profession of the sponsor as well as his "companion." In fact in its first four years the apprenticeship had not worked out as the Doctor had anticipated, but in that same way in which fortune had favoured her other enterprises it smiled upon this one as well, for what at first appeared to be a failure turned out to be a success in disguise. Some of the apprenticeships were as one might have hoped, and these she offered as evidence of the scheme's practicability and humanity.

But most of her clients turned out to be fickle. In part this was a failure of the "arrangement", since the boy candidate and his sponsor had quite different views as to what this was all about, and the relationship, on that basis alone, was inclined to founder.

Recycling apprentices proved as financially advantageous to the Foundation as recycling old paper, glass containers and worn out developing fluid. The cost of the original contract, usually around \$10,000 — more or less depending upon the quality of the apprentice and the wealth of the sponsor — would under the new arrangement be considered an "initial membership cost", and subsequent "matches" would be arranged at a more modest premium.

Now was a time for growth. Repressive laws were again squeezing the open market and forcing people into under-the-counter transactions. With the right capital — which now seemed virtually within reach — and the right vision, things could come together. She had achieved Amsterdam. She was ready to move into Copenhagen. Cyril would be meeting with people in Frankfurt the next month and now, with BJ Enterprises within sight, Britain was just over the horizon.

There was on this morning a disagreement between Dr. Claude and her associate which had to do with the timing of their current project. Dr. Claude was eager to consummate a new partnership between a candidate in training and a sponsor. It would be a significant partnership, one on which both she and Smoot had done a good deal of careful planning. Smoot was more cautious. He thought they should wait a few more days.

He sat now with his legs neatly crossed, the crease in his trousers protected by a slight tuck above each knee. As he spoke he removed a piece of carpet lint from the cuff.

"This Bryce-Jones person is strange," Smoot began, "I mean, apart from the fact that he's mad. Andrew couldn't figure him out at all."

"Bryce-Jones was somewhat interested in Andrew."

"Somewhat is not a sure thing."

"Maybe we should take a different approach."

"Yes?" Smoot said.

"I think we've got Bryce-Jones cast in the wrong role. I'm thinking of the conversation between him and his butler about the boy in the chapel, the angel in the sunbeam. I think this is something we can work with."

"Like explosive putty."

"No," said the doctor, "Bryce-Jones was clearly infatuated with that boy and that knocked his pegs out and he left the school. A little schizophrenic. Seeing design in random newspaper numbers. He's here in his father's hotel trying to figure out the mission to which he has been called."

"I don't see how any of this gets us any closer to the Bryce-Jones money. We need pictures, videos, the whole thing. We aren't going to bring the father to heel with allegations and allusions. Being insane may be embarrassing in England but it is not against the law."

"You are like a digger-wasp, Cyril. You can't see alternatives. You've got your eyes too fixed on your goal. I'm telling you there is a better way to reach it."

"I'm listening."

"We don't pair him with the boy."

"After all I've been through to get him ready?"

"None of it wasted. We have another client who seems very interested in the Ames boy and is prepared to invest in the partnership."

"James?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"\$50,000."

"I won't argue with that. What's the contract?"

"Sailing. James owns a charter boat. He'll "apprentice" him as first mate. The boy grew up in boats."

"All right, so much for Bobby-Billy. I still don't see how you are going to bring Lord Jones to the table."

"I am not interested in bringing Lord Jones to the table." "But that is the whole point! The BJ empire. The holding company. The hotels!"

"Why choose blackmail, Cyril, when partnership extends its hand?"

"Partnership!?"

"Precisely. We are exactly what young Bryce-Jones is looking for."

"The Foundation?"

"The Foundation. It is why his spirits have sent him to Amsterdam. It is his mission. We'll take him into partnership. Put him in charge of the London office."

"But you have always said London was impossible."

"Impossible for us, Cyril. Not impossible for BJ Enterprises." "But he doesn't even know what we're about."

"Nor need he know. In fact it would be a disaster for him to know. No, Cyril, Michael Drury Bryce-Jones will be a great moral force in Great Britain, a voice on behalf of disenfranchised youth. It will be our biggest and boldest step and in the richest market of all Europe."

27. A Time Machine

Saturday, May 26th

My Beloved Anthony,

It's raining. Hard. It started last night. So no canals today.

This morning I stayed in bed watching TV because of the rain, and Cyril came and told me to get up. There's nothing to do, I said. Well, you can't stay in bed, he said. It's a bad habit. Sleep turns to sloth, he said. So he flipped off the television and then fussed around the way he does, straightening stuff up. Finally he comes to my bed and says "Okay, let's go!" or something like that. I said that he'd have to make me. He said I am being very childish. Well, I'm still just a kid, I said. He didn't seem to like that but he didn't say anything.

Well, then he didn't know what to do. You'd have to see Cyril to know why he's not the kind of person to get into a pillow fight with or a wrestling match. He's so bloody neat! Not neat neat but neat like an old lady's house.

You have an appointment with a gentleman this morning, he said. It turns out he sells cars in Liverpool. I have had five of these interviews now and it's a little clearer what's going on. These guys are hot for my pants. It's written all over them. But Cyril hasn't asked me to do any of that stuff, and if he does, I'll leave. I say WHAT? and he says calm down, it's just to do him — Cyril that is — a favour. The guy needs to meet a really nice kid, he says, so that he'll sign up with the organisation. There's a membership fee. It's quite a lot. Enough to keep me in Sugar Pops for quite a while. I get the message, which is that I can give a little back for all the hospitality.

We keep going through this thing about how I'm not looking for a sponsor, I'm looking for my father and he says yes, he knows that and he's doing everything he can to help me, which he is. And he says it is good for the organisation to have a nice kid like me around. And I say especially in that bathing suit, and he says it doesn't hurt, which gives me the willies a little bit. Then he talks more about keeping my options open, which I don't argue with.

You owe me a letter. How is everyone? Has Adam still got his tap turned off? I love you, my beloved Anthony, and I hope I will see you soon.

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Bobby

Monday May 28th

My Beloved Anthony,

Why haven't you written to me! I don't know what to think. It has been five days now since

your last letter. Your last one got here in only three. I went to the hostel yesterday but Peter wasn't there, only some girl who didn't talk English very well. She said that someone from the school had called, she thought, but she didn't know who it was, I'd have to talk to Pieter. Sounds like Soames-Winthrop. I'm glad I wasn't there. I wouldn't have known what to say to him. Probably he has the police out looking for me, I don't know. Anyway they won't find me there and no one except you knows that I am here. DON'T TELL ANYONE! I just feel that I'm getting close to something. The fellow I told you about has had everyone in the town looking for the boat, I guess. Some guy on a tour bus apparently saw it north of the harbour, so we're getting closer.

Please, please write. I feel like a kite and you're holding the string. Don't let go!

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Bobby

Tuesday, May 29th

My Beloved Anthony!

Have you ever been in a place where you were afraid to cry? It just sits like a great big piece of bread in my throat. When there was no letter from you yesterday I came up here and wanted to cry. I felt so bad. I'm afraid it's because you don't love me. I have tried to figure out why and I know it must be because Neville Summers spoke to you about something that he and I did once or twice. It couldn't be anything else. Or that Katherine told you about the night I spent there. But we always agreed it would be all right with a girl, didn't we? So it can't be her. It has to be Neville.

I feel like a dirty whore, Anthony. I guess maybe I am, like my mother. It's in my blood. And maybe you should get rid of me. I don't mean that, of course. I couldn't mean it. Not now and not here, because I am so scared. If you would just give me another chance, just write and say you don't hate me, and later if you decide I'm no good you can tell me then, when I can handle it. I can't now, I have to tell you that.

Oh, please try to forgive me, Anthony. You must must must know that I love only you.

LATER: I tried to cry but it didn't work. I laid down on the bed and tried to cry but I hate myself too much. I think I'm really scared, Anthony. I'm not just saying that to get your sympathy. All of a sudden this whole thing in the hotel is like a scary movie. I don't know what's going on here; I think sometimes I'm kidding myself about it being okay. Especially being in the pool, even with other kids there. It's like the Time Machine. Remember how Bryce-Jones told me about that once and I read it, about those people who just lie around in the sun eating and making love and the moorlocks down below harvest them like sheep? I feel like one of those people when I'm at the pool, like a crack is going to open up and I'll fall through into the jaws of one of those things. I actually had a dream like that.

I don't know what else to say. Please call me here; I can't wait for a letter. The number is at

the top of the page. Please, Anthony, don't leave me here alone!

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Bobby

28. The Mystic and Doctor Claude

It wasn't what Bryce-Jones had expected at all. Doctor Claude had been charming. Not at all the person his recent adventures had prepared him for. In fact he found himself quite at ease in her apartment. There were some remarkably fine paintings, a very tasty old port and a remarkable collection of Mediaeval furniture.

By the time they finished lunch, a confit of duck, an artichoke half with fresh mussels and an aged Chablis, a number of preliminaries had been dealt with. It was not that Doctor Claude had rushed him. He didn't feel that at all. He had simply been carried along by her enthusiasms. And by his growing sense of jubilation in the discovery that Judson had been wrong about the whole thing. The old man would be most amused.

Of course it looked so much on the surface like the other thing. But that of course was the way the Foundation operated. It was precisely what allowed it to penetrate to the very core of sin and corruption and rescue the children from the clutches of those who would demean them. Not only rescue them but set them up with promising careers and promising lives.

And the benefactors who had lined up to play a role in this world-wide crusade! It was a virtual who's who!

The hotel, of course, had been paying a price. That was true. But it was for charity and he was sure that, once his father understood that, the matter would be spoken of no more. And not only charity but that very sort which had stirred Bryce-Jones's soul from the earliest manifestation of his beneficent instincts: the rescue of the young from those weaknesses of disposition and circumstances of misfortune which so often conspired against them.

"Well, here's to the world's youth," Dr Claude said, raising her glass.

"To youth," Bryce Jones said and held his out. She touched it lightly with her own. "And to the on-going and even greater success of the Alumnus Foundation."

They drank. He put his glass down and when he looked up saw that she was studying him. It was not an unpleasant sensation. Not prurient or anything like that. Just interested. Perhaps even admiring.

"There is something about you, if you don't mind my saying so... may I call you Michael?"

"Please."

"There is something about you, Michael, that eludes but inspires me. I sense that there is some prescience about you, Michael. Your mind seems to occupy more space than one expects in an aura. Yours is absolutely radiant. I have felt it increasingly as we have talked. In fact with some force. At first I wondered even if you might anticipate my thoughts, but I think it is not that kind of sensitivity. More orderly and absolute than that. More celestial. What shall I say, more

mathematical? Is that possible. Am I at all on the right track?"

Doctor Claude's clue that she was very much on the right track included several days worth of discarded newspapers which Cyril had instructed the cleaning lady to preserve as well as the taped conversations. She had good reason to feel that she was on firm ground.

Michael looked deferentially at his glass and smiled. How long had he waited, how little had he dared hope for a sympathetic soul. After everything else it seemed too much. "Yes, I have some facility with numbers," he said at last.

"I knew it. Surely you haven't at your young age decoded the cosmic algorithm!"

"I couldn't say, I haven't heard of it," he replied eager to take instruction on that unfamiliar subject if such should be forthcoming.

"Well, it is so little written of nowadays. You have to go to the Mediaeval texts to find any mention. Mediaevalism is a hobby of mine, as you may observe around you. It means having the gift of sight which allows one to discover in an apparently random composition of numbers — say for example a time table or the financial page of a newspaper — a pattern of greater meaning."

It seemed almost too unfair; anyone with even an ounce of human sympathy would have thought so. But Doctor Claude was not so burdened. Was that a tear of gratitude glistening in the young man's right eye? It might well be.

"Yes, something like that," he managed to say. "And it is precisely what has brought me to Amsterdam, to this hotel, to this conversation. But you see, I thought it was the opposite of what it is. As though I were looking in a mirror. Until now I hadn't understood that."

"There is something of that as I recall in a manuscript from the Abbey at Canigou."

"Of what?"

"Of the mirror configuration. Of seeing things upside-down. I believe it has to do with whether one is right or left handed, but I may not be recalling that correctly."

"I am left handed."

"Well, there you are. I hope you will consider joining our modest crusade, Michael. It is asking a lot, I know, of a young man with a future such as your own. But I presume to suggest it because I think, as I have said, that it is no accident we are together at this moment. One must be sensitive to the currents of life and at times clear one's mind for other voices."

Michael, in whose mind there had been very lately a number of differing voices, felt a great tranquillity in the thought of their resolving themselves now, like a chord played on a great organ, into one abiding cadence.

"I am honoured that you should think me worthy."

"I too listen, my friend."

"Yes."

"And now..."

Doctor Claude made the smallest movement which was also the most delicate indication that the court was over. There was too much at stake to move any faster than seemed obviously in the interests of winning Bryce-Jones's dedication to the cause. He would need time now to reflect. He would need to be able to tell anyone who asked, including that meddling butler, that he was not being rushed into anything. "What a very significant day this has been," she said and walked him to the door. She decided then on the next step. "And it is not over. I want to invite you to join me this evening for a ceremony. You recall I spoke earlier of our apprentice programme."

"Yes, indeed."

"We will be formalising one of those relationships this evening. I think you might enjoy meeting the young man and his sponsor. I think it will give you cause for celebration, as it does for me each time, for that is the culmination of all our work. In a symbolic sense it is. Will you join us?"

"I should be honoured."

"Good. Six pm. In my office."

29. A Mercifully Short Chapter

Thursday May 31st

Dear Diary,

Today it is raining in my heart.

I have bought you today because I have no one else to talk to. I guess this will be the beginning of a new life for me, so why not start writing it down? Maybe later there will be someone who will want to read it.

It will be a new life for two reasons. First because I have decided to be an apprentice, and second because I almost died.

The morning after the last time I wrote to my friend, Anthony, I learned from Cyril Smoot that my father is dead. One of the people who is a sponsor and has a boat business found out. At two o'clock in the morning the houseboat next to his caught fire. He tried to rescue the people on it. There were two parents and a boy. They lived but he died. I wonder if he knew that he had a child who loved him as well and who wanted him so very much? I hope he did. I hope he always remembered that he named me Amius.

I felt very bad about that. I had told myself that if I didn't find my dad I would still get on okay; but when I heard that he was dead it was something I hadn't expected. That on top of losing my best friend. (I have promised myself that I will not write mushy stuff in this book because what good is it anyway except that it makes you cry!?)

A couple of times lately in the swimming pool I have felt bad, maybe because it is so relaxing and you can think, and all I could think about was being all alone. (That's not mushy; that is a fact; I am all alone and I'd better get used to saying it!) Well, I thought a couple of times about just swimming down and staying at the bottom, so this time I knew what I was going to do.

I dived in and I thought, this is the last time you will be above water from now on, like your mom and dad, and I held on to the bottom of the ladder. It was very hard to do. I wanted to let go, so I pretended that I was holding onto someone who was also holding on to me, and it worked.

I don't know what happened then. Mr. James — I think his name is Roger — rescued me. He saw me from his room in the hotel. They have balconies that look out onto the pool. He jumped off his balcony right into the pool and hauled me up. I have a fractured wrist. He said I had jammed my hand behind the ladder and it got hurt when he pulled on me.

He gave me artificial respiration and I came alive again, but I puked all over the place. Puking is one of the things I do very well. Later he stayed with me in my room. I was pretty sick for a couple of days, I guess. He is a very nice person. He has a big boat, bigger than my dad's was, and he is here because he wants an apprentice to be his first mate. I figure since he

saved my life I guess I owe it to him, so I'm going to sign the papers tonight. He doesn't like this place any more than I do and says that even though I'm not in tip-top shape yet it would be better if we got out of here.

He said that when I came out of it I was hallucinating and asked if he was my dad. I don't remember that but he says he told me he wasn't but he'd like to be. So I guess that's not too bad.

I haven't been straight with him yet, though, even though I trust him. So I'm still Billy Lee Deacon. He knows about my dad being dead, of course, because Cyril told him. But I didn't tell him about my mom. I said she died when I was born. Maybe it would have been better if she had. That's a horrible thing to say, but sometimes I am so mad at my whole life that I don't know what to do!

I didn't tell him about Anthony, of course, because I'm sure he wouldn't want me if he knew about us. And anyway, it doesn't matter now, because whatever was true isn't any more.

Later Cyril came in and asked if I was sure and I said yes and he asked if I was ready to do anything Mr. James wanted me to and I said I didn't care. I didn't want to talk about it. I don't believe Mr. James is that kind of person, anyway; and if he is then what's so *precious about my body anyway? (* Another rule for this book is that I'm not going to use swear words.) The only other thing is to go hang out in the railroad station. What else is there?

I am going to stop here because I feel a whole lot of mushy stuff coming up now and I know I'll get sappy. But I have to say this, which is that I love Anthony Parker with all my heart and soul and I don't care who knows it or reads this and that I hope he is happy and will always be happy.

30. Amius At Last

Doctor Grabner took little time to savour her successes. That, she believed, was one reason for them. It was the old fable of the tortoise and the hare. And so as she sat awaiting her guests on the evening of May the thirty-first, her mind, hostile to the past and impatient with the present, imagined the future.

Before her on the desk lay Bobby's pathetic letters to his beloved friend. If she ever had misgivings about her enterprises they were quickly dispelled by such sentimental drivel as this. She had neither respect nor sympathy for emotion which escaped its owner like so much steam when it might better have powered the will.

Bobby Ames would be a good match for Roger James, and she had wanted a good match for him. She would not be done with him when the bargain was struck. He was well connected and, of course, now he would be complicit. Once a customer always a customer, she was fond of saying, meaning not only that she could count on most of her customers to return but that, even if they didn't, she would always have a basis for returning to them.

There was a knock on the door. She slipped the papers into the desk drawer before pressing the buzzer. It was Cyril. "Well?" she said. "Are we ready for the ceremony?"

"I believe so. I wasn't able to speak with your new protégé. He and his manservant have apparently gone to explore the city. Perhaps he plans to buy a part of it."

"Don't be catty; it suits you too well, Cyril. One must always play against the grain. What about the boy?"

"He's ready."

"Is he recovered?"

"Recovered enough. He won't be out of here one moment too soon to suit me. If he'd actually suicided it would have been a catastrophe."

"It would have been nothing of the kind, but I am relieved that James didn't walk away from the contract."

"I suppose having saved the boy he feels some responsibility to him. It's not the kind of thing that makes any sense to me, but I'm not the one paying the money. Maybe he's mystical. There's certainly been enough of that around here lately."

"James is an interesting man."

"What do you make of him? All that money and all that travelling? Smuggling?"

"Of course."

"He must be good at it."

"He is one of the best. I have done my homework. He will be enormously useful to us."

"And he's paying \$50,000. The boy isn't worth it."

"He's worth twice that and I could get it."

Before the argument could continue there was a second knock on the door. Doctor Claude pressed her buzzer and the man of whom they had just spoken entered the room.

Now, if the reader suspects that this person, known to Doctor Claude and Cyril Smoot as Roger James, may have another, truer identity, and be, indeed, someone he has learned quite a bit about in a previous chapter, he must bide his time and be patient; all will be revealed in due course.

The man was dressed as if for a grander occasion. Doctor Claude had seen at once that he liked clothes. He probably liked other beautiful things as well, things which one was unlikely to acquire on the open market. Again her mind began spinning webs. She smiled.

"Mr. James."

"Dr. Claude. Mr Smoot." He held out his hand and Cyril took it, not reluctantly, Doctor Claude noticed. There were always things to be learned even about one's closest associates.

"Well, the moment draws near, my friend."

"Yes. I had not expected to be so pleased so soon."

"He is a remarkable lad."

"And knows boats. It's seems almost fated."

"I am sure you will find him a good companion."

"There is one thing."

"Yes?"

"Does he know what will be asked of him sexually?"

Doctor Claude looked at her desk with some distress. It was Cyril who spoke, surprised by the indiscretion of their guest.

"As I told you, Mr. James, that is a matter which is left entirely..."

"Please, Smoot, don't patronise me. I have \$50,000 here and I want to know what I'm getting. I am a man who likes things out in the open between partners, and as I understand it this is a partnership we're entering into."

"It is, indeed, but its terms do not include..."

"They damned well had better or this thing's off."

In her momentary distress, Doctor Claude fastened upon a Bruegel she had admired once in the home of a client. It had been stolen the next month along with some other valuable pieces and never found. There was that world of the never found. Never ventured, never gained, she thought, and smiled. "Please sit down, Mr. James," she said.

He did. She motioned Cyril to do the same.

"I am sure you understand that we must take the greatest precautions in an organisation of this size and vulnerability and you will appreciate Cyril's circumspection."

"It's a simple question. I want to know what we are agreeing about, that's all."

"You have found your way to this room through a long and informative process, I believe."

"I have. But now I am here and it's your assurance that I want. I am not prepared to pay \$50,000 for a deck hand."

"You are a direct man, Mr. James. I admire that. I hope we will have cause to continue the relationship we are beginning today in other ventures. In promise of that, I give you my personal assurance that you have not been misled, that the boy understands quite well what will be expected of him sexually, and yet it remains with you to develop that in a way which will be productive to you both."

"That's more like it."

"Cyril, why don't you go and fetch the candidate. Mr. Bryce-Jones should be here shortly. Now, Mr. James, can I offer you a liqueur?"

"No thanks, I'm fine. Who is this Bryce-Jones fellow?"

"A new associate who is entering the firm. You have heard of BJ Enterprises, I assume."

"No, as a matter of fact, I haven't."

"Well, the firm is interested in funding a new centre and the young man is coming on to undertake the local administration of that. He was interested in the apprentice programme and I thought it would be inspiring for him to see you and Billy Deacon make a team. "

"How much does he know?"

"Less than you and I, Mr. James."

"That's just as well."

"And the boy?"

"What about him? You are satisfied, I assume."

"Yes. I was just wondering about him. Where he comes from, how he got here..."

"That, Mr. James you must ask the boy. But I can tell you he is a totally free agent and without recourse."

"In other words, desperate."

"I am sorry that you have seen precisely how desperate." "Yes."

"He says his mother died when he was born."

"Really? I thought he told Cyril that she had drowned in... excuse me." There had been a knock on the door. Dr. Claude pressed the buzzer. "Ah, Billy, come in. We were just speaking of you. Well, you look quite recovered, except for that arm."

"Yes, I'm okay. Hello, Mr. James." Bobby held out his good hand and his sponsor took it, looking into his face as if he hadn't really taken it in before. Bobby dropped his eyes. What if Mr. James didn't want him, after all this? Had he learned something new that had changed his mind?

"Well, Billy, are you ready to begin a new adventure?" the doctor asked.

"Let's just get on with the formalities," Mr. James said. "Billy doesn't like them any more than I do. Is that right, boy?" Bobby nodded.

"You want to read this over?"

"I guess I should," Bobby said.

"Have you?"

"Yeah."

"Is it okay?"

"You hadn't better trust my opinion. This is a big thing."

"I guess if I didn't trust your opinion I wouldn't sign it anyway," Bobby said. He took the pen, scribbled his new name on the documents put before him and watched his sponsor write his own below: Roger Alvin James.

Then Mr. James said, "Let's have Smoot witness it. I always like to have a witness. And perhaps this Jones fellow as well if he ever gets here."

Smoot appeared confused at the suggestion. "I'm not sure that..."

"Go ahead Cyril, sign there below me. I guess we aren't going to have the pleasure of our new associate after all."

Suddenly the door was thrown open and collided against the wall like a rifle going off. A group of seven or eight uniformed men entered the room. They'd come to arrest him, Bobby thought, with rising panic, for... what? Oh, it could be anything: running away from England, using a false name, intending to engage in prostitution. He tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. He saw Mr. James pick up the contract before Doctor Claude thought to reach for it and hand it to one of the policemen. "That should do it," Mr. James said.

Then everything happened very fast. One of the uniformed officers who seemed to be in command began citing charges against Dr. Claude and Cyril Smoot in English: providing opportunity to others to commit acts of indecency with minors, kidnapping, illegal transportation of minors, blackmail — it went on and on. Mr. James handed over a microphone "bug" to one of the policemen. The two accused started yelling. And then, at the height of the confusion, someone behind Bobby cleared his throat and said, "I beg your pardon..."

"And who might you be?" a policeman asked.

"Why, my name is Bryce-Jones."

"Bryce-Jones?" Bobby gasped. "Michael Drury Bryce-Jones?" He swung around. There indeed stood a young man of about nineteen whose astonished reaction was that of one who has suddenly and quite accidentally walked in upon a scene of intimacy, or even perhaps indecency, where he had expected to find a table set for cards. Despite the fledgeling moustache, Bobby recognised a very familiar and welcome face. "I can't believe this!" he said. He crossed the room, suddenly indifferent to the other events going on around him. With his good hand he clutched the arm of his erstwhile protector.

Michael blinked a couple of times. His jaw dropped. "Ames?"

"Yes."

"Bobby Ames?"

"What?!"

Now everyone turned and looked at Mr. James. A moment before his face had shown an

amused and satisfied smile. Now it was ashen. He put his hand on the desk.

Cyril Smoot stood nearest to him, receiving a pair of handcuffs and in a more compliant mood than his superior.

Mr. James took the lapel of Smoot's coat in his hand and turned the bewildered accomplice toward him. "What is that boy's name?" he demanded.

"Billy Deacon."

"His real name!" Mr. James took the left lapel as well and it appeared he might lift Smoot clear off the floor — an unpleasant enough prospect, considering the other indignities of the afternoon — to win his compliance.

"Ames," Smoot said, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear it. "Bobby Ames."

Bobby, who was happily shaking the hand of his old friend, turned around. "Bobby Ames?" Mr. James asked him, his eyes blazing.

"Yes," Bobby said.

"Robert Amius Ames?"

Now Bobby was wary. It was all he had. The name was all he had. They couldn't have that too. Then there would be nothing left. And it wasn't for this man to speak it. There was only one man who had the right to speak it and he was dead. Bobby didn't answer. He moved closed to Bryce-Jones.

"No one has called you by that name all these years, have they?" Mr. James said in a more kindly voice. He crossed the room. "All those lost years." He took Bobby's head in his hands and kissed it and said, "I am your father, Bobby."

Perhaps it was the succession of surprises, each following hard upon the other; perhaps he hadn't really recovered fully from his broken heart and his broken wrist. Whatever the cause, Bobby Ames, self-styled expert at crying, didn't cry then, as might be expected, but fainted dead away.

31. Father, Son, and Lovers

That same night, lovers and anglers along the Scheveningen jetties might have seen, had they looked up from what they were doing, a large white schooner glide out into the North Sea, set sail in the fair south-east breeze and disappear in the direction of England.

In the cockpit of the Amius, Bobby clung to his father in a way which was both endearing and distressing to Will Raddock, whom they had just picked up at Schiphol Airport on their way to the boat. Endearing because he was so pleased with the outcome of these past few days and distressing because he saw laid bare the wounds which years of isolation and loneliness had inflicted on both father and son and from which in all likelihood their imaginations would never entirely recover. But although Clay cried, his son did not. It seemed that Bobby was still in shock at having his dad back from the grave.

There were many stories to tell. A listener's opinion of Dot Ames would not have been improved by any of them. But neither would he have found the conversation entirely unsympathetic or unkind. There was room now in their hearts for one who could no longer keep them apart.

Bobby watched his father's face, lit by the light in the binnacle, and was moved by the story of the two men. His heart ached for the years lost and he rejoiced in the years ahead, but he still could not weep. Something held him back, some unspoken fear that this too might be snatched away, that this ship, like others, might sink beneath him.

They had not realised how late it had become until Bobby began to yawn. He had hung on his father's every word until the exertion itself had tired him. The doctor frightened him even now, as one is haunted by a danger that is past but the remembered anticipation of which remains vivid. Though he was tired he was afraid to leave the company he had at last found.

But finally he did. His father almost carried him down the companion-way and into the owner's cabin. Bobby didn't undress. He didn't even remember his father pulling a blanket over him and bending down and kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"Well," said Clay, once back on deck and standing beside Will at the helm.

"Well," said his companion of twelve years.

"I think I had stopped believing it would happen."

"Finding Bobby?"

"Yeah."

"He's more than you might have hoped for."

"He's beautiful."

"That too."

When Bobby awoke he thought at first he was in his mother's boat, and his heart sank. Then he noticed the smells — clean and of varnish, fresh sea air and paint — and opened his eyes to the large, bright and cheerful cabin. There were a couple of stuffed toy animals in the corner of his bunk. One was a rabbit. He picked it up and examined it. Then it dawned on him that twelve years had passed and a lot of people had been on the boat. He started to put it back.

"It was yours," his father said, standing in the doorway. "The other one too."

"You kept them all this time?"

"It was all I had of you." Clay came into the cabin and sat down beside Bobby. "You can have either bunk you want. Maybe you can try them both out and see which one suits you best."

"Dad?"

"Yes, Bobby?"

"I need to call somebody."

"Anthony, the boy you wrote the letters to?"

Bobby nodded. The police had recovered the letters, all of them, from Dr. Claude's desk drawer. "There's a telephone. I saw it but I don't know how to use it."

"Can you reach him now?"

"Yeah. It's pretty early but that's okay."

"Then I'll show you."

They went into the main cabin and raised the marine operator on the ship-to-shore. Then Clay went onto deck where Will stood at the helm.

"Is he up?" Will asked.

"He's on the phone with his friend."

"Ah."

"I don't even know where this school is, Will. I guess there's a lot I don't know."

The south-east wind had held steady at about 20 knots through the night. Now it had died down a bit. The sun had risen and they had picked up a pair of sea-gulls which were following them in

hopes of breakfast scraps.

They talked about the events of the past 24 hours: Clay's underground adventures working his way up through the Foundation, his rescuing Bobby at the last moment from drowning. "Jesus, he's had a hell of a time," Clay said. "It was so close, Will."

"I know."

"He's taking a long time on the phone."

Will laughed. "You've got a lot to learn about teenagers."

"When did you become an expert?"

"I went to a boys' boarding school."

"And had sex with everyone."

"Not everyone, but my share."

"Do you think he has?"

"He sounds pretty monogamous to me."

"I'm not so sure. Those letters to his friend are remarkable. I can't believe he wanted me to read them!"

"You're his father."

"I never told my father anything like what he wrote about."

"You never had anything to tell."

"That's the truth. Did you — tell your father, that is?"

"No, but my father wasn't gay."

"I don't think that makes all that much difference."

"He wants you to know everything about him. He's making up for lost time. And he wants you to accept him, all of him, everything about him."

"I think he's got a girl-friend, too. He mentions a girl in one of his letters."

"Does that make you feel better?"

"Boys his age are supposed to be interested in girls."

"I wasn't. I was hot for a boy two years older than me."

"Well, I was."

"A lot of good it did you."

"It got me Bobby." "Now, that's a fact."

"He calls the kid his `beloved'."

"Anthony."

"Yes."

"That's his name."

"I know it's his name."

"You old prude. You know what?"

"I'm jealous of my son's friend."

"Are you really?" Bobby had suddenly appeared on deck.

He went to his father and hung on an arm.

"You weren't supposed to hear that," Clay said.

"You are, aren't you?" Bobby said it with a concern that quite perplexed his father.

"I'd be jealous of anyone right now, after all these years. No, I'm just kidding."

"You're going to love Anthony."

"I know."

"How come?"

"Will says he's beautiful."

Bobby turned to Will. "You saw him?"

"Briefly."

"He is beautiful, isn't he? But he's just a kid; he's not a father."

You don't have to be jealous."

"I'm happy for you. I don't think at your age I was capable of loving anyone the way you love Anthony. How is he, by the way?"

"He was in bed. They got him up. He was doopey. Anthony is no good for the first hour. He can't even find his clothes. But he's fine. He was still worried, and so was this little kid who pees his bed, because they hadn't heard from me personally and didn't know where I was. They're going to have a birthday party for me."

"June the tenth," his father said. "Seven thirty-seven Eastern Standard Time."

"You remembered the time?"

"Of course. I was hoping we could have this one together."

"Oh, at school it doesn't matter when we have them. It doesn't have to be on the day. The real one will be with you and Will.

And Anthony."

"I suppose you're eager to get back to St. Matthew's."

"I love the place, Dad." He laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Saying `Dad'."

Will gave up the helm to Clay. "I think I'll cook something up for breakfast," he said. "What do you say, Bobby? Could you handle a couple eggs?"

"Sure."

"I don't suppose you drink coffee."

"Not so early."

"Orange juice? It's canned."

"That's great."

Will disappeared down the companion-way. Clay put out his arm and Bobby snuggled against his father's chest. He put his hand on the big brass wheel alongside Clay's. Clay took it, examined it, felt each of the fingers. "You know, when you were a baby I used to marvel at your

hands. They were so small and perfect. And the nails. You bite them don't you?"

"Yes."

"I guess you've had reason."

"It wasn't your fault. Dad?"

"Yes?"

"You aren't really jealous of Anthony, are you?"

"No. Are you jealous of Will?"

"Of course not. He's your lover. I'm your kid. He is your lover isn't he?"

"Yes. And Anthony is yours?"

"Yes."

"I mean you do sleep with him?"

Bobby laughed. "Yes."

"Now you're laughing again."

"Because you're so shocked."

"I am not."

"You certainly are. Anthony thinks I'm shameless, too. You'll get along great."

"What about Katherine?"

"Oh, she was in the letters, wasn't she? And Neville."

"Yes."

Bobby described his adventure with the girl in the tea-shop and ended with, "I stayed with her the night before I sailed for Amsterdam and we made it together."

"How'd it make you feel?"

"Great! We did it five times!"

"My God, to be young again."

"But I love Anthony."

"And Neville?"

"You don't want to know about him. He was a mistake."

"We all make mistakes."

"Dad?"

"Yes, Bobby?"

"Would you like it better if I loved Katherine?"

"I'd be pretty much a hypocrite if I did, wouldn't I?"

"You loved Mom once."

"It was a mistake. And I don't think I really did. She made me think I did. I needed to think I could."

"Did you love Will the whole time?"

"Probably."

"So when you made me you were thinking of him."

"That's maybe going too far. No, I was probably thinking of me. That's something I did a lot."

"Me, too. Until Anthony. Dad?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I'll be gay?"

"You're only fourteen."

"Fifteen in nine days."

"I don't know, Bobby. And it doesn't really matter does it?"

"As long as you can be happy, and make someone else happy?"

Bobby broke away from his father's embrace and walked to the rail. He looked at the water: blue, green, black — white where foam folded back along the hull.

"Dad?"

"Bobby."

"Can you afford to send me to St. Matthew's?"

"Yes."

"Where will you be when I go back there?"

"I hadn't thought about that. Where would you like me to be?"

"Not very far away. Not on the boat someplace."

"Do you get weekends?"

"Every third one. Can we do things then? I mean with Will and Anthony, too?"

"You bet. And in the summer I'll hold you to that contract you signed."

A cloud came over Bobby's face momentarily and he turned away. Clay saw it and said, "That was insensitive of me, Bobby. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You know what I thought when Cyril told me you'd be hitting on me?"

"Hitting on you?"

"You know. The sex part."

"Oh."

"I thought, well, he saved my life, I guess it's his. I think I read that in a book once."

"It isn't, Bobby. It's yours."

"I don't want it to be all mine. It's been like that for too long."

"For me, too."

Bobby came back and leaned into his father. The boy seemed smaller to Clay, now. Not so mature as he had appeared at the hotel, like a hero out of costume.

"Can Anthony come on the boat this summer?"

"If he wants to. Sure. We're taking a group of Hungarian boys on a training cruise through the Baltic. He'll have to carry his own weight."

"Oh, he will. He's a good worker. But he'll have to learn some things. I can teach him."

Bobby seemed for a moment lost in his own thoughts. Clay saw him shiver, and suddenly he was reminded of another time and another grief. He removed his wallet and took out the worn scrap of paper.

"What's that?" Bobby asked.

"Something you wrote when you were ten and left at a school in Istanbul."

"How did you get it?"

"It was when I almost caught up with you but I was too late." The wistfulness in his father's voice caught him off his guard, as one is caught by a sudden gust of wind walking the top of a wall or surprised suddenly on a beach by the cold wash of an incoming tide, and an unwanted sadness came upon him. He looked at the paper. There was hardly anything at all to it, worn as it was from the years of its confinement and use.

"And you kept it all this time?" Bobby asked.

"Yes," his father replied.

He knew it at once for what it was. It had been four years earlier but the memory was still fresh. There had been a woman at the school who had befriended him and invited him, once or twice, to her house. He had felt safe there. She had taught him to do weaving on a small loom. He was to have gone there again the day after his mother called and told him he would be leaving. As always, he was to abandon his possessions. This time he was to go to the Hilton Hotel. A friend of hers met him there and they flew to Alexandria, where the boat was docked. He had left the note for the woman whom he had assured on one occasion that he had as nice a family as she had wanted him to have. His father, he had told her, was in the Secret Service. Now he read the note.

I have to go away from here. It's my father's work. He's coming to get me. Don't worry about me. Thanks for being my friend.

Bobby.

He felt a soft and heavily laden wind stir within him. It grew, picking up the light detritus of his past, disturbing clouds which had hung safely on the horizon. But now they moved in, slowly at first. A few drops only. One fell on the paper. Another. Then the storm broke. Bobby wept for the piece of unfinished cloth on the small loom, for the ten-year-old boy who had lied himself safe from affection. He wept for his loveless mother. He wept for so much time lost.

The note fell from his hand, blew off into the North Sea where the sea-gulls briefly examined it, found it uninteresting and let it spin away in the ship's dying wake.

Epilogue

Like the morning mist on the Smart, the memory of youth vaporises before the inquiring sun, turning what seemed like mystery into an ordinary Suffolk landscape.

Thus has your author written freshly of what was passing instead of what was past and has come inevitably close to the end of his tale. It remains now for his hero and those whose lives he has touched to accustom themselves to a more tranquil and careful existence, to reflect upon recent adventures and piece out, where they can, a pattern from which they may learn and upon which they may plan more satisfactorily the year and years ahead.

In the months since Bobby and his father stood at the helm of the Amius on her way west to England, your author has laboured to give these events a shape both distinct and discrete. In this he has been as honest as the events would allow and as hopeful as a sympathetic heart requires. Where his resources have been scant, or his reporters impatient to get on with their lives, he has invented. Not from whole cloth but, like a quilter, from the pieces given him.

Nor will he put aside now, for the want of more time and to make a more finished story, those events which have transpired since June the first, 1990, for they will certainly be of interest to those who have followed this adventure to that date.

Bobby Ames celebrated his fifteenth birthday on the 10th of June at a rather smart club in London. Anthony was there, as were Henry Skelton and Adam Spooner. A second party was held by the PJ Soiree on Saturday the sixteenth of June in Martin's room. Tom Carstairs was master of ceremonies. Bledsoe had paid a sixth former to buy a bottle of faux champagne as well as a bottle of the real thing and had then changed the labels and asked Clara to keep the now disguised bottle of bubbly hidden in the fridge for the party. With the faux, at Anthony's suggestion, three of them had surprised Spooner with a little party to commemorate his stay on Sprinkles Two. Anthony believed, correctly, that it would be hard for Adam to give up this relative luxury and that marking the occasion would help. As it turned out, he was right. But there were also other things in store for Adam which were destined to help him along in his poor little life.

It seemed only fair that Bledsoe should uncork his own bottle of champagne and, with a great deal of advice, he did so and they drank Bobby's health.

Then Small told a story about his Aunt's cat which had had a litter of seven kittens, one with two tails; and Wells said it was impossible to have two tails unless you had two assholes. Then Quin-Quiller told of spending a summer at his grandfather's farm in Lincolnshire and seeing horse's "dongs" that were two feet long. Swami announced to everyone's amazement that dogs didn't really screw. He had seen a programme on television, he said, where two ladies from Hampstead had got together for tea and to breed their toy poodles who humped around the rug while the ladies ate biscuits and discussed how they would split up the litter. One of the ladies had explained that actually the sperm got ejaculated outside and then found its way to the vagina. Much was made of this, the case being made that if it was true for dogs it might just as

well be true for people, and Martin swore that he knew a woman who had become pregnant simply by sitting in a chair recently occupied by a man, and that she had sued him for patrimony, and that, while the court had found for the defendant, he had relented and married her anyway.

Then everyone agreed that Clayton Ames was the coolest father they had ever met and Bobby promised all of them that they could sail on the boat, not having figured how to explain, if they did, the reason that his father and Will Raddock slept in a cabin with a double bed.

After an hour of stories and more than a few affectionate insults, Bret Tully had the bad taste to suggest that Anthony do a repeat of his earlier performance for Ames, but the suggestion was squashed even before Ames, who was occupied opening a large box tied up in the Sunday Times and sellotape, was aware that it had been made.

The box, which was collectively from the PJ Soiree, turned out to contain the already constructed model of a two masted schooner. Small had overseen the project which had taken many hours and, considering the number of inexperienced hands which had participated in its construction, was quite impressive. On the stern Martin, who had the best penmanship of the group, had painted Amius — Tuppington-on-Smart.

It seemed for a minute that Bobby was going to disappoint the expectations of his builder-benefactors, for he just looked at the boat dumbly. There was a silence. Since there hadn't been one for some time, it seemed all the more peculiar. Perhaps he was disappointed, Small thought, and looked again at the boat to see if it was less impressive an achievement than he had remembered. It wasn't, and when he looked at Ames he realised he was crying. Then there was a lot of hugging which was a new thing for the PJ Soiree and went down rather well. When that was over Small knelt and removed the cabin. "There's a special feature," he said, and pointed to a bed with two tiny manikins on it. They had their arms as much around one another as two intractable small plastic figures could be made to.

"They don't have any dongs." Carstairs said, examining them closely.

"You can't buy that kind, dingbat," Small said.

"You can at Youngs, " Tully said. "I've seen them."

"Not with dongs," Bledsoe said.

"I didn't notice," Tully said.

"Probably not," Wells said. "Youngs is pretty conservative."

"They have dolls for kids that have genitals," Mason said.

"Most kids do," Bledsoe said.

"Not the kids, stupid, the dolls," Mason said.

"My little brother has one," Spratt Slade said.

"I should hope so," Carstairs said. "They'll never let him into St. Matthew's without one."

"Without a doll?"

"No, you can get in without a doll. At least I think you can," Carstairs said. "Did you get in without one, Ames?"

"What?" Bobby asked.

"Get in without one."

"It's funny, I hadn't thought of that for a long time. I remember it was the first thing I saw when I went into the room. It was Anthony's."

"Did he let you sleep with it?" Tully asked.

"Of course. Didn't you Anthony?"

Anthony was red as a sunset. "Bobby!"

"What?"

"You're being had."

"What do you mean? Tully, are you all right? Why is Tully rolling on the floor choking to death?"

"Ames, they're not talking about dolls and teddies," Tully said.

"I know," Bobby said. Then he laughed. And everyone else laughed and finally even Anthony grinned. Bobby held out his hand and Anthony took it. Then they sang For He's A Jolly Good Fellow, Martin took the cake out of his closet, lit the candles and Bobby made a wish.

As circumstance would have it, the gang all went its separate ways that summer and Bobby wasn't called upon to explain the double bed on the Amius. He spent one week at Fairchild Hall for Anthony's grandmother's eightieth birthday party. Being there, he explained to Anthony, made it seem that nothing at all remarkable had happened in the past three months. Anthony's mother greeted him with a light kiss on his cheek as she always did and Lord Fairchild shook his hand as if it had never been broken at the bottom of a swimming pool in a hotel in Amsterdam. He liked that.

Meanwhile, Flanders and Swann were on their way to starting a family. The boys in Sprinkles will keep one from the litter; that is to say Adam will, the saying of which already puts me ahead of my story.

Mr. Ethelred twice took a group of boys over the holidays to study Stone-Age and Viking sites. Bret Tully helped him organise the outing and as a result of his success at that has become Secretary of The Wanderers, the St. Matthew's Outings Club. Tan Callahan went on the Ethelred outing and has become, in consequence, a serious archaeology buff. So, for reasons of his own, having less to do with the Vikings than the Celts, has Tom Carstairs. Quin-Quiller and Bledsoe, who has faithfully held to a regimen of weight-lifting for three months now, also went along, and Bledsoe found a rodent hole on the farm that turned out to lead to an undiscovered burial vault.

It was nip and tuck for Dr. Soames-Winthrop over the summer months. The governors did meet to discuss the matter of the runaway orphan, but by the time they did he was no longer a runaway and no longer an orphan. Still they felt the cold wind of scandal at their backs and chastened the rector to a more circumspect policy for the admitting of boys. "No more vagrant Americans!" one of the governors, an MP from Bournemouth, chastened.

The police came to talk with Neville Summers. They had apparently found his name on a list among Doctor Claude's papers. What they learned from him or the papers must be a matter of conjecture. So far not a word of the Amsterdam scandal has reached the newspapers. Your author did learn, however, from a friend of Summers', that some boys from the school who had taken a year off after their 'A' Levels to travel, found that, being of legal age, they could pick up quite a lot of money in Amsterdam. Neville apparently had been approached by one of these old boys a year earlier, as someone who might be willing to help in a talent search among public schools. He had, it was reckoned by his friend, been quite helpful. Bobby Ames was not the first boy he had approached. What annoyed Summers the most about the whole Bobby Ames fiasco, according to his friend, was that he had never been properly compensated. He had been promised quite a large sum of money and had counted upon it for the purchase of a vintage E model Jaguar upon which he had made and lost, it appears, a deposit.

He was forced to leave St. Matthew's, not as the consequence of his actions (no boys would actually come forth to accuse him) but because no housemaster would have him and a boy without a house is a boy without a school. The friend believed that he would take his last year at a school in Geneva.

Several boys moved out of Sprinkles House at the end of the year. All but three of the eleven-year-old mice were distributed among the other houses. Bret Tully was moved to Carpenter House because its new housemaster had been a college chum of his father's; but the boy made such a protest after two weeks that he was moved back to Sprinkles where he had had the foresight to ask Henry Skelton to hold on to his bed. The new housemaster was compensated with a new boy from a Mormon family living in Jersey. Sprinkles House had not been a wise placement for the lad who had been instructed by his local elder to make at least one conversion each term and, in trying to keep that promise, had made himself unpopular. Except with Carstairs, that is, who expressed a real interest in the book of Mormon and was willing to take instruction.

Blount-Morrison and Spratt Slade moved into Sprinkles House and are rooming together. They were invited to join the PJ Soiree after the Christmas holidays. There are seven other new boys

as well, including Quin-Quiller's younger brother. In the nomenclature of the school this means that the older must be called major and the younger minor, a tradition against which Quin-Quiller major has rebelled, changing his name to Lance Panther. The staff, all except for Henry Truebooth, have taken the rebellion in good form and address him now simply as Panther.

Mr. Felleway the maths teacher did not return for the Autumn term. There were rumours of his having planted microphones in several of the rooms in Carpenter House in order to overhear boys' conversations. There were other rumours as well, but then there always are when a housemaster leaves suddenly.

Michael Drury Bryce-Jones's story promises in the months and years ahead to be one of the most interesting. It was much more of a disappointment for him than anyone else to discover that The Alumnus Foundation was not as it represented itself, for he had found in the doctor's concept the quintessential expression of his longing to be of service to the young. Not willing, as he later put it to Bobby Ames, to throw out the soup with the chicken bones, he had prevailed upon his father to see what could be done. Surely, he argued, there must be, somewhere in the enormity of the organisation a framework which could support reform.

It could not be known immediately, of course, who among the hotel staff was in league with the Foundation, who had been coerced into complicity and who were ignorant of the whole affair. It could be assumed, however, for the sake of convenience, that those who still remained on the premises by the end of the hullabaloo were not the ones in whom the police might have been most interested. Five members of staff, including the manager, could not be found.

The "boys" were indifferently helpful in separating the guilty from the innocent. None, it appears, had been taken advantage of, or would admit to it. So finally all of the guests but one, whom the police had been tracking for quite other reasons, were merely interviewed, had their names taken and asked to remain available by phone to the police for the next week.

With the help of Judson, Bryce-Jones had regaled his father with his experiences in Amsterdam. Somehow in the telling Judson had managed to convey that, though the undercover operation had not been, strictly speaking, a coup engineered by young Bryce-Jones, the boy had nevertheless been a contributor to its success and probably much wondered at by the authorities for his combination of youth and audacity.

To his credit, Lord Jones has come through for his son. With a great deal of dedicated attention and determination he managed to get himself and several other prominent European businessmen appointed trustees of the organisation during the period of its investigation.

An inventory of its operations, assets and liabilities is, at the time of writing, still under way, while the majority of its legitimate operations continue to serve the young in several countries. Bureaucracy even when written small is cumbersome. When written in international terms involving ten countries, their social service organisations, police forces, banks and governments, it is imponderable. But Michael, whom the trustees have appointed to help press the inventory to its conclusion, remains hopeful that in another year the corruption, as invisibly spread within the roots of the organisation as a mycelium within the roots of an apparently healthy tree, will

be exposed to light and killed. Then it is his dream to run the organisation properly and honestly. This would be a daunting challenge for any twenty-year-old but seems not at all to intimidate this young man who continues to find reassurance in the daily papers.

He carries his work on in the same offices as were occupied by Dr. Claude and her staff and sits at Cardinal Salvaneli's table. The Amstelhoek Villas is now managed by Sidney Judson, an elegant and charming gentleman in his early sixties who is much spoken of among the city's hoteliers, having become, in a very short time, one of the most successful among them. It was, he says, time for a career change.

Where the Amius sailed in the summer of 1990 with its crew of four and a dozen Hungarian teenagers, what laughter heard, what tears shed, is another story beyond the compass of this narrative. Suffice it to say that Clayton Ames had a lot to learn about being a father, let alone the father of a boy as bold in his affections as Clayton was shy in his own. And Bobby had a good deal to learn about fathers, or at least this one, who fit none of the clothes he had cut painstakingly from his twelve years of fantasies.

But they got on, and there were times when Will and Anthony would leave them to one another and such misunderstandings as may have arisen over the past day or so (such insoluble bits as their love of one another would not, could not after twelve years, dissolve) would be suspended for the moment as they stood by one another, occupying the same imagination, prescient each of the other's fears and longings.

Anthony's affection for Clayton was greater than he let on to anyone except Will who was his confidant. Without Clayton, Anthony told Will, he would have lost Bobby. Not to the Foundation or the streets or even to Neville Summers but simply to necessity. Bobby had lost his capacity to love, Anthony said, startling Will with his insight. He wouldn't have learned how to again, Anthony explained, without his father.

Will for his part, though he kept it to himself, was also grateful, for Clayton, too, had developed hollow places within him where there seemed to be no feeling, places that Will could no longer touch, and these seemed gradually to be healing.

As for our hero and his friend, life was good again, as good as it had been at the beginning when ghosts had not yet found Bobby Ames' hiding place at St. Matthew's School.

The rest would pass. The mischief and silliness of their affection would return over the summer months.

One warm and windless night near Bornholm as they were sailing to pick up their Hungarians, they had dinner on the deck beneath the stars. Will and Clay had talked of earlier times in their lives, at college. Will told stories which Clay had never heard before, of his own prep school. They laughed. They became, for a while, one story.

"Look!" Anthony said and pointed to the sky. It was a shooting star. "Quick, make a wish," he said.

"I have everything I want," Bobby said. "You make one."

"I do too," Anthony said. "Doesn't someone want this star?" "I know," Bobby said. "Hold hands."

They did.

"Now everyone close your eyes. Now we will make a wish together."

"What wish?" Anthony said.

"You will know," Bobby said.

Will cheated. He opened his eyes. He looked at the other three with their heads bowed as if in prayer. Then he looked up at the sky as three more meteors trailed their brief glory across the heavens.

Other Books

If you enjoyed this book, you will want to read other recent fiction from The Acolyte Press:

St. Matthews Passion, by Jared Bunda

The first book about Bobby Ames and Anthony and their lives at St. Matthew's. It tells of Bobby's struggles, as an American lad, to find acceptance with his English classmates, of "candy striping" and other brutal games played by the older boys on the younger. A vivid, amusing, exciting, erotic tale of boys on their tumultuous journey through adolescence.

The Sixth Acolyte Reader

The most recent collection of short fiction on the subject of boy-boy and man-boy love. Eddie in God Moves in Mysterious Ways, lost spawn of Texas white trash, is toughened up at Reverend Potter's Christian Academy into an athlete and finds two people to love. Bob Henderson tells of breaking out of boy-abstinence with an attractive 13-year-old. Two boys are remembered/addressed in Hakim Bey's sinuous Yohimbe Poems. The eternal boy is more amusingly encountered in tales by Alan Edward, Daniel Mallery and Jacques de Brethmas, who shows him at his most intriguingly deceitful. In other stories he walks away from a plane crash in Australia, picks up a man at a futuristic swimming pool, talks at quite cross purposes with his boarding school dorm master....

Lucky Lips, by Ron Elan

Ernie Willet is eleven, a good-looking, popular, athletic kid, but two years earlier he lost his father, suddenly, in a car accident, and he's been trying ever since, oh so very hard, to "be a little man". He almost convinces his mother. He has support in 16-year-old Rick who lives down the street, whom he worships and who secretly adores him. But what is he to make of Gordie Lewis, his classmate and "best enemy", who tackles him every time he sets foot outside the school and now invites him to his home for the weekend? Are their wrestling matches for fun, to win, or are they aiming at something else? In this novel, Ron Elan explores with sensitivity, humor and excitement the world of an 11-year-old boy, with all of its surprises, pathos, fears, and erotic aspects. Ernie and Gordie are probably the most unlikely, and possibly the most delightful and interesting couple you are likely to meet in fiction this year.

Shakespeare's Boy, by Casimir Dukahz

The Elizabethan glory. Shakespeare, Marlowe. The last days of England's greatest queen — and a pure Casimir Dukahz creation, 13-year-old boy-actor, Ruy.

Ruy is a fatherless, motherless, cheeky and irrepressibly sexy street urchin who achieves

instant, tumultuous fame on the stage of the Globe Theatre playing Juliet (although he would rather do Lady Macbeth). Off stage he draws to himself, as moths to a candle, all manner of men, from tramp to King, and boys both rich and poor.

The last book, and only novel, the immortal "Duke" wrote before being called on that last great trek in 1988, at the end of which we are sure he found himself atumble with mischievous and exploitative youngsters in the heaven he so richly deserves.

The Fifth Acolyte Reader

A wonderfully varied assortment of young males flash through these pages: In the great Dutch writer, Jef Last's touching novella, 12-year-old Karel discovering the pleasures of his body in the Dutch dunes as the canons of World War One rumble in the south; Latino Luis in the debut of a 14-year-old writer giving free vent to his bursting pubertal desires, Teddy the teenage American tennis player on a wild trip through central Africa in one of the last stories of Robert Campbell; Leonardo the wily and proud Far East boy prostitute; Jacques the innocent baptizing his Jesuit math teacher; heterosexual Lionel who helps his favorite uncle turn an important corner in his life; the Himalayan boy Dorje-Buddha in a delightful tease by Alan Edward; finally tidewater boys, past and present, in one of Hakim's most beautiful poems.

Kim, My Beloved, by Jens Eisenhardt

The story of the passion of a very fallible, anxious young man for a cheerful schoolboy; how the boy slowly responds to the man's love; and how they then must deal with the outside world (in this case a rural Danish boarding school) which can never learn of that love and its secret consummations. A very personal and well-written autobiographical novel which explores the depths (and heights) of a long-lasting and extremely intense man-boy relationship.

Singularities, Book One, by Robert Campbell

A collection of short stories which Gore Vidal called "Interesting enough to be banned in Texas." Robert Campbell had a most varied talent. He could adopt the voice of a redneck preacher, a small town embittered cynic, a naive Caribbean Island boy, a middle-class Midwestern American teenager. He was as at ease writing about East Africa as his own American Middle South.

There are tales in this book about two boys struggling with their gay consciousness, love between men and boys which span the troubled waters of inter-racial suspicions, the dance of courtship and power politics at a Southern military school, a 14-year-old psychopath as beautiful as he is deadly. Perhaps his most amusing creation is a remarkably clear-sighted lonely-hearts columnist who gives the most scandalous advice to teenagers with sexual problems.

Dance of the Warriors, by Kevin Esser

The middle of the 21st Century. Medieval Christian militarism has reduced America to a dispirited province of failing crops and decaying cities. Gays and boy-lovers are packed off to the Camps in Utah, never to return. The only rebels are `vags', young male members of a warrior cult living in such wastelands as the abandoned reaches of North Chicago.

This is the ultimately uplifting odyssey of two boys, 13-year-old Teddy and his great Chicano friend Cisco, who must fight their way through epic battles toward freedom.

"Kevin Esser's Dance of the Warriors is totally hot," writes Hakim Bey, author of Crowstone. "I suspect this book will become the man-boy love statement and a sort of rallying cry to the masses," writes Camilla. "I've certainly been feeling the urge to scrawl VAG POWER on every wall I see."

Solos, Duets and Improvisations, by Wallington Fuger

Sprawling beside a rock-bound lake, all but isolated in the Canadian North Woods, is the Farmer Academy, a private prep-school for musically talented boys. Joel Forrest is a 14-year-old freshman there, as precocious on his violin as he is naive about his growing body and its erotic potential. His budding good looks attract Craddock, the Don Juan of the senior class. Roxy Knowles, another freshman, has only once in his young life touched another person intimately — and falls in love with his straight roommate. Sophomore V. I. Mallory only knows erotic humiliation at the hands of another senior — until one evening he is asked to look after the small son of his flute teacher.

Solos, Duets and Improvisations is a frankly explicit tale of love and lust, ecstasy and revenge, as half a dozen boys thrash their way toward self-realization during the course of one tumultuous academic year.

Non-fiction from The Acolyte Press:

Pulling It Off, by Dr. Joseph Winchester

In the 1960s, when the sexual revolution was at its peak, Dr. Winchester started taping boys' accounts of their own masturbatory experiences and practices; he continued even into the repressive 1980s. From this unique archive he extracted over 400 of the boys' quotes and built his book upon them, adding only a sparse but intelligent commentary.

191 boys relate just how they got started masturbating, where they do it, what manual and other techniques they use, even their favorite lubricants. They talk about mutual masturbation, who their partners are, group activities, sex clubs and what precisely goes on in them.

Pulling It Off gives the general reader the most detailed picture ever published of this universal

and healthy activity in the young and ripening male.

Getting It On, by Dr. Joseph Winchester

From the same archive of recorded conversations with pubertal and early adolescent youth which he drew upon for Pulling It Off (see above), Dr. Winchester has now let six boys tell, each in his own words taped at the time it was all happening the tale of his ongoing sexual experiences with other boys and men.

Duane was orphaned at ten and spent his boyhood fleeing the "kid archipelago" of foster homes and care facilities, surviving on alliances with boy-loving men. Teddy was a typical small-town boy who graduated from pubertal "show and tell" to accepting responsibility not just as lover but as hero-guide to a young Indian lad. Jean-Michel loved the wilderness surrounding his father's north woods lodge — and the advances of the guests and their sons even more. Davy was radicalized when his older lover Ty was jailed for propositioning a Chicago teenage hustler. Cory played "greasy pig" wrestling games with his peers, made love to his best friend Barry, to an older man, and to that man's pubertal boy-friend.

Despite all this intense same-gender sexual activity, all six of Dr. Winchester's subjects now are living heterosexual lives — and don't regret one minute of their former encounters.

It's Okay to Say Yes by J. Darling

How do Western boy-lovers — and, perhaps of more importance, their boys — really fare in those fabled equatorial lands of danger and sexual opportunity? The author has devoted the last 12 years of his life to the love and care of boys in the Third World. He has visited all those places where a well-publicized boy-love "scene" exists, and many more where it doesn't. He has suffered persecution, even imprisonment, but gained the and fulfillment he's sought, at the same time helping his boys, them of illnesses, supporting their families, buying them the basic necessities of life — and a few coveted luxuries.

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