



Ikarita

alan
edward

KIT
by

Alan Edward



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Author's note

Kit is the boy in the book, not the boy on the cover. Cover design is a matter falling outside an author's control.

A. E.

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Chapter One

The trees stand in a wide even circle and the thin hedges are spun from trunk to trunk and from each trunk to the center. In between the hedges are triangles; all the triangles are equal. To prove that all the triangles are equal, produce a line running from a to b, then to c, then back again to a. Cease running.

Quod erat demonstrandum. Now I can walk from tree to tree so as to remain at all points equidistant from the center; the center of the web being a point having no magnitude I cannot safely advance to a distance lesser than that of its radius. Now it must know and it must see that I will not come to it, that I will not enter the round web, and I too must know that I am at all points at the rim so at each tree I turn through one hundred and eighty degrees and strike each trunk over and over with my tightened fist so it can hear me cry out and I and it can know me pinned irremovably into me-Kit by the bright sharp pain, again, again, again, held in the outer circle freshly marked here, and at the next tree, and at the next tree.

Ticuerunt omnes. Now the I is opening, the other I still sleeping, but this watching unblinking from the center, the dark body rearing behind it, the eight legs stirring, unfolding as it wakes. But I cry out *look, look,* because in the great black pupil is only the white grass and the dim sky, but I am not in the I, I am me-Kit, safe, separate. Away from the point of the I, me-Kit has position and existence together with magnitude. Now I will go back to the House. Once I feared them, the people in the House, but now I will return there running and with eagerness; the pain, the control, the hurts, the needles are all, I know now, the precious things that will guard me, that will hold me anchored in Kit-me so that I cannot, even in sleep, float into the garden and into the web, to be there in an instant drawn into its center and to be drowned in the black I.

But I do not go yet; I wait, because something is different. He too is at the rim; although he has two I's open and I am in both of them, Kit-me is given back whole, for a millisecond I am Kit-me without the cost of hurt, yet he is still he-he. And after I have laughed I am Kit-me again and even more when I have cried. And after I have cried I am still in his I's, but dimly, and I do not believe it any more and I turn and run to the House where they will make me know again.

Turn thine eyes away from me, for they have overcome me. Out of the green secret womb of the trees he formed and grew, and now he is almost at the wood's edge, plimsolls lightly scuffing the grass and the small wild flowers, and as he comes the light and luminous mist, lifting before the sun, rolls back into the leaves and into the low branches. At the beginning there was only a neat small form partly screened by foliage, back-lit, framed between the black trunks, then, against the dark, an impression of gossamer locks, ends floating in the light early wind, and now, in the clearing where the sun cuts the trees at a steep angle and light spears down and across here and everywhere, the shadows of long lashes on curved and soft cheeks, a shy glance from china-blue eyes, and at last, where the forest opens with the sunlight spilling all about him, the heart-stopping confirmation of seraphic loveliness, christened with the full golden light of the morning, standing quite still now, face and palms raised for a moment, then looking straight ahead, full, steadily.

The man is uncertain at first whether the boy sees him or not; the boy appears to be looking past him, beyond him, his gaze wide and unfocused. But it is more certain that when the man smiles, there is a half-smile in response, one that broadens unexpectedly until all of the boy's face lights up and he almost laughs; then the smile vanishes as if cut by a switch, the boy's eyes fill and his lips droop, then tears begin to spill out and run down his cheeks, and his shoulders lift and quiver. He raises his hands to his face and

the man sees with alarm their skin broken and covered with fresh blood; as the boy rubs his face with his knuckles the blood streaks it horribly, all the way down to his chin, tinting the ends of the blond strands of hair scarlet where they curve round his ears and neck. The man has started to his feet, but the boy, sobbing aloud, moves first; a twist of corduroy-clad hips and he is plunging away through the undergrowth and has gone, gone in the direction of the long low building that the man knows is on the other side of the fence.

Too late to follow now, impossible to follow; an instant earlier Baxter's freshly-wrought *persona* cracked like a piece of hollow china, and was now self-destructing to shock-waves that went on and on until there was only a mound of fragments and a finger of white dust that blew into the trees and vanished. It had begun unmistakably when the boy had stopped at the edge of the clearing, and had ended just as categorically less than a minute later; there was nothing recognizable left.

No-one, but no-one else, You Celestial Sorcerer, would pursue a man to a barren island with nothing but salt water all around, a man resolved to take the Cure and with thirst already fading, and then dangle from heaven a vintage so delectable that angels would weep to see it on earth, to see it swim just beyond reach, sparkling in the light vaporous morning like silver, a vintage of a rarity hardly even dreamed about, and even now in retrospect, still only half believed.

Baxter felt sick. But now he knew why what should have given inexpressible pleasure caused him, Paul Baxter, this sharp, acute pain, this twist in the guts that now was closer to terror than any other emotion he could think of; it was the sure knowledge of helplessness, of final and utter thralldom.

He had lusted vainly, he knew then, after those strange gods, he knew it for certain. *My Lord, I agree to accept treatment.* His head lowered in penitence, shaken a little from side to side as if in half-disbelieving recognition of his own depravity. Then there was that psych-whatever who used the word 'orientation' a lot. *That was it;* he had begun to believe it then. All of them had believed it together, Baxter, the psych., and the judge, and they had all seen it together – Baxter's emotional compass dexterously spun by science through one hundred and eighty degrees to be precise, this neo-Baxter thereafter carried forward by gusts of desire from the diametrically opposite pole, from the Bermuda triangle into the Gulf Stream, from... Good word, orientation. *In view of the assurances that have been given to the Court, I am prepared to take a lenient course of action. The effect of a Treatment Order under Section 60 of the Mental Health Act is as follows.*

Eighteen months. *Eighteen months.* And he was supposed to go on believing it, even wanting it, with that *petit blond incroyable*, that cerebral-fuse-blowing, stomach-tightening, knee-loosening wood-elf playing, undressing, bathing, going to bed, sleeping, dressing a space of some yards and two walls away. The Child and Adolescent Unit; he could just see it. The tall fence that separated it from the wood was partly overgrown and broken in places; he supposed that the boy had slipped through one of the gaps. He turned his back abruptly on the Unit, charged unbearably now with the boy's presence. He went towards the main building, knowing that he had to make a decision soon, but suspecting that the power to decide had already been wrenched away from him. Then he found himself wondering again about vintage. Seventy-one perhaps; an unparalleled year.

"Twelve years and five months," said Fogg-Willerby, "One for you, no doubt about it."

"I really don't know, F-W, I really have to say I don't know. These days, one's time..."

"Nonsense, Partridge, could have been made for you. Preadolescent penile fixation, I'd say."

"Really?" asked Partridge with a slight quickening of interest.

"Well, aren't they all at that age? According to you bods, that is." Fogg-Willerby got up. "The file's out in the car, I'll get it now. Funny sort of noise, by the way, *tunka-tunka*; don't like it."

"What bods?"

"Eh?"

"According to you bods, you said. One simply wishes to know to what category one is being assigned."

"Send not to ask. I was simply thinking of the analytical bullshit I'll get in your report. Perhaps if anyone was any different when you'd finished with them... You'll find the file interesting, anyhow."

"Really, Professor, it must be said that if you expect me to be of assistance to you – "

"You would be of infinitely more assistance to me with a spanner, as things stand," said Fogg-Willerby, "Come out to the car with me and read the file at least; I've a little bottle of something for your Emergency Cupboard tucked away with it."

"So why didn't you say that at first?" asked Partridge, going with him to the door.

"And enhance your *oral* fixation? Come, that would never do. But it would oblige me, seriously, if you would see this boy; he's in the Unit now. I knew the dad a little, you know."

They went into the driveway, opened the bonnet of Fogg-Willerby's car, and looked in.

"A loose plug-lead," said Partridge, "leading to arrhythmias, tremor, and, on acceleration, to the sound of which you complain." He put it on. "So don't say that psychotherapists are impractical. You'll be able to give me some family background, then?"

"Not much, not to discuss helpfully. And I wouldn't have the detachment, old boy. But your Miss Thoroughgood tells me that she will have full particulars available for you at the next Case Conference."

"I don't doubt it," said Partridge. "Are you coming in again? Mr. Nursing Officer Trenchard said he had some problems."

"New ones, or the old ones?" said Fogg-Willerby. "For once he'll have to unburden himself to you. I've got to get across to the other side. A new admission, Section 60, sex maniac apparently. Good of you to fix the plug, though. Funny things, cars. One should do one of those courses, those evening courses. Walk over to the other side with me, will you?"

A wall some eight feet in height separated the two buildings at this point; they walked down the path between the climbing frame and the breeze-block fortress that together represented the Unstructured Play Area.

"You'd prefer to talk out of earshot?" asked Partridge.

"Mainly, I've lost my key; I was hoping you'd be able to let me through. A tragic business, that. You must have heard of him, radio-astronomer they said, but most likely Defense. Advisor to every Government committee in sight. Life Peerage in the offing – or conferred in the last List, I can't remember."

"The Howard affair," said Partridge. "It still crops up, doesn't it?" In effect, did he fall or was he pushed?"

"Specifically, did he drive his car over the cliff at Polperro *with* his wife, on a perfectly clear day and a good road, by accident or design. An open verdict in the end, as I remember, but who can say? Lot of strain, might have flipped. Anyway, it looked like the boy was getting over it to an extent, was taken in by kindly relatives, went on with his schooling and so on. Then gradually – well, you'll see him, form your own conclusions. Textbook psychosis, I'd say; you must show him to the students."

Partridge locked the gate behind Fogg-Willerby and returned to the Unit.

"We must," he said vehemently, "get some good *material* for the students, you know. Plenty of nutters on the adult side, of course, but not enough nutty kids, not nutty *enough*, not *interesting* enough. Jesus."

"What's the matter with you, then?" Staff Nurse Sylvia Armitage appeared unexpectedly from the region of the sand-pit, carrying an abandoned tricycle.

"Sit down for a moment, Sylvia."

"I'm afraid I have to get on, Harold. I'm sorry."

"Well, I'm sorry, too, Sylvia, very sorry to have to be so direct, but I'm very surprised that you can ask me a question like that, very surprised that you can ask what the matter is when you know very well what the matter is."

"Let's get back to the Unit, Harold, there's the Drug Round soon. We can talk when we get back."

"No we can't, you know we can't. Please sit down."

They sat on a bench; Sylvia indicated the file that Partridge was holding.

"And there's the case conference," she said. "I saw Prof give you that; I expect it's about the new patient."

Partridge opened the file, read for a moment, then closed it again.

"A round is only a round, Sylvia, but has it never occurred to you to wonder how one can give help, I mean truly *effective* help as a therapist, while there remain in oneself unmet needs, unquiet wishes, unfulfilled... longings?"

"No, I can't say it has occurred to me."

"But, Sylvia, is it not so very true, I mean for each and every one of us. You see, so to speak, here I am, and there...in effect, are you. Man, *know thyself*, said Plato. And woman too, of course, one must say it these days. But is it not only by our truly knowing ourselves, both of us, and in resolving together those basic needs which, after honest self-scrutiny, we recognize in ourselves, that we can thus proceed to effective knowledge of our patients, to be *true* therapists, *true* members of a helping profession. Sylvia... what time do you finish this evening?"

"I have been shot many a line in my time," said Sylvia, "but I really think you deserve some kind of award. Can we get on now?"

"It may be a harsh thing to say," Partridge said, "but you do, you really do, remind me of F-W at times. In his case, fixation so far back that he's almost invisible, that it's hardly true. Developmentally he's still on his potty, I mean shitting over everyone still."

They rose and walked back to the Unit.

"And where do I fit into this system?" asked Sylvia lightly.

"You see, there you go again."

"Oh God, go where?"

"Trivializing; joking denial. For you, Sylvia, I am ultimately objectified; I am the penis your father took away from your mother. How regressed can you get, Sylvia?"

"If you give me these case-notes, I'll take them upstairs for you."

The office of a child psychiatrist is a place of small colorful possibilities, bravely heterogeneous aspirations and, in minute panorama, of innumerable sights of the preadolescent *psyche* represented, fixed, and solidified in wood, sand, and water. Before the District Refurbishment Program the appointments of Dr. Partridge's office had been basic, with a sand-tray at one side of the room and his desk at the other. The sand-tray, complete with a miniature tank regiment and a bazooka that fired wooden matches, had been set beneath the only window, conveniently placed for particles or clouds of contractors' sand to be sent spinning across the room in the draft, though not usually as far as the desk and Case File, in some degree protected by Cleaning Ladies against the advancing tide. Now the room was divided by an imaginary line into the Play Area and the Interview Area. The Play Area, consisting of the sand-tray with a miniature tank regiment and a bazooka that fired wooden matches, was now positioned so as to catch the demi-gale from under the door, and the Interview Area, consisting of Partridge's desk and case-file, was positioned to catch the light from the window, and would have done, had not the

Automatic Environmental Control, or electrically-operated Venetian blind, jammed in a partly closed position, providing the entire office with a distinctive green coloration of which all of its occupants tended, in some degree or another, to partake.

"My informant was the Great-Aunt," said Miss Vera Thoroughgood, taking some notes out of a shoulder-bag. "The boy has been living with Mrs. Reeding and her husband for six months now, since just after the loss of his parents. There is of course no direct information on early developmental influences and interpersonal relationships, but hopefully from what information I have some relevant facts may emerge.

"Mother married at age twenty-five and the client was an only child, born five years later," continued Vera. "This delay might indicate a certain ambivalence on the mother's part about pregnancy or child-care, or one might on the other hand speculate that, given the high-status career of the father, there was some – "

"But we have no firm information?" said Partridge, turning a page.

"No – but making certain interpretations from what-"

"One only makes interpretations after a sufficient period of analysis, of scrutiny, of information-gathering. Some central facts at this stage, perhaps. The birth, and after..?"

"It was a normal full-term birth. Milestones all fairly early. Relations with parents in the first years do, from what I gather, suggest something of a mixed-message situation in that mother tended to vary somewhat the degree of warmth and attention given the boy, and was also absent a good deal, although it seems that the relationship was basically a warm one. Father played only a minor role in the upbringing, being often abroad, therefore the mother was ostensibly the main caring parent, though it does seem to me that there may have been in their relationship the beginnings of a double-bind situation that could later have given rise to an autistic picture, such as now we – "

"What in heaven's name is an 'autistic picture'?" asked Partridge, looking up.

"I was quoting directly from the referring doctor's letter, Harold," said Vera blandly. "And, even though it is not my habit to use medical-model language, I felt that in the present context the term would be meaningful to you."

"The habit is one which you should not abandon," said Partridge. "Vera, please don't get into diagnoses, and wrong ones, at this stage."

"I really can't see why it's wrong, Harold," Sylvia Armitage said. "I mean, I've been looking up autism and it all fits, all the symptoms – the language difficulty, the delusions, the odd impersonal behavior, the screaming fits and self-destructiveness, the... Just a minute, I jotted it all down, it's here somewhere."

"You can always tell an autistic child, they say," said a student nurse to the Case Conference at large. "Apparently they all have this extraordinarily attractive, almost angelic appearance that's absolutely classic."

Nursing Office Arthur Trenchard nodded.

"Yes – you know, when you've been around for a while like I have you develop this kind of sixth sense about diagnoses, and as soon as this patient came in I said to myself, 'Hallo,' I said – "

Partridge rapped the table with his pen.

"Once and for all," he said emphatically, "the boy is *not* autistic. We are not assembled here for a seminar and there isn't time for one, but please do take it from me that the autistic syndrome is invariably present from birth and associated with severe mental deficiency, among other features. Now, neither of these apply to this boy. The symptoms are of onset in preadolescence in a previously extremely bright youngster. At the most we're seeing an acute psychotic or schizophrenic illness, but we really are not

dealing in diagnoses at present. So can we please have some facts, just to complete the history? Vera, I don't like to act the heavy chairman in these meetings, it's not compatible with my view of myself, but I do suggest that you present the history under relatively simple headings. For example, now that we've had birth and milestones, what about schooling?"

"If that's truly how you want it," said Vera, "I can rattle off impersonal facts quite readily. Schooling... Prep School five to eleven. Common Entrance to Public School age twelve; a report from the school suggests considerable academically-oriented achievement and satisfactory peer relationships. He participated in the usual elitist games and sports favored by such institutions and all seemed to be set for him to take his place in the school and social hierarchy – until, of course, these first Easter holidays."

"Now, we don't need to deal on the event in detail," Partridge said. "The question of suicide – "

"It's quite possible," said Vera. "The strain of maintaining a certain life-style..."

"Yes, but one can't say that the precise reason for the parents' death has much bearing on the problem as we have to deal with it now, can one?"

"One might," said Sylvia. "Mightn't there be a question of inherited factors, weaknesses, perhaps. The boy's self-destructiveness."

God, she was brainy too. And what a pair of tits.

"Certainly," Partridge said, "inherited vulnerabilities to stress are factors one must always consider. However – if one might again return to the history – I understand that the child, apart from being naturally extremely upset at first, seemed to adapt to some extent, at least to begin with."

"I gather the boy actually found them – after the accident, that is," said Trenchard.

"No, that was just a little tabloid melodrama, the usual thing," said Partridge. "He was at school when he learned of the tragedy; then he left for a while, I believe."

"Yes," said Vera, "but it was planned that he would return to the school, though not immediately, and Mrs. Reeding, being sufficiently privileged to afford it, engaged a private tutor for him for some months."

This arrangement seemed to be working well for a time, and then it seems that the boy became increasingly withdrawn and that he gradually stopped communicating. Mrs. Reeding referred to odd games he began to play at that time; he would sit in a room endlessly drawing chalk lines on the floor – not much at first, but then for hours on end, seemingly carrying out calculations, measuring lines and angles and so forth. To begin with, Mrs. Reeding was not seriously concerned about this; the boy had in fact acquired a good deal of mathematical ability at school, and she imagined that much of this represented tasks set by his tutor. But the tutor too confessed himself puzzled. And the drawing went on.

Let's see... Yes, the angles then began to give way to masses of radiating lines, all coming out from the center like a spider's web. He would measure them and talk to himself, and then he began, so to speak, to *involve* himself in the diagrams, that is, he would squat in a corner of the room surrounding himself with chalk triangles and squares and would sometimes remain there for hours. On these occasions she described him as often looking frightened or even 'terrified'; when she was elsewhere in the house she would on occasions hear him calling out or crying, but he would never say what the matter was. Then, to go out, he would never cross the room directly, but would go round the extreme edge staring all the time at the space in the middle – though there was nothing to be seen. If she took him by the arm and tried to pull him across the room he would scream and struggle, and always break away."

"Didn't they ask him about all this?"

"Of course. But he wouldn't say anything at all; he got upset and frightened when pressed, so they didn't push him too hard. But in the end Mr. and Mrs. Reeding took him to see the family doctor, in whom it seems they had some faith, and he was basically reassuring. He spoke to them of the eccentricities of – well, if not quite of genius, of an extremely bright kid, associated with delayed shock. They went off a

little happier, I gather. And then the eye thing began."

"This was with the pictures and so on?" asked Partridge, thumbing through his own file.

"Yes – it began with his turning portraits and photographs to the wall, then he took to blacking out the eyes with biro or charcoal. There were a number of fairly valuable portraits in Mrs. Reeding's affluent home and she admits that, when the boy finally poked through the eyes of one of these with a hot skewer, she at last lost patience and punished him severely. Well, after that the damage stopped, but – "

"I'm not surprised to hear it," said Trenchard. "And I must say, that if I had been the boy's aunt I would not have waited so long before – "

"Mr. Trenchard – no value judgments at this stage, please," said Partridge.

"Am I, as a member of the team, permitted to make a comment or am I not?" asked Trenchard.

"Yes, please – go ahead, then," said Partridge resignedly.

"I have made all the comment I think necessary – for the moment," said Trenchard, leaning back somewhat and folding his arms.

"After that he got worse again – much worse," Vera continued. "He spoke less and less, sometimes just in monosyllables, and there were increasingly frequent tantrums and screaming fits. Sometimes he would hurt himself, it almost seemed deliberately, banging his head on the wall or cutting himself – till finally there was this almost total regression, where – "

"'Regression' is another interpretive term that it would be best not to introduce at this stage," said Partridge. To use a word like that you have to know what you mean by it, and – "

"I do know what I mean by it," said Vera. "In a multidisciplinary team a social worker is more than a mere gatherer of information, you know; I must be allowed at least a *measure* of interpretive comment, and 'regression' in the present context I regard as a return to more infantile patterns – to, in this boy's case, a growing measure of dependency, principally on the aunt. In the end she had to help him with all kinds of things – washing, dressing and so on. He just didn't seem to connect any more. Also he went back to using his 'baby' name, Kit, instead of Christopher, and responding only to 'Kit'. And he would use the name, when he spoke at all, to refer to himself in the third person. For example, instead of saying, 'I want it', he would say 'Kit wants it'. This, I believe, still persists. Well – that virtually brings the history up to date. The aunt was simply unable to cope any longer, Professor Fogg-Willerby was consulted – apparently he had known the father slightly – and it was agreed that the boy should be admitted to the Unit for observation."

"Thank you," said Partridge, drawing a line. "One final point – how does the boy's aunt see the future? Could she, for example, see him returning to live with her permanently and resume his schooling as originally planned?"

"I didn't confront her with that, Harold. Where she's at now is, I think, still looking to a hospital-oriented solution to the boy's problems. To get her to look further I'll have to work with her a great deal more, though I don't feel that she is basically rejecting of the child."

"Very well," said Partridge. "Mr. Trenchard, you and the rest of the nursing staff have had the opportunity of observing the boy for at least a brief period. What have you got to tell us?"

"Thank you, Doctor." Trenchard opened his file. "You will appreciate that the relatively short time that the child has been in the Unit has given us limited opportunities to carry out observations. But thus far one can say that the child has *not* settled satisfactorily into the Unit. He has tended, in fact, to avoid staff or other-patient contacts and has been largely mute with no spontaneous verbal speech, thus he has been almost completely isolated in the group, not, as far as I can see, having participated in any peer-group interaction whatever."

"Do you agree with this assessment, Sylvia?" asked Partridge.

"More or less. He doesn't speak and he doesn't mix – just like Mr. Trenchard says."

"So that was all, Mr. Trenchard, then?"

"This is all I can report at this preliminary stage, Doctor. Except for one problem regarding the child's general attitude. He has already left the Unit once without permission and was found in the wood at the back. This apparent tendency to wander naturally gives rise to some concern among the nursing staff; perhaps you would let me know what your instructions are in this respect?"

"Have a word with him – or perhaps Sylvia would be best."

"I think I should speak to the boy myself. He's in the dormitory now; I sent him there after he was found."

"Well, please don't add to the boy's troubles, will you? Just take it easy; lock the back door if you must. All right then, everybody, that's about as far as we can take it for the moment. I'll interview the boy tomorrow and try and decide on the best line of treatment; we'll have another conference after I've seen him. Sylvia, could I have a word, please?"

In the filtered sunlight of the boys' dormitory, Christopher Howard sat on the edge of his bed, still fully dressed, chin in his hands, face half hidden by his trailing blond locks.

"We don't make the rules for *our* benefit, we don't make them for fun; they're not for our good, but for *your* good," Mr. Trenchard was saying. "You know quite well that you are not allowed to leave the Unit without permission, yet you didn't ask us, you didn't even *tell* us that you were going out. You may not realize it, but we have a duty to look after you, we are responsible for you here. And now, you see, you have hurt yourself, and perhaps that will be a little reminder to you that wrongdoing sometimes brings its own consequences, its own punishment. But we don't want to be too hard on you the first time, so we'll say no more about it. Just remember that we're all here to help. I know that you've got problems – as indeed who hasn't – and I want you to feel that we're always here for you to chat to whenever you want to... to chat."

The sun moves in a bright parallelogram across the carpet spreading to a wash of pale luminosity as the sun drops between the high elms, and soon it will be lapping at the feet of this improbable pin-headed Canute, perhaps it will rise, drowning, silencing these relentless banalities. One, two, three, into the sea. Now you see him, now you don't. The light broadens and is a near-circle around both of us now, but there is not a magic in it, he will not drown, yet I still do not look, I keep my I's down, I hold them away from him. At last it is quiet and there are only the leaves rustling as the wind rises and falls, *swish, swish*, like tiny waves falling and retreating, further, further away.

"Well, I'm sorry that you've got nothing to say to me," continued Mr. Trenchard. "Perhaps you'll want to confide in us, open out to us, some other time. Remember that we're all here to help you. Now I'll leave you to think over what I've said, and then you must get washed for tea."

Almost as soon as Trenchard had left, the door opened again and the room was full of noise suddenly; there were high voices and running feet. The boy on the bed looked up, startled.

Three smaller boys had come into the room and then had stopped short when they saw him. The oldest of the three, who might have been aged about eleven, came over, looking at Kit closely and with great interest.

"Hallo, what's your name?"

He sat on the bed opposite and bounced up and down, then looked across at the others.

"I told you. I knew there'd be a new kid today. Last night I hear Partridge telling Concord Charlie to get the bed made up. Hey – " He looked at the new boy with fresh interest. " – you're hurt. Been in a fight, then?"

The other boy's limpid blue eyes were fixed on him; after a moment he shook his head.

"Bet you have. And now Concorde Charlie's put you on punishment, that why you're in the dorm. Pretty good work, your first day in."

"Who?"

The eleven-year-old laughed. "Trenchard – the Nursing Officer, you know. We call him that because of his big conk, didn't you notice it?" He squeezed his nose, pressed it upwards, drew down the corners of his eyes, and squawked, 'Concorde Charlie calling. Come in, zero-three, it's your bedtime'."

The two smaller boys shrieked with laughter and one clapped.

"Shut up, you two. So that's Concorde Charlie. He's been at you already; I can tell. What you in for, then?"

The boy bounced on the bed some more. He was a neatly-built child clad only in a colored tee-shirt and frayed undersized jeans. He was faintly brown-skinned, with green eyes and well-formed cheekbones that imparted a pert, elfin appearance. He had white even teeth, mischievously curved lips and uncombed dark hair. Small, slightly grubby hands clutched the edge of the mattress and his bare toes thudded on the carpet.

"How's this for a trampoline, then. Watch me!" He stood on the bed and bounced even more extravagantly, three times, then missed the edge of the bed and fell heavily on the floor. His face still expressionless, Kit rose and helped him to his feet.

"Thanks." A little breathless, the younger boy perched on his bed again. "My name's Kevin. That's Joe and the other's Dave. Joe's in for running away and Dave pees his pants."

The littlest boy flung himself on Kevin with sudden and silent ferocity, punching him with both fists. Kevin, unruffled, gently dislodged him.

"What are you... in for?" asked Kit, his eyes still on the boy opposite him. He spoke slowly and hesitantly, almost as if English were an unfamiliar language.

"I bunk off of school," said the elfin visitant cheerfully. "It's not half bad here, though we do have some lessons." He wrinkled his nose at the recollection, then said, "Tell us what you did, then? Been nicking maybe? I do too sometimes." He bounced up and down again, but warily, on his bottom.

"Don't – don't know," said Kit, bewilderment in his eyes.

The eyes of the other boy narrowed a little. "Here – you're posh, aren't you? I reckoned you were, the clothes and all."

He bounced again, considering.

"I don't mind," he said generously. "We'll be mates, you and me; we're the two biggest. How old are you?"

"T-twelve."

"Me too – soon. We'll show 'em. I'll teach you a few tricks, you'll see. Listen here – "

The door opened and a nurse came in.

"Ah now, boys, it's washing yourselves you should be and the tea nearly ready."

"Okay, Bridget, don't flap," grumbled Kevin, getting to his feet.

"Nurse Rafferty to you, me boy. Get on now, the tea on the table and the very sight of you as would shame the tinkers themselves."

The three youngsters scampered out, but the slim blond boy by the window remained where he was, his eyes as before half-hidden by the long loose strands of his hair, his face again half-covered, dropped again to his palms.

The large nurse came over and looked down at him.

"Ah, the poor lamb," she said quietly. "And very strange it must be to you, the likes of you in this kind

of a place. Will you not be coming for a drop of tea, it's hungry you'll be now, sure?"

After a moment the boy nodded, not looking up.

"Well, you just come in a minute now. You know the way, and looking for you we'll be."

She went out leaving the door ajar, but the boy still did not move.

The void has extended, its margins receding away and away as they had done before slowly, but now more rapidly, now at an appalling, terrifying speed. He cried out, his hands slid over the smooth edge frantically seeking purchase, fingers to interlock with his own, some quick warm entrapment, but now he was spinning away into the black and now it was within him. He was alone where terror possessed him; his chest heaved with inner emptiness. None of the grotesque inhabitants of this place would hold him from the dark or the I in it – least of all that over-familiar jumped-up orderly or whatever who had mercifully left him some minutes ago. God, to 'open out' and be sucked into those stupid fish-eyes. The boy Kevin he did not dislike, but he did not think Kevin would be his friend, knew he could not protect him. The doctor could, but would not.

Yet there had been something that day, and he began to remember it again. Then he had been caught in two I's where for once there had been no terror, for an instant it had been warm, and the great darkness had been pierced before sweeping in around him again. At the rim of the circle, by the trees. No – by one tree, the third from the fence. Tomorrow, before dusk, he would go to the forest and he would find it again.

Chapter Two

Fogg-Willerby's Section 60 was waiting for him when he arrived, seated on a bench outside his consulting room.

"Ah, good afternoon. Come in, come in. I've got all the files here, all the letters, the legal bits and so on. Sit down, please, then we can get on with the preliminaries, eh?"

Fogg-Willerby read the file in silence for a few moments, then said, "Hmm, Paul David Baxter, aged thirty-four. You *are* Baxter, by the way, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Baxter."

"Good. Just as well to be sure, eh? People never look quite as you'd imagined them, do they?" He looked up. "You're no exception, Mr. Baxter."

"I'm very sorry," said Baxter, "but I'll pop out and get my dirty raincoat if you like. I left it in the hall."

The Professor turned over a page, took his spectacles out of their case, then put them back again.

"Mr. Baxter," he said, "today I have dealt with a class of congenitally defective medical students, a deputation from Crumpford Community Health Council, a psychotic adolescent and a loose spark-lead. For Providence to ask me, after it all, to confront what our American cousins refer to as a 'wise guy' is too much, just too much. I've had a hard day, Baxter, I've had a hard day."

"I'm sorry, Professor," said Baxter. "All I can say is, so have I. Being here is rather... well, not very pleasant. Nervousness, perhaps... A bad joke, really. I'm sorry."

"Well, well, well, never mind, let's begin again. Now then, there's a lot of ground I don't want to cover for a second time; it's all been gone through. Let's look forward, not back, eh? You heard what the Judge said, and understood it, eh?"

Baxter nodded.

"Good. And no doubt you told the judge that you were going to accept treatment and start all over, give the thing up, put it behind you and so on, sort your sex life out and so on, eh?"

Baxter nodded again.

"Well, don't tell it to me. I've heard it all until I could say it myself – and have someone believe it. It won't do, Baxter, it won't do."

"I – I'm sorry, I don't quite..."

"I mean, when they say it before you catch 'em, then it's got some credibility. But after the verdict – oh, no – oh, dear me, no."

He finally put on his glasses and elevated them to the degree necessary to bring Baxter centrally into his line of vision. "Oh, no, no, no," he said. Then his tone moderated a little. "Now, look, I'm sure you're not a bad fellow, not a bad fellow at all. I mean, in a way it's a damned pity, really, a well set-up young fellow like you. And then ending up in a place like this. What d'you do it for? What d'you do it for, eh?"

Baxter thought, then shook his head. "That's far too big a question to begin with," he said. "Even at the best of times. And now... well, there's the shock value of it all, so to speak – the red-brick walls, the noise, the... sorts of patients here, the smells... I think I could just tell you my name, possibly my address. Perhaps we could work upwards from that. But the other... I'd better just say that I don't know."

"Good – an honest reply. That I'll write down," said Fogg-Willerby, doing so. "Now let us, as you have wisely suggested, go on from there. The factual stuff I don't want, it's all on file, social workers and the like put it together. I mean, if I want to know when you came out of nappies I just look it up on page

two; we don't need to go into it now, eh?"

Baxter smiled. "We begin to agree," he said.

"Good, good. But just let me get the general background. Put you in perspective at the outset, if we can. Tell me a little about your parents. Are they still alive?"

"Oh, yes – though I don't see so much of them; we were never very close. I never got on with my dad in particular, though I am told that is a fairly common pattern in people with my – "

"And in many others," said the Professor. "Dear me, Mr. Baxter, dear, dear me, let's not get into Penguin-size psychology at virtually the first moment of our acquaintance. Let's be very plain, very simple, let's talk as man to man. Inform me, but don't instruct me. Were you at boarding school?"

"Yes – for about three years. One year boarding at a Prep-school, two at Public School, then my mother took me away."

"Why was that?"

"For very mundane reasons. I wasn't working hard enough, failing my exams. I needed maternal supervision, it seemed."

"And then?"

"I did a little better, got into University, came out with a moderately good degree, then went into teaching. As you may know."

"And the reasons for your choice?"

Baxter hesitated. "Well, that's it, isn't it?"

"Can I presume, then," said the Professor, "that we are about to strike a somewhat *less* mundane note? Well, so we should. And, again, let's begin at the beginning. Now, when were you first aware of this – um – fascination with little boys?"

"I've asked myself this a few times and, to be frank, I can't remember a time, even when I was young, when I *didn't* have a crush on some other kid. I mean, I remember even when I was nine I would hardly let the boy next door out of my sight. He was about eleven then; I cried when he went away on holiday, even though it was just for a week. And he used to stay with me sometimes, he used to have his bath with me. That – that was the bit I liked best."

"I am not a prurient man," said the Professor, "or even an inquisitive one, but, to complete the paragraph, what happened under the soap-suds?"

"Nothing, actually." Baxter laughed. "I just – well, loved being with him, looking at him – that's all. But a year or two later, when I started to – er – masturbate, it was always Colin that I thought about. To begin with, anyway. There were many Colins after that, of course – very many."

"All through school?"

"All the time. Oddly enough, the age of the boy didn't vary much. When I was small, I remember I was always watching the boys in the top couple of forms in the Prep-school and thinking how nice some of them looked, especially in their football shorts, or in the swimming-pool." He laughed nervously. "I still do. Then it seems, as I grew older, that I sort of overtook the age of the boy I was interested in – if you follow me. That always stayed much the same."

"Early adolescence, that was the magic age, eh?"

"Well, rather younger. It's a boy, so to speak, on the brink of adolescence that I usually find... stirring."

"And what is it in particular about a boy attracts you?"

Baxter thought, then spread his hands. "God. Why are men – most men anyway – attracted to women? Answer me that first."

"So I'm to enter another 'don't know', eh? But you misunderstand. I just wanted to find out what type of boy in particular appeals to you – sometimes it means something, sometimes not. Is it the butch type –

you know, muscular and athletic and so on, or something more in the effeminate category, eh?"

"I wouldn't say that either extreme would appeal to me very much," said Baxter thoughtfully. "My notion of attractiveness is, I would say, very conventional and boring, the sort of boy that any old lady would drool over, the choirboy on the Christmas card, perhaps, limpid blue eyes, golden locks, a slim, lithe body..."

Christ. Not for a moment had the image of the boy in the woods been far from his conscious awareness, but now it was back with x-times intensity, rendering him almost dizzy with its sensual power; he had stopped speaking abruptly, and the Professor turned inquiring eyes on him. But it was useless; now while he was here, he would all but live in the wood, he would spend every moment of his spare time there now. He thought then about telling the Professor, of asking for a transfer to another hospital – but there it would be worse, he would still remember, and there would be no remaining possibility of meeting, speaking... ever.

The Professor was writing again.

"Yes, I see. Well now, Baxter, that I can follow, surprising as it may seem to you. But so could most people. I mean, people do buy Christmas cards, lots of them, with pretty little choirboys in front, old ladies, at any rate, do drool over little blond moppets. Nice kids *are* appealing – it's a maternal or paternal thing really. But what I don't get is... the other. You're no fool, you know where playing around with kids gets you, you know what the consequences are, eh? Why d'you do it?"

"Why?" Baxter smiled faintly. "Who's the expert here, who's the one with the answers – me or you?"

"You be it."

"Professor, I think you're simply being provocative. You must know that it's never a question of this, that or the other. You fall in love and everything else follows naturally. You don't think about it. Still, I expect *you've* got a theory; psychiatrists always have."

"You don't deserve one. There's nothing special about you, Baxter. But, for what it's worth, it's simply a matter of being hooked – that's about the size of it."

"Yes?"

"Crude, perhaps, and not quite the word I wanted, but close enough. A form of imprinting, if you like, Konrad Lorenz in reverse, the drake imprinted on the little duckling – not the other way around. Bound to happen, you know, if there's only the two of you swimming in the pond."

"Very graphic," said Baxter, after a moment or two.

Fogg-Willerby took off his spectacles and wagged them. "Now, don't be cynical, my boy. Encounters in an emotional void have powerful consequences. There you are, not much affection from your parents, shoved in a boarding school, then who comes along but a nice little boy, perhaps from the same kind of home, and... there you are. Your first experience of love, of affection, a model for all time. You're trying to re-create that now, over and again."

"It's too simple," Baxter said.

"If you reject anything for that reason," said Fogg-Willerby, "you're a fool."

"Perhaps," said Baxter. "But tell me something else, please, and make that simple, too."

"Certainly."

"Why isn't it all right?"

"Eh?"

"Just that. Very well – let's follow your lonely-hearts theory. Very touching, a bit contrived maybe, but as it happens there was something in it in this instance. We were fairly lonely and friendless, both of us, we liked being together, and we did something that we *both* enjoyed. *He* didn't complain; they only found out by accident."

"It isn't all right because you're in here for it."

"Oh, come on," said Baxter impatiently. "I didn't expect an evasion like that; you can't mean it."

"I certainly do. Again it's too simple for you, isn't it? Society, Baxter, has its rules, its taboos. And it's bigger than you, you'll find that out if you break those rules; then it'll dismember you, Baxter."

"I'm still disappointed," said Baxter. "You know, I once heard a chap say that doctors are simply agents of 'our fascist state'. Now, I don't go along with him politically, but I think now that there he might have had a point."

"Then you're a fool twice over. Doctors, young man, have to help patients live in society *as it is*, not as they or anyone else might want it to be. We're there to help you adapt. We oil the wheels, Baxter, we oil the wheels. But never mind society for a moment; what about you?"

"What about me?"

"For you the alternatives are simple," said Fogg-Willerby, half closing the file. "The same as before, in fact. Either you agree to accept treatment or go back to – where you were before. I think that's clear; which is it to be?"

"I don't know," said Baxter. "Frankly, I've always believed that one 'treats' for an illness, and only for an illness. Well, I don't see myself as 'ill', and I don't know that I want to."

For a moment Baxter thought of asking the Professor to send him back to prison; then he remembered again the one good reason why he should stay.

"Come now," said Fogg-Willerby, "apart from the little matter of getting yourself in here for a few months, can you honestly tell me that this thing has never caused you a moment's distress, a moment's unhappiness?"

"Of course not," said Baxter. "But in every –"

"Look at it like this. If I were to say to you, look here, Baxter, here's a pill that'll cure the thing just like that, turn you one hundred percent straight, just like that, would you take it, eh, would you?"

Baxter considered, then laughed. "I probably would," he said, "just out of sheer curiosity."

"There now, that's a beginning. Curiosity means receptiveness, a belief that after all there may be something different for you, something better. Stay with us for a bit, try the treatment for a bit, even if it is just out of curiosity."

"I don't know. I mean, what sort of treatment did you have in mind? I might as well tell you I'm not having any of those electric shocks."

"Dear, dear," said Fogg-Willerby. "Dear, dear, dear. Not only do you have the wrong friends, you read the wrong books. To tell the truth, I didn't have any particular kind of treatment in mind, not just yet.

I just thought I'd talk to you some more, a few more times. Or would you consider that equally aversive?"

"No – I don't think I would," said Baxter, considering, then smiling.

"Good." Fogg-Willerby stood up. "Thursday, then. That's when I come here next. I'll see myself out."

My tree places me in the third dimension, beyond the rim and above the ground. The branch is a line holding me above the sweep of its I's, though I can see it rearing, looking, searching, both I's open now. They are wide and the red sun is in them and the web trembles with its rage that they cannot lift above the flat plane, their own dimension. Here, though its arms stretch and grope through the web like an army of long snakes, here perhaps I am safe until I drop again. So, the tangent having been drawn, construct a right angle, but *upwards*, and produce to meet line ab, being the first branch of the third tree. The length of the line is constant, and I am at point c. Here now I am I-me, I am Kit-me, here I do not need to hurt,

but it will wait, it shouts its anger and I cannot stay long away from it, a line having no width; soon I must come down, soon I must fall, and as I think of that and see the I's my muscles grow soft with terror and a scream begins to grow and bulge in me. Then, before it comes loose from me and I am falling, the rage in the I's is yellow, then white, then it is burning, smoking, blackening, then shrinking, the arms pulling in, in... Then there is nothing there that I can see, the odors freshen, the leaves move, and birds fly in and sound again. Now I am remembering it, now it is working again, the magic of the third tree; it is all around me now, I am in a warm bath of it, and I lean my head back against the trunk, soaking in it, feeling it hold me, stroke me with its adulation.

For some moments Baxter hesitated to move, even a little; the recognition that the boy was there again had been delayed as he was almost hidden; he continued to stand still and remain silent partly from a conviction that when he spoke the boy would drop from the tree and run away – though logically there was no reason why he should – and partly to preserve intact his belief that the near-magical impression from below was not just a trick of the filtered light, a compound of angle, light, and shadow. Baxter stayed where he was, and the boy stayed where he was, *genus* wood-boy, his legs, clad in neat green corduroy, swinging from the branch, his blond hair lying on the rough trunk, the wind lifting it, trailing it across the bark like thistledown.

Unexpectedly the boy looked down.

"Hullo," Baxter said.

"Hello," the boy said after a moment.

Baxter came closer; he leaned against the trunk, looked up and smiled.

"I'm Paul," he said. "I think I saw you yesterday, didn't I?"

The boy didn't reply, nor did he remove his unbelievable blue eyes from Baxter for an instant; the man began to feel disconcerted.

"Are you coming down?" he asked lightly.

The boy looked at him for a little longer, then shook his head. His eyes still fixed on the man below him, he moved outwards a little, then patted the branch beside him with his palm. It looked as if he smiled hesitantly, but the smile had gone almost before Baxter noticed it. But Baxter had climbed on to the branch in so short a time that he surprised even himself; he found himself perched there full of mixed emotions, partly feeling slightly ridiculous, partly intoxicated by his nearness to the boy.

The smile returned, lighting the boy's face for an instant more. "Kit," he said, still watching the man. He tapped his chest. "Kit."

Baxter laughed. "You Tarzan, me Jane. Jolly good." It was a bit crazy, both of them perched in the tree like a pair of chimpanzees. He laughed some more, then saw that the boy's eyes had filled with hurt and were beginning to glisten and spill. He stopped short. God – the kid had some kind of speech problem and he, Silly-Bugger Baxter, had begun their acquaintance by making fun of him. He had begun to mumble some kind of apology when, unexpectedly, the boy started to giggle. Baxter laughed too, with relief, then said, "I'm sorry, really I am. I don't often make bad jokes, but then, I'm not used to – to being here. And – and I don't just mean being up a tree. But I won't do it again. Promise."

It was, he realized then, much the same excuse he had made to the Professor; the worst part of it was that it was probably true. They were beginning to get to him already.

"It was just about here I saw you yesterday," he said hesitantly to the boy. "You'd hurt yourself, hadn't you?"

The boy nodded, and exhibited slightly raw and skinned knuckles. "It's stopped bleeding," he said.

Baxter screwed up his face. "It must be sore, though. I was coming over to see if I could help, but then you went off. Did you have a tumble?"

"No," said the boy.

"A fight, perhaps? Or just some other kind of accident?"

The boy shook his head. "No – it was not an accident," he said slowly. He looked down.

Baxter felt uneasy; he abandoned the subject. Then he pointed to the space beyond which the wood opened into a tall avenue. "It was just about there that I saw you first of all," he said quietly. "The sun almost directly behind you... I wasn't sure at first what I saw. Then you came a little nearer. But still... the light made me screw up my eyes; it was rather like looking at an Impressionist painting, where... No – it's difficult for me to explain in terms that would be familiar to you. Even to explain it at all."

"The essence of Impressionism is the recognition and acknowledgment of the light as a third presence," said the boy in a soft toneless voice. "That was quoting, you understand. But you must know that when you look at an Impressionist painting the desired effect is that you feel yourself coming out of a dark room into the sunlight, the contrast so great that you *have* to screw up your eyes, so that at first you can see only the colors. The shapes of the people, the trees and so on are vague and uncertain; in the sudden brightness you can't quite make them out."

After a short silence Baxter said, "I've been rather patronizing, I'm afraid. But somehow one doesn't expect..."

"We had a Manet," said the boy in a somewhat apologetic tone. "At least, they thought it was. But Renoir was their favorite. Do you know – " He looked at Baxter intently. " – nothing or no-one in a Renoir painting is ugly. Not only the girls or the children, but the old women, even the men, are beautiful."

"True," said Baxter, "though beauty isn't always an illusion, is it?"

"Maybe not." The boy suddenly looked impishly at the man beside him. "Perhaps Renoir, on a good day, could even do something about you!"

Baxter's tastes were possibly, indeed almost certainly, eccentric, but to him boyish cheek was irresistible, adorable. He stretched an arm along the branch. "In a moment, unless he is careful, someone will find himself sitting on that nice green grass underneath a good deal sooner than he expected!"

The smile disappeared abruptly from the boy's face, his eyes widened as if with terror and he shrank away. His lips compressed, quivering; he seemed again as if he were going to cry. He looked at the ground, then up again at Baxter. "Please – please don't," he pleaded, "I'm sorry – I really am. I won't say it again."

Baxter, flabbergasted, reached out to steady the boy, but he moved still further back, pressing his body against the trunk. His voice rose. "No – no!"

In heaven's name, had the boy seriously imagined that Baxter was about to attack him? "Kit," the man said urgently, "it's all right, it really is. It was a joke, that's all. A bad joke – but just a joke."

The boy calmed a little, eyeing him warily, but he didn't come closer. You've done it again, Baxter decided; the boy had some kind of phobia, God knew what – falling perhaps – and Bully-Boy Baxter had just pretended he was going to push him out of a tree. You really are, Baxter, why not just go home.

"I'm sorry, Kit," he said again. He saw that the grazes on one of the boy's knuckles were beginning to ooze again. He took a clean handkerchief from his pocket. "Look here, Kit. No more silly jokes, I promise you. I may be a fool, but at least I'm an honest one. Trust me."

Kit nodded; after what seemed a very long time he edged back along the branch a little. Baxter wrapped the bleeding knuckles in the handkerchief and held the boy's hand in both of his own.

The boy started to speak. "It's – it's..." Then he stopped again and shook his head.

Baxter put a hand on his shoulder. "Quiet now, Kit. You've had a fright, I'm not really sure why, but it's all over now. It is, it really is."

The boy's breathing slowed gradually, then he turned with a weak smile to Baxter, and said, "Thanks."

"Do you want to come down now?" Baxter asked.

"Will you – will you go down first?"

"Okay." Baxter climbed down, then the boy dropped almost without warning; Baxter, acting by reflex, caught the boy in his outstretched arms, and by another reflex which he regretted an instant later, allowed the boy to slip to the ground until he stood upright again.

Baxter remained completely still for a moment, then he lowered his arms to his sides, swallowed, and asked, "How old are you, Kit?"

"Twelve, nearly thirteen. How old are *you*, Sir?"

"Paul."

"How old are you, Paul?"

"Thirty-four."

The boy took a felt-tip pen from his pocket and began scribbling lines and numbers on a smooth area of the tree where the bark had peeled off; Baxter noticed there were some lines there already.

"The properties of a Magic Square, first recognized by Euclid, are that the numbers, followed in any direction, vertically, horizontally or diagonally, always add up to thirty-four," said the boy. "Look." He quickly completed the diagram, wrote the totals, then turned to the man with a quick smile.

"That is the third tree in the seventh row," he said. "It's a magic tree." He pocketed the pen, put his arms round the tree-trunk and rested his cheek against the bark.

"I do believe it is," said Baxter quietly.

"It was seven o'clock when we met tonight," said the boy. "That makes two sevens." He spread his arms wide and spun around, eyes half shut. "Seven gold wires and the candles shining. Turn widdershins and wish... Do you always come here at seven, Paul?"

"I will now," said Baxter. "Always."

They walked back to the fence that separated the Childrens' Unit from the wood, and along it to a narrow wooden gate.

"It's locked," said the boy.

"How will you get in?" asked Baxter, slightly alarmed.

"It's all right," the boy said. He faced the door and stretched out both arms towards it, palms down and fingers spread. "Turn your back, take three paces towards the magic tree, and say 'Oddsbodkins'," he commanded.

Baxter hesitated, then, smiling slightly, did as the boy asked. Then he said, "What now?"

There was no reply and he turned, but the boy had gone.

"Actually there's a hole in the fence, courtesy of Kit, made yesterday," came the boy's voice, after a short interval; he laughed and laughed, then stopped. Baxter said "Good-night", but there was no answer.

"Now, children," said Vera Thoroughgood, "I first ought to tell you what the Group is all about, ought I not?"

None of the children in the circle looked up or spoke. Through partly closed eyes Kit watched the design on the carpet shift, re-shape into rows and columns of long, spidery numerals. Given that the degree of verbosity of a Social Worker is $V(S)$ and that of a Nursing Officer is $V(N)$, then adding the two and assuming a constant decay of the rate of Group Therapy of $D(G)$, then the expected half-life would be not less than... forty-five minutes. Christ.

"So you see, children, group therapy is about solving our problems. Now we all have problems, there's nothing to be ashamed of in having problems. Because your problems have got to do not just with

you but with the community, with the people around you, with society. Society is, you see, just a very big group – just as we are a very small one – and, because it is often this very big group we call society which causes problems, it is often in a group that these can be put right. Now this group is being chaired jointly by myself and Mr. Trenchard, because the group we are all most familiar with is, of course, the family, and here we try to get as close to being a kind of family as possible. It is in such a group – in a family, you see – that people can often share their problems most easily. So has anyone got a problem that they would like to mention, that they would like to share with the group now?"

All the children were studying the carpet now with varying degrees of absorption.

"Come along then," said Vera encouragingly, "anything at all."

"How come we can't play football in the day-room?" asked the dark-eyed boy called Kevin with sudden vehemence. There was a chorus of agreement.

"Because that's not what you're here for," said Nursing Officer Trenchard with equal vehemence. Silence fell again.

"One of the girls, perhaps," said Vera. "We can't leave it all to the boys, now can we?"

"How come we got to go to bed at eight?" demanded a fierce little moppet. "At home I get to stay up till twelve, and here we can't even get to see Kojak."

"Or Starsky and Hutch."

"Or the Late Horror Movie. Nothing but Blue bloody Peter."

"And Watch with Mother. Sissy rubbish."

"It's a shame."

"Shame, shame."

"That's *enough!*" shouted Trenchard. "Really – this is *not* a beer-garden, and the sooner you all realize it the better. Now, if none of you have anything sensible to say, perhaps *I* can say something. Miss Thoroughgood has been speaking to you about problems and, of course, problems are what we're all here to solve, and the group is intended to help us. Now, one of the ways in which the members of a group can help one another is to keep the rules that are made for the benefit of all. No – I'm sorry, Vera, I'm very sorry, but you've had your say, please let me have mine now. Right – I'm speaking especially to some of your boys who think that rules are not important, that they don't matter. Well, I know you think that Trenchard is a bit of an old stick-in-the-mud, but, you know, old Trenchard fought in the war and learned a thing or two, I can tell you. Now, just suppose I had been given an order by one of my superiors and had said, no, I don't want to do it, or, like some of you boys say – and I'm not looking at anyone *yet* – I don't *feel* like doing it, what do you think would have happened, eh?"

There was a silence. Trenchard looked round expectantly. "Well?"

"We would have lost the war," said Kit impassively, not looking up.

"Er – yes," said Trenchard. "Er – well, yes – and it's nice to hear you beginning to participate, Kit – it's quite true that, in a very real sense, we *would have* lost the war. You know, there's an old poem that goes, 'For the want of a nail the shoe was lost, for the want of a – '."

Kit got up suddenly and ran out of the room. As he closed the door and waited for a moment outside he heard Vera say, "Turn around, children, and don't pay any attention. Kit has a *lot* of problems; we must be very understanding. Now, Mr. Trenchard, if you would kindly allow me to..."

The boy turned and ran full tilt down the corridor; at the corner he collided with Sylvia Armitage, who was carrying an armful of linen, but who whisked it clear at the moment of impact and steadied the boy with her free hand.

"Hello! Why, it's my friend Kit. Slipping out of the group, then? Dear, dear, what *will* Mr. Trenchard say? Well, it's too late to go back now. Come and help me with this little lot, then perhaps we can sort a

few of your things out, you and I."

Kit took some of the blankets and, in silence, helped Sylvia to stack them in a cupboard. Then she closed the door, held the boy at arm's length and considered him thoughtfully.

"You're a little smudged, aren't you? Been outside?"

Kit nodded.

"Well, we'll assume you had permission. You know, you have lovely clothes, but they're rather too nice for playing around here. Come on, let's look through your things and see if there's anything more casual."

In the dormitory Sylvia took off the boy's fresh white sweater and shirt, then handed him a light short-sleeved tee-shirt to put on in their place.

"The boys here usually wear shorts in the summer," Sylvia said. "Shall I find you a pair?"

Kit nodded.

"Here – try these, then."

The boy wriggled out of his jeans and pulled on the brief, brightly-colored shorts Sylvia handed to him. She moved back a little and looked him up and down. "There – I think you look really nice," she said appreciatively. She went back across to the boy, stooped a little, slid her arm behind his hips and pulled him close, then kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Don't be unhappy; everything will be okay now," she said quietly. She stood back. "All right, then, why don't you go out and play for a little before dinner? Since you're not going back to the group, you might as well be getting some fresh air."

"Will you come?" asked Kit.

"I'm afraid I can't," said Sylvia. "I've got all the medicines to give out and the nurses' duty roster to finish. I'd like to come out and play with you but, as you can see, I've got work to do. Sorry."

The door of the dormitory was slightly open; now voices could be heard from the corridor, one rising in recrimination.

"...not content with undermining, attempting to monopolize the Group, but also introducing militaristic and authority-based concepts at *every* turn, completely negating, completely *vitiating* everything I'm trying to do. Don't you understand that it's precisely these kinds of punitive attitudes that those children are here to get away from?"

"I'm sorry, Vera, I'm very sorry, but – "

"And I can't *bear* people who keep saying they're sorry *but*," snapped Vera. "Either don't be sorry, or don't do it."

"Well, I'm sorry, Vera, but it really does these children no favor at all to make them think they're here to do precisely as they wish."

"No, you think they should do as *you* wish," said Vera. "My God, if I had wanted to have someone role-play a paternalistic ogre in the Group, I could not have done better than – "

She saw Sylvia and Kit, who had come to the doorway, and her voice died away. She smiled sweetly at Trenchard, who had begun to speak, and held up her hand. "No more for the moment, please. Pas devant, you know."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Pas devant les enfants," said Vera, indicating Kit.

"On donne des conseils, mais on ne donne point de sagesse d'en profiter," Kit said.

"Eh?" said Trenchard.

"La Rochefoucauld," said Kit.

There was a clatter of running feet in the corridor; three small boys rounded the corner and one thudded into Trenchard at full speed, almost knocking him over; it was the boy Kit remembered as Kevin.

"I have told you a hundred times that the corridors are not for running in," said Trenchard furiously, holding him by the collar. "You see now, Vera, what comes of your – "

"Oh, keep your hair on," said Kevin. "They're not for standing on the middle of, either. Hi, Kit! Coming out?"

A door opened and Harold Partridge joined the small group.

"Ah, Christopher," he said, "I've been looking for you. Might we have a word for a moment or two?"

Kit followed him into his office and as he closed the door he heard Trenchard saying, "Now, that is *not* the sort of remark that a Nursing Officer expects to hear from an eleven-year-old child. If I was your – "

"It's a double door," Partridge told his young patient. "If you close the inner one too, it might be an advantage."

Chapter Three

With an effort, Partridge closed his Venetian blinds further against the low afternoon sun and the light contracted to thin brilliant pencil-lines on the carpet, enhancing the effect of other-worldliness that came with the almost total silence when the inner door was shut.

"Maybe," said Partridge, "you would like to..." He looked vaguely towards the sand-tray, then at Kit. "Or maybe not.

"Perhaps you would have a seat anyhow," he said. "And there are, of course, the crayons and paints just beside you. Sometimes a medium of communication helps one to..."

His voice trailed off and he looked through the file on his desk. Kit pressed his palms together between his pale bare thighs, looked down, and said nothing.

Then Partridge looked up and smiled at the boy, nodding a little. "I think the first problem I must – um – solve is what I am to call you. Quite often in official documents, if one may call case-notes that, a child has one name, one rather formal name perhaps, but he himself might well be known by some kind of more – "

"Kit," said the boy.

" – rather more informal name, or nickname, even. Kit? Good. Now, I'm Dr. Partridge, I'm responsible for your treatment. My first name's Harold, you may call me that if you like; please call me whatever you want, whatever you need to call me."

Kit nodded.

"Now, when we meet, Kit, as we will quite often, the purpose of our meeting, our encounter, is not primarily for me to talk to you, but for you to talk to me. Being talked to, or rather being talked *at* by someone who simply needs to hear himself saying the things he says, is a common experience of youth, yet if I am to relate to you in a real, a positive way, I must be very much aware of a sense of sharing, of genuine dialogue in what I hear you say to me and what you hear me say to you. Yet we so often listen simply in order to respond, not in order to hear. While we want to hear, we do not listen; equally we would speak, but instead we fall silent."

Partridge had risen; as he spoke he progressively transferred his weight forward on to his toes, his body arching back at an increasingly steep angle in order to maintain balance; then the process was reversed, weight by degrees being transferred to his heels, the trunk arching forward and slightly upward.

"Certain types of meeting, of encounter," he went on, "are especially prone to this type of difficulty, one being the psycho-therapeutic relationship, at least in the earlier stages. I refer, essentially, to you and to me, to what we say to one another, to all that must lie between where you are now and where you hope to be in, say, a few weeks or months, at the end of... Ah, you've changed your mind, I see."

The boy had taken up a pencil and drawing pad and had already covered part of the top sheet with a cluster of lines and angles.

Partridge squinted at it. "What's that – Donald Duck?"

"It's a triangulation of the South Wood," said Kit. "Look."

Partridge came round the table and watched as the delicate, meticulously-drafted lines spread across the entire sheet.

"There," said Kit, "that's the perimeter, marked by a double unbroken line. The compass reference is here; there's north. It's a conical projection roughly; the scale is unimportant. Now, given that the shape of the wood is broadly hexagonal, all angles of the hexagon will thus be equidistant from the center.

Yes?"

"That I do see," said Partridge, "though quite where, within the present context, that is within the immediate... But do go on."

The boy's hand was gripping the pencil rather more tightly; the fluidity of the drawing was lost somewhat as he added a line protruding vertically from the hexagon and ended it with a small lop-sided circle. He dropped the pencil, then picked it up again. "From one of the angles," he said hesitantly, "draw a – draw a straight line, thus forming two exterior angles. At a distance equal to the distance of the angle from – from the center, draw circle A, and outside it point K. K for – for Kit." Quickly he ringed the circle heavily several times, then dropped the pencil and didn't pick it up. "I cry at night sometimes," he said.

Partridge looking closely at the diagram, his brow furrowed, said, "Yes, I see... So, in this circle, the point would represent you, your existence as you see it now. Now, the circle itself, what would that represent? Something, I should imagine, that you envisage yourself as being separate from, as being excluded from, perhaps. The world? The Unit? School, maybe?"

The boy, looking down, shook his head, then slowly took up the pencil and began to draw again. In the center of the hexagon he added a dark round spot, made it into the shape of an eye and then, around the edge of the diagram, he drew odd, scattered shapes, in general sketchy and crude, contrasting oddly with the careful draftsmanship of the central figure – a sun with straggling rays, a few stars, squiggles vaguely suggestive of Greek letters, a leaning cross, a swastika. "Sometimes during the day too," he said when he had finished, looking up.

"Sometimes what?" asked Partridge.

Suddenly Kit ringed the central eye again and again with force and vehemence, then drew a number of heavy erratic lines radiating out from it, in heavy black. Drawing the last one, he broke the pencil, then he crumpled the paper up and threw it on the floor. Breathing quickly and heavily, his hands clenched, he sat still, looking downwards, then after about a minute his limbs relaxed, his breathing became quieter and more controlled; he slid his palms down on to his knees and looked again at the man opposite him.

Partridge had sat down at his desk. "Now, try not to talk for a bit," he said quietly. "You don't have to be frightened, you know. It's quite safe here."

The boy nodded but didn't speak.

"Kit, I really didn't want to intervene in this way so soon, but I wonder if you need to say something now about what's in your mind at present. I can see that you are still distressed and I think a degree of sharing at this stage might help us with therapy later."

The clock ticked; dusk was not far off, and the lines on the carpet became faint, nearly invisible.

"Are you frightened because of what was in the drawing?" Partridge asked. "Or perhaps you don't know why you were frightened. Some people don't."

The boy shook his head vigorously and then, almost with one movement, got up, went to the window and closed the blinds with a snap, not looking at them. Then he sat down and buried his face.

After a short time Partridge said, "Kit, I do understand that there is a certain amount that you cannot verbalize, cannot acknowledge, and what you do not say I cannot supply – where you leave spaces, intervals, I cannot, would not wish to interpolate. I can infer a little, deduce a little from the drawings, or suspect that I can, yet it is far too early in therapy for interpretations, for hypotheses. My feeling is that much more must come from you to me verbally, spontaneously. Do you agree?"

The silence went on again; Kit traced invisible patterns on his thighs.

"Well then, maybe we've had enough for now," said Partridge finally. "Why not go off and play for a while before bed-time. We can meet again tomorrow at about the same time."

The boy shook his head.

"You don't *want* to meet tomorrow?" Partridge said, slightly disconcerted. "I'm sorry if – "

Kit looked up. "No, it – it wasn't that. But can't we stay here for a little longer?"

"Don't you think we've talked enough for one day?" asked Partridge.

"We – don't have to talk, do we? Can't we just stay anyhow?"

Partridge looked at his watch. "Well, the time really is up, you know, and one does have to recognize that the limitations imposed by time is a real factor in therapy that – "

"Please," said the boy.

Partridge stood up, then sat down again. "Kit," he said quietly, "I do know, I do understand a good deal of what you feel. And I do think that we will be able in due course to set out on some kind of therapeutic journey at the end of which you will have, you will be... somewhere different from where you are now. And I do recognize your wish not to be alone, to be with someone. And that will be me, your therapist, if you will allow me. I don't hesitate to acknowledge that I already feel very warmly towards you, so that we really can expect, in time, a positive outcome. But I really must get on now, Christopher. So – tomorrow, then?"

The boy was silent for a moment or two, then he nodded and got up. As he opened the door to go into the corridor a missile or projectile passed, very high and very fast, just missing him. From a short distance away Sylvia Armitage's voice rose in reproof.

"*Not* in the corridor, boys; I've told you endlessly. I'll lock it away next time. Oh, hello, Harold."

"I wonder if we could have a word for a moment, Sylvia?" asked Partridge from the doorway.

"Can I go out then?" asked dark-eyed Kevin, picking up what turned out to be a football. "Hi, Kit! Coming out?"

Kit shook his head.

"What's the matter? Didn't they play football in that posh school of yours, then? Never mind – I'll teach you."

"You'll teach *me*?" asked Kit, raising his eyebrows. Then he smiled. "All right – let's see, then."

Sylvia could not remember having seen Kit smile before.

"Okay, you go in goal first," said Kevin. "That door'll be it. Mind out, Doc."

"Didn't you *hear* me?" said Sylvia. "Didn't you hear what I said just a moment ago?"

"Well, can we go out, then?"

"Okay – for a half hour, that's all."

"If you wouldn't mind," said Partridge, still hovering. "Some of the... medications. If we could just review them, go over them, for a minute or two."

Passing the ball to and fro the two boys ran off down the wide corridor, and then down the stairs. His face unusually flushed, his eyes bright, watching the bouncing football, Kit collided forcibly with Vera Thoroughgood, who was coming through the hall. She gasped, swayed, and momentarily held on to him for support.

"Kit?" she said after a moment, "well, I *am* surprised. Although one does see the d-desirability of a r-relatively unstructured environment, I – I must say... Thank you."

Kevin had picked up her scattered case-notes and returned them to her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Out to play football. Chuck the ball over, Miss."

"Well, as it happens, I want to have a word with you, Kit. That's why I've come."

The boy's head dropped.

"Oh, go on, Miss," said Kevin. "We've only got half an hour. You can come too if you like; we don't

mind playing with girls."

"Please," said Vera. *"Please. Come here, both of you."* She put a hand on each boy's shoulder.

"Now I don't think, do you, boys, that playing football is what any of us is here for. Don't you remember our chat this morning about problems? We all have them, small problems and big problems, and it's to look at these and hopefully to – "

Partially freeing himself, Kevin brought his toe into sharp and accurate contact with Vera's ankle.

"Run, Kit!" he shouted.

Kit hesitated, then ran. Passing the ball, Kevin tried to dodge round Vera and join him. However, although a loosely-woven caftan does not equip its wearer ideally for pursuit and capture, Vera showed surprising speed, and in a moment was making her way upstairs, clutching the wriggling boy firmly by his shoulder. "One does not – does not wish to act punitively," she panted, "but really, if you cannot hear what I say in any other or meaningful way..."

Their voices faded. Some moments later the Unit football, dropping through the heavy foliage of the South Wood, bounced on the head of Paul Baxter and then rolled on to the grass. Baxter, turning, experienced an emotional thud of almost equal force, seeing the boy standing smiling impishly, exquisitely bare-legged, among the trees a few yards away. Kit ran up to within a couple of feet of Baxter, then stopped, looking up at him. Baxter knew how he would have wanted, how he badly wanted, to greet the boy, but something of the nervous paralysis that had gripped him on the first day had returned. It was the instantaneous and painful dismantling of a kind of defense mechanism; when he was not with Kit he had half-convinced himself, partly for his own peace of mind – at least to be able to sleep at night – that the boy could not possibly look like he did; the truth, when he met the boy, came with the same keen, delectable shock as it had yesterday.

"It – it's good to see you again," he said lamely.

A memorable understatement; the boy, again smiling suddenly and brilliantly, had jumped up a foot or two and hung suspended by his hands from a low branch, arching his body to and fro, swinging his legs extravagantly. Baxter stood still, looking up; it was impossible to look anywhere else.

Then Kit dropped to his toes, and went over and sat on a fallen trunk, hugging his knees. Baxter sat down beside him. "You have a certain skill with a football, have you not?" he said after a moment. "In terms of both accuracy, I would say, and also power in what I believe is the quadriceps."

"Sorry," said the boy, a little shyly. "It didn't land too heavily, did it? It was meant to be just a little tap – just to say, hello, Kit's here."

"I didn't mind. I hoped you'd come."

"You should have known Kit would keep his promise."

"What are you frightened of, Kit?" asked Baxter on impulse.

The boy stood up, then looked at him steadily; his smile had gone. "I don't understand," he said.

Baxter felt chilled, but persisted. "Why do you say 'Kit'?"

"It's my name."

"Yes, but why instead of saying 'me' – or in your case of course 'you', or 'I', do you say – well, you know..."

Kit's blue eyes were still fixed on Baxter; he was silent, not helping him. Then Baxter imagined he saw the eyes begin to glisten and he willed himself to stop talking, biting his lips hard. There he went, tramping over highly sensitive ground with his great spiked boots again. He started to say something, but Kit did not seem to hear him; his eyes looked past Baxter, fixed apparently on the dark red building on the far side of the wall.

"Why are you in here?" the boy asked abruptly.

Was he angry now? Don't forget that *you're* one of us too, you're one of those nutters from behind the high wall.

"Kit," he said awkwardly, "I'm sorry if I upset you."

"You didn't."

"It was really just friendly interest because I – well, I like you rather."

Understatement number two. But now the boy smiled a little, though uneasily. "It's okay, really it is. But there – there isn't always an answer."

"Well, let's go and play football for a bit," said Baxter lightly. "It looks as though you might be able to teach me a little."

Kit shook his head. "Answer me first," he said. He pointed in the direction of the wall again.

Baxter rose, holding the football which he had picked up, and bounced it a couple of times on the fallen log. Then it skidded off at an angle into the undergrowth, robbing him of even that diversion. For a moment he was somewhere distant, detached, watching the passage of old shapes on a screen – the County Lunatic Asylum near his boyhood home, the shrinking fascination, the horror of watching lines of shambling, drooling inmates passing to and fro to the fields in the work gangs, how his mother's face had tightened, how her voice had lowered, how she had hushed him when he asked questions. God, if she was alive, if she knew.... Childhood horror had later given way to something little better, contempt for pitiable inadequates. To see, or even to imagine he saw, the palest reflection of this contempt in Kit's eyes was unbearable. Yet, to tell him the truth could not be thought about for a moment. "It's – it's just as with you, very difficult to explain," he began hesitantly. *You smooth bastard, turning it back on the boy like that.* But... "But I'm not here because – well, like some of the others, being ill or having had a breakdown, in that sense. To be frank, Kit, I did something wrong – or, at least, something that is technically a crime, though I don't think it is. I was given the chance of going here rather than going to jail. So – so here I am." He paused.

"Well?" said Kit impatiently.

"Well, what?"

"What did you *do*?"

"They said not to tell anyone," said Baxter, improvising rapidly.

The boy swung at arm's length from the trunk of a young sapling, round and round. "Jackanory, tell a story, Jackanory, tell a story," he chanted. "*You'll* never go to heaven."

"Well – not exactly," conceded Baxter. "But..."

"You must say," said the boy, "if we're going to be friends, that is."

Baxter was unable to speak for a moment or two. He looked at the boy, seated again on the great fallen oak, dangling his long legs, the sun lighting his hair. *If...?* The wind stirred a branch above him, and a cloud of petals floated down into the clearing; a bird, some kind of a bird, sang from somewhere. *If there be a paradise on earth it is here, oh, it is here.*

He spoke after about a minute. "Kit," he said, "I *could* make up a story, perhaps a good one, perhaps not. But to be very truthful, it would upset me too much to talk about it just now. Give me time; I promise I'll tell you some day."

Kit nodded, apparently satisfied. He extended a leg into the undergrowth and moved the ball out with his toe. "Now you can play football," he said. "Your goal's between these two trees over there; see if you can stop my shots. How long can you stay?"

"How long can *you* stay? Shouldn't you soon – "

"Do you like being in here?" Kit asked.

"I didn't at first," said Baxter slowly, "but you know, Kit, now I'm beginning to think I've been very

lucky – very lucky indeed."

"Not just you," said the boy quickly and almost inaudibly. Then he turned away and ran to the opposite side of the clearing. The ball had rolled into the bushes again, and finding it took him a surprisingly long time.

I find that I must disagree," said Harold Partridge. "I really must say that to you."

"I didn't expect you to say anything else," said Vera Thoroughgood tartly. "Trapped as you are in your medically-oriented framework, I don't imagine you even hear what I say, still less assent to it. How indeed can there be any dialogue with someone who attaches reductive labels to a child already victimized by conflicting pressures within the community, calling them 'diagnoses', insulting and degrading the child by referring to his human cry for help as a 'mental illness' – how can there?"

"Is this you or me we're talking about, Vera?" asked Partridge mildly.

"Harold, just can one have a viable discussion with you? I mean, when you can ask a question like that?"

Staff Nurse Armitage shuffled her notes. "Look here, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was under the impression we were here to discuss the progress and treatment of one child in particular, not to listen to a theoretical debate which, if I may say so, we have heard many times before."

"Hear, hear!" Nursing Officer Trenchard said emphatically. "Even though I may well be speaking out of turn, I do agree with what Sylvia has just said. Some of us have work to get on with, patients to look after."

The Ward Team had assembled again in Harold Partridge's office; Christopher Howard's notes lay on the desk, open at the light blue (Medical) section. Partridge added another Continuation Sheet, wrote something on it and said, "We *all* have work to do, Mr. Trenchard, tasks to perform. Mine is at present to formulate, *without interruption*, this boy's case and to put before you my views about the present diagnoses together with some ideas about further management, *following which* I shall be glad to hear the views of other members of the team."

"I doubt it," said Vera, almost in an undertone. "I very much doubt it."

"Harold, I didn't want to raise this again," said Sylvia, "but I've been looking up autism since we talked before and, you know, according to what I've read, Christopher, or Kit, does seem to fall very much into that category. There's this odd detachment almost all the time, the silences, then the bouts of destructive behavior, the self-injury, and also this unusually attractive appearance autistics are supposed to have. Then there's this odd impersonality where names are concerned. Do you notice how he rarely looks at anyone, how he avoids eye-contact, and the way he always talks about himself in the third person, how he always says 'Kit', never 'me' or 'I'?"

"Sylvia, you are understanding the term 'autism' in its rather old-fashioned sense, where it means nothing more than severe withdrawal, being normally used in the context of schizophrenia. But nowadays when people talk about autistic children they mean those that are severely brain-damaged from birth – a very different category. Certainly autistics don't communicate much, but neither would you if you were brain-damaged."

"So he's a schizophrenic now, is he?" said Vera.

"No," said Partridge after a moment. "Psychotic, perhaps – perhaps not, but 'schizophrenia' is a term I would hesitate to attach to this patient, to this boy."

"So how would you diagnose him, Doctor?" asked Trenchard.

Dad said, never trust anyone who calls you 'Doctor' in every other sentence. "I'd just leave it there, I think – an acute psychotic reaction, most probably of schizo-affective type."

"There you go again," said Vera. "A perfectly natural human response – clearly to an intolerable loss in this instance, and you brand it as sickness, illness."

"The boy is distressed, the boy *is* sick, the boy is in mental pain, for Christ's sake. Illness is pain, illness is distress," said Partridge irritably. "You ought to have seen his face when he was sitting in my office looking out of the window at God knows what. Sheer terror. It frightened me, too."

"Is he hallucinated, then?" asked Sylvia. "You know, he often doesn't seem to be taking in what one says, to be looking past one, listening to something else almost."

"He might be. There are some drawings that bother me somewhat. But in essence, what I feel about the boy is this. He has been immensely, terribly traumatized – that is indisputable – and it's also clear, also evident, that the loss has fallen on exquisitely sensitive soil, hence I would say, and we can all see, that the response is all the more extravagant, the more complex. Parents are, after all, one's primary source of identity of self-esteem; I feel that at the core of this boy's illness is fear of loss of identity, fear of non-being. There are, so to speak, no human mirrors now that can reflect back to him his own face, can confirm his existence – there are no faces where he sees care, sees love written. In fact it is this dread of non-being, sometimes termed 'ontological insecurity', which Laing held to be at the root of all psychotic illness, of all 'madness'."

"So you *are* into anti-psychiatry then, Harold?" said Vera.

"Of course not – the term came originally from the existentialists, from Heidegger and others," said Partridge sharply. "The mechanism I am trying, am attempting to explain goes rather farther, if you will allow me, being that whereby the self builds elaborate defenses, complex protective systems. The reference to oneself in the third person is part of, is a feature of, such a system. The 'I' or 'me' must be so totally protected as not even to be referred to, not even to be spoken of; it must be locked away, it must be secret, a hidden treasure. So in the middle of nearly everything he draws is this mysterious concretization, the drawing of an eye – incidentally not uncommon in psychotic art –"

"What does it *matter* to this boy, for God's sake, whether something is common or not common in 'psychotic art'?" cried Vera. "One really does feel, Harold, as if one is being taken on a tour of some kind of gallery or museum having totally irrelevant things on the wall pointed out to one. I simply do not hear anything from you with meaning in the present context."

"Well, I do follow," said Sylvia. "The eye in the middle of the picture is a sort of code word for the 'I', or himself, trapped, sort of shut in by everything. I have one of his drawings here – look."

"That's not quite it," said Partridge. "It's almost the other way round. Though I'm not very sure yet, I can't explain it."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, "Oddly, during the interview the boy didn't always use the third person; I do recall, now, his saying 'I' a couple of times, though I can't remember in what context."

"Maybe he's improving already," said Sylvia. "You know, he did once look directly at me and smile yesterday – scarcely unusual for other children, but for Kit..."

"That, as I remember, was when a game of football in the corridor was being proposed – something strictly forbidden in the Unit, as is well known," said Trenchard. "It was that Kevin Cheney who started it; those boys will be a bad influence on one another, mark my words."

"I really can't see why they aren't allowed to play in the corridor," said Vera.

"It's dangerous and unpleasant for other people," said Trenchard. "And it marks the floor."

"Is the floor more important to you than the happiness of the children, Mr. Trenchard?" Vera asked.

"Please, Vera," said Partridge wearily. "The children would be even happier to break all the windows, or to do God knows what else to the place."

"I must say I can't recall *you* being too happy when those boys ran into you, on the stairs," said

Sylvia.

"Sylvia, I may have allowed certain momentary expressions of feeling to escape me at the time – and this is good – but it's very different from being a persistent killjoy, a compulsive authoritarian – very different indeed. Anyway, I had wanted to discuss Kit's response in the Group with him, which would have been a far better idea than football; I think I'm entitled to that view at any rate."

"Well, perhaps we might hear from you now something about the boy's progress in the Group so far; I believe you have already had him with you for a couple of sessions," said Partridge. "We might look forward rather than back, we might now look positively at treatment."

"Leaving aside the implications of the term 'treatment'," said Vera, "yes, we have had a couple of group sessions; there are the usual problems in that the children tend to be preoccupied with trivia to the extent that we can rarely look at deeper issues. Kit unfortunately does not participate and is thus tending to reject, and be rejected by, his peer group in the Unit."

"You know, when people talk about a peer group I always think of men sitting round in coronets and whatnot," said Sylvia to the group at large. "Why can't one just say 'the other children'?"

"Now, *there's* a perfect example of trivialization introduced in the group context," said Vera heatedly. "I refer of course to children of his own age and status."

"But there can't be many of those," persisted Sylvia. "I mean, he comes from a very different background from most of the others, doesn't he?"

"I really don't think that the question of outside societal advantage enters into it; at least it shouldn't," said Vera. "I happen to believe that children are basically all the same."

"There at least I find I am in agreement with you," said Partridge.

"Nevertheless I still feel I have a great deal of work to do in the Group before verbal and other forms of on-going communication between Kit and the other children are instituted," said Vera. "A very great deal."

"What did she say?"

"Not a lot." Kevin Cheney, perched on the end of his bed, grinned at Kit, who sat on the dormitory carpet hugging his knees in his habitual way. "I thought at first that she was going to take me up to Concorde Charlie, but then after a bit she goes, 'I'm sorry to make controlling statements, but you must bear in mind the – er – relative importance of the various – various pharmaceutical activities here.' What'd she mean?"

"No idea." Kit shook his head. "She probably didn't know herself."

"Bit of a windbag, you reckon?"

"Force ten."

The boys giggled.

"Wish I had a pair of shorts like these," said Kevin, looking at the boy on the carpet. "All I got is these old denims – a bit sweaty in the hot weather."

"Mmm," said Kit. Then he sat up and snapped his fingers. "Just a minute – yes – there's a pair that are just a bit small for me. They're in one of these drawers. Let's rummage."

"There!" he said after a few moments. "Try these."

The younger boy unbuttoned his denims and kicked them off, then put the shorts on. He wriggled pleurably, then jumped from toe to toe. "They're smart, they feel good."

Kit grinned. "They *look* good on you – a perfect fit. Hold on to them now; they're yours to keep."

Kevin's eyes lit up. "Gosh, thanks. Thanks, Kit. I'll wear them all the time. They'll be good for football."

"*And good for wrestling.*" Unexpectedly Kit jumped on to the bed, bounced, then launched himself at the other boy, clutching him round the waist with both arms. The two tumbled on to the floor in a confusion of bare limbs; then Kevin, recovering breath, clutched both of Kit's hands and, their fingers intertwined, forced him slowly backwards and upwards.

"No, you don't," said the older boy. He pressed his forehead against Kevin's and gradually pushed his head down towards the carpet again. "You give up?" he asked, after a short time. Kevin, smiling, shook his head vigorously but didn't move. Then, under the relatively light weight of Kit's body, he twisted quickly and easily and moved his legs upwards around the other boy's hips, their thighs locking together.

"Now you can't get up."

"Don't care."

Now he holds me away from it; I am covered, warmed. Out of my eye's edge I can see the dark shape of it at the window dwindle, retreat, half sink into the black cold. But the white I's are running down it like broken eggs, and it being drawn ever up, up, into the sun. It contorts, writhes, but soon, very soon, it will be pulled into the fire; *there is nothing, no nothing, hid from the heat thereof.*

The dormitory door opened.

"Ah now, is it fighting you are?" came the voice of Nurse Rafferty. "And the two of yous on the floor and the beds trampled on and the very drawers pulled out of the chest and the clothes threw everywhere. On your feet the two of yous and think shame; it's friends you should be, like yous were told in the Group this very morning, so just be going back into the dayroom and be thinking over that and be shaking hands and not fighting again at all."

The boys, slightly flushed, had struggled to their feet. Harold Partridge, who had come in behind the nurse, held the door open and the two boys went out in silence. He closed it again and came in. "Bridget," he said. He clasped his hands behind his head and then on top of it, leaning forward until his weight rested fully on the balls of his feet, then leaning back again. "Bridget – has it ever occurred to you to wonder, have you ever asked yourself, when was the last time when either of those boys might have been touched, might have been held, by another human being?"

"Ah now, these are fine words, Doctor Partridge, but you should be speaking them to them that has the tidying of this place, or the making of these beds, or the cleaning and ironing of the clothes – "

"Yes, yes, yes – I know." Partridge pulled at a jacket button; it came off and he put it in his pocket. "I do agree that there has to be – "

"And a tumbler broke and all." Bridget pointed. "My old mammy in Sligo would have known how to deal with the likes of them, so she would, God rest her."

" – that there has to be a modicum of order, of direction, I do not deny that, not for a moment."

"The question arises, then, is this truly a child-centered unit or not?" asked Vera Thoroughgood from the doorway. "Or is it, as your last remark suggests, simply an authoritarian arena for the staff to work out their fantasies of control, to perpetuate the repression to which these children have been subjected from their first years. This is a question we all must face. Have you faced it, Harold?"

"Ye gods, is there no escape?" groaned Partridge. "Vera – Nurse Rafferty and I were just discussing a simple matter of dormitory management; it doesn't really involve you – doesn't call upon your special skills, that is. But I really must get on and have a word with the Professor while he's still around. I need to discuss Kit Howard with him, canvass his views on the boy's treatment."

"Well, we all know what *these* will be," said Vera. "I wonder that you bother."

"I don't know what you mean, Vera," said Partridge, slightly nettled.

"I think you do, Harold. And if you expect me to connive at the imposition on this boy of any kind of drug therapy or electroshock, I warn you that – "

"Please, Vera. If you really think that these would be the Professor's first thoughts you have a ludicrously distorted conception of modern psychiatry. In fact your view, your attitude is almost too pitifully infantile, too laughable, even, to argue about. Excuse me."

Chapter Four

"What did you put him on?" asked Fogg-Willerby.

"Put him on?" asked Partridge. "I'm not sure that I altogether follow you, F-W."

"Normally," said Fogg-Willerby, "I'd recommend a combination of phenothiazines and tricyclic antidepressants in view of the schizo-affective nature of the boy's condition; however, bearing in mind the paranoid features and these very prominent hallucinations, perhaps after all chlorpromazine alone in adequate dosage would be the best medication initially."

"Well, I must say, F-W, you surprise me, surprise me very much. I would scarcely have thought that –

"It's largely a matter of preference, of course. Some people are very keen on the new phenothiazine analogues but, you know, in my opinion nothing beats Largactil for its anti-dopamine activities. It's quite specific for hallucinations, sorts 'em in a flash."

"But you surely do not imagine, F-W, that I propose to drug this patient?"

"What alternative is there to medication?" asked Fogg-Willerby, slightly surprised. "There isn't one – not if you want to relieve this unfortunate boy's symptoms, that is. Dammit, even Freud didn't analyze psychotics."

"I wasn't talking about analysis. Surely, though, if you concede that this child is disturbed, frightened, you have first to find out *why* he is disturbed and frightened, you've got to discover the *meaning* of his experience; I really do feel that an initial period of exploratory psychotherapy to this end is essential before one can begin to understand, to help this boy."

"Exploratory psychotherapy, licensed voyeurism. Not only self-indulgent but inhumane. Look, Harold, we have the means at hand to alleviate distress, to redress the chemical imbalances in this poor boy's brain that are causing him so much misery, so much sheer terror sometimes; it's unethical not to use them. Good heavens, if someone came to you in hypoglycemic coma you'd give him insulin, wouldn't you; you wouldn't sit there asking him the *meaning* of the diabetic experience, eh?"

"I wouldn't give him insulin either," said Partridge. "Not unless I wanted to kill him."

"Well, you know what I mean," said Fogg-Willerby impatiently. "I'm just trying to put it to you that our role, if role we have, is to alleviate distress, and as quickly as possible."

"That's veterinary treatment, F-W," said Partridge. "Pills don't deal with the underlying problem – the boy's losses, his emotional solitude, his insecurity."

"Nobody says they will. The trouble is that most of you chaps still can't distinguish between prevention and treatment. Treat first, prevent later. If a man comes to me with pneumonia I give him an antibiotic; I don't knit him a vest."

"It's nothing like as simple as that, F-W. I really don't find myself able to accept that kind of physical analogy."

"Your inability to do this or do that isn't a factor in the equation. Look here, you're a kindly chap, Harold, you want to do the best by your patients, but your analytical training and all the damned verbiage connected with it keeps getting in the way, makes you introspective. Try to imagine that the patients might have feelings other than the ones they touch off inside that cranium of yours; they might have some of their own. Look from somewhere outside Harold Partridge, examine cues other than your own emotions. Have you *seen* the boy, have you seen him clench his teeth, his fists, have you seen him batter his head against the furniture, have you heard him cry?"

"I didn't realize that *you'd* seen him," said Partridge in some surprise.

"I haven't," said Fogg-Willerby. "But I'm familiar with the clinical features of psychotic depression in adolescents. So give me credit for age and experience. My advice is, address yourself to alleviating the boy's distress first, then build your therapeutic relationship afterwards, in the longer term."

"No – I'm afraid I can't go down that road with you," said Partridge. "The trust, the alliance has to come first. The mere thought of giving a twelve-year-old boy major anti-psychotic drugs, and quite possibly against his wishes, forcibly, does run counter to everything I care about, to the way I want to relate to my young patients. And it could lead to further abuses, ECT even."

"Not a bad idea either," said Fogg-Willerby. "At least he would temporarily forget his traumatic experiences, something your treatment will never achieve. *Ah, teach me not to remember, but rather to forget, for I forget the things I would remember, and remember those I would forget* Themistocles, circa 380 BC. Where's that file got to?"

"You had it, F-W."

"There you are, you see," Fogg-Willerby said. "Ah yes, here it is. Well, I shall simply record my recommendations in the case-notes, though you will doubtless follow no recommendations but your own."

Partridge sipped his coffee, rose, and inclined backwards on to his heels, leaning steeply forwards, then sat down again. "It's not that I don't – that I don't appreciate, that I don't value..."

Fogg-Willerby looked up and adjusted his half-moon glasses speculatively. "You really are turning soft, Harold. They're getting to you, you know, they're getting to you. Thank God I can take early retirement soon and leave chaps like you to go on battling for whatever dubious status an NHS Consultant may still enjoy. The old order changeth, Harold, and not for the better. We're masters in our own house no longer, nor have we been since all those other tin-pot hierarchies were erected about us. Now, take a Nursing Officer like Trenchard, for example, who's clearly got total control of this place. In a way he's the equivalent of the old Matron, who was also able to exact cringing obedience from everyone about her; she, I suppose, had absolute power too, but somehow she didn't need to keep proving it. Maybe she too had risen from the ranks, maybe not, but if she had the fact wasn't quite so... evident. And as for that Social Worker of yours – she's accountable neither to you or to me, but to someone in a far distant Local Authority Office whom you'll never see or speak to, whose name you don't even know. Not only can't you tell her to do anything, but it's actually the other way around. Social Workers, not us, have the ultimate custody of the bodies and souls of our patients. You know, even at the moment when you think you're exercising your ultimate power, when you 'certify' a patient, all you're doing technically is providing a report to the responsible Social Worker, to act upon or not as he or she decides. *That's where we are.*"

"So how are we to win, F-W?"

"Force of character. Sheer force of character, Harold. That's all we have left now."

"Ah."

"Speaking of which – if I may become personal for a minute, talking as an old chap to a younger colleague for whom I have a certain degree of concern..."

"Yes?"

"When you are able to see the needs of your patients only in exclusively technical terms, that's a handicap – but when you start seeing your own needs in the same way, that's a tragedy. So do it to your patients if you must – perhaps we need to do it at least sometimes to rationalize our new status – but what I don't like to see is Partridge doing it to Partridge."

"Too many riddles, F-W; I can't follow."

"They want ordinary things, but we only give them extraordinary things. They want to play, but we give them Occupational Therapy, they want to talk, but we give them psycho-therapeutic support, they

want companionship and we give them a Group. For friendship read 'interaction', for love read 'positive emotion'. Don't do it, Harold, don't do it."

"What, or who, are you talking about?" asked Partridge uneasily.

"You. I repeat, do it to your patients if you must, but don't do it to yourself."

"I wonder if you could be... specific," said Partridge after a short silence.

"I'm around this place a good bit; I hear a lot, I see a lot," said Fogg-Willerby. He finished writing in the case-notes, then said, "Take her to Henri's; she finishes at five and I recommend it. Old-established place, food and wine you won't get this side of Boulogne and they've still got their own eight-piece orchestra. Used to take Norah there in the old days; still do. It hasn't changed much. A bit of dancing later – a good floor – and a decent cabaret if you're lucky."

"I – I don't think I want to discuss... That is..." Partridge paused. "What if she won't come?"

"Bound to; they all love dressing up. You need to pay a woman a compliment in the sort of place you invite her to; that's the sort of thing you young fellows forget. Not some nasty Pizza Palace."

Fogg-Willerby added a further note in the file and closed it. "Think it over."

They rose. Fogg-Willerby handed the file back. "Don't be too disappointed if things don't work out, that's all."

"Come, F-W, I've just had your assurance, as a man of the world, that they would."

"I was talking about the patient," said Fogg-Willerby with faint irritation. "Simply remember that psychiatry isn't a matter of cause and effect; you can't root out a neurosis like a cabbage. But when distress and pain have been relieved, then the patient's view of himself and his situation may well be altered through his encounters with a therapist. People themselves don't change, but they can learn *inter alia* self-protection. I've got a chap at the moment, sexual offense, Section 60; *he'll* never be different, but he can learn not to be self-destructive, he can learn to keep himself out of trouble. After all, most problems are self-inflicted. Including yours."

Fogg-Willerby picked up his car keys and they walked down the corridor to the main entrance.

"Don't think I'm not grateful for that job on my engine, of course. Goes like a dream now. Like a lift?"

"That would be kind, Professor."

I have position, but not size. At twenty meters beyond the rim of the circle, I as a point no longer am visible from the center, but the distance cannot be maintained, soon the web will contract, pulling me into the black I. Then the tug comes, swiftly; my feet slide and I scream. It is visible now, for the first time in days and days, rearing, the great half-closed I opening, the dark body lifting, the eight legs unfolding, and I cry out again clutching at a tree-trunk, my hand pulling through briar and thorns, hearing my clothes rip. Then it has stopped like before, and I am seeing that it has shrunk, it is smaller than it was, and I am being pulled away, being pulled away firmly, strongly backwards. Back from the cold swamp where it is to the warm wood with the green sunshine and all the flowers. And it is growing indistinct, its form weak, mists are rising and the I clouds, the outlines dim and into the vapors its legs are dropping, limp, vanishing. And the warm is here now, and in the warm, unbelievable happiness... But the grasp is loosening, my hand is sliding out... God, no... Hold me, keep me, I must stay here. I must be real, I must feel the pain again.

"Tell me about this psychotherapist, then," said Baxter.

After a moment of silence he said, "Kit?"

The boy started a little, looked back at the man beside him, smiled and said, "Sorry." Then he said, "Oh, he's a nice chap. But *very* earnest. I mean, everything's such a big deal. You don't just talk, you

have... 'verbal intercourse', or the like"

"Does he actually say that?" asked Baxter, slightly surprised.

The boy grinned. "Not exactly. But you begin to think that he may be the type you could talk to and who might understand what you mean – a bit rare in there, actually – but then, well, after a bit he doesn't seem to want to know any more, then when he remembers that you're still there all he usually says, quite suddenly, is that the 'therapy hour' is over. And that's that"

"An hour wasted, from the sound of it," said Baxter.

"Not quite," said Kit. Then he looked up at Baxter and said, "He isn't like you, though."

Kit was seated on a fallen trunk; Baxter, sitting on the grass facing him, felt a powerful impulse to lean forward and take both the boy's hands in his, or to put his palms on the smooth young thighs. But he waited, he didn't know for what, and the moment passed; he nodded his head and said, "Good."

"Look," said Kit. He unhooked a heavy Swiss knife from his belt and snapped out a couple of the blades.

"Very fine," said Baxter. "Vicious-looking, though."

"My dad gave it to me for my last birthday," said the boy unemotionally. He closed the smaller blade, held it with the large blade upright, and jumped to his feet. "Play splits?"

Baxter shook his head. "Not for me. To dangerous."

"Chicken." The boy stood where he was; he smiled at Baxter and then slowly, with almost meticulous care, he pushed the point of the blade deeply into the back of his hand, drew it towards his wrist and then, just as deliberately, withdrew the knife, closed it, and dropped it on the ground. Blood welled instantly from the cut; before Baxter, who had been for a moment motionless with disbelief, could reach the boy, bright scarlet runnels had extended swiftly down his hand and arm till blood was dripping on to the tree trunk and the grass.

"It's quite – quite clean," said Baxter inanely, pulling out his handkerchief and wrapping it round Kit's hand. He chattered mindlessly, dabbing at the blood, wiping, pressing. "Now then – there, now – don't worry, it'll be all right. Local pressure, that's what they used to tell us would stop bleeding. Yes... yes, it does seem to work. Just need to hold it for a little. Now, if I only had a plaster. Used to have a couple in my wallet, one never knew. Just hold that for a moment and I'll have a look. Ah – here we are. Not very big, but they should help."

He removed the handkerchief; the cut was still oozing, but the plasters covered most of it and Baxter straightened up now, satisfied.

Then he looked at the boy. "It must hurt a lot," he said.

Kid nodded, then his eyes closed convulsively and his head dropped. Without having thought about it, Baxter had put one hand behind the boy's knees and another round his shoulders and had lifted the boy bodily on to his lap. He held him, caressed him, while Kit buried his face in Baxter's chest; his shoulders heaved.

"Don't cry, Kit," Baxter said after a minute. Very lightly, several times over, he wiped the damp cheeks with his finger-tips, then ran his hands through the long fine strands of hair, stroking and stroking until the boy was still and quiet again.

"It doesn't hurt any more," the boy said at last, very softly.

Baxter laughed. "You're a fake, Kitten." He went on stroking, then said, "You know, you *are* rather well named. I believe that if I went on doing this for long enough, you'd begin to purr!"

Kit took a slow breath, produced something like a muted snore from the back of his throat, then broke into giggles. Baxter, holding him, feeling his own body shake with the boy's merriment, began to think that he comprehended something, but something still so opaque that he would perhaps have to put it into

words, hear himself saying it, before knowing exactly what it was. Placing his palms on either side of Kit's cheeks, he moved the boy's face away, then spoke hesitantly, indicating the cut hand. "You know, Kitten, you didn't have to do *that*," he said, "for me-to do... this." He held the boy in his arms and slid a hand through the blond locks again.

Unexpectedly Kit broke free and stood upright, facing him, his face flushed and accusing. "Yes, I did – I *did!*" he said angrily. He picked the knife up, hurled it away from him, turned, and before Baxter could follow he was gone, the bushes swinging back into place over the hole in the fence, the scuffling of rapid feet on the leaves dropping into silence almost as soon as it had begun.

Seven, the magic hour for a week, was a long time past, and lights had risen in the great building behind the wall, but its outline was still perceptible against the penumbra of the day, its bulk closing what was left of the space between the forest and the clouds, its pale luminescence running before the late cumuli as the wind rose, as it became chillier, as the trees stirred and bowed before it, moving, jostling, whispering. Soon its heavy mass had all been absorbed into the dark, soon even the moon had been drowned in rain-clouds, and then drops were falling everywhere, the faraway patter on the highest leaves swelling to a dull steady roaring as the rain grew heavier and as water began to drop, then to spill in streams and runnels, from the lower leaves and branches on to the grass. The wind freshened, sending gusts of rain into the clearing, then dropped again. In time the rain eased to a light drizzle and at long last Baxter, soaked and shivering now, rose from the log where he had been sitting for two hours or more.

The time had long since passed when any sound, any snap or rustle might have sounded even remotely like the approach of a pair of small feet in plimsolls, any movement in the leaves like the flicker of lithe twelve-year-old legs,. the time had come when nothing could seem like Kit returning any more – though he had indeed known that after his first half-frantic pursuit and calling the boy would not come back. He remembered clinging to the top of the wall, clinging till his finger-tips lost their strength and his hands scraped painfully over the edges of the bricks as he slid off, trying to glimpse the boy on the lawn or the playground beyond, but he could not. For a moment he had wanted to climb over in pursuit, but this would have brought him inevitably into an open area in full view of the windows of the Unit, and also of part of the main hospital. "Damn, damn *damn!*" He had thumped the wall with his closed fist, then sat on the log again, hardly even comforted by imagining rather than sensing the faint warmth of the spot where Kit had sat a short time before. Temporarily some of the irritation was directed against the boy as well as himself. Why in Christ's name did the kid have to be so ridiculously touchy, so emotionally fragile as to go darting off into the undergrowth like some shy fawn or nocturnal wood animal at the merest look or word? Then shame and self-reproach overwhelmed him, his head sank, his throat tightened and tears at length began to trickle from between his fingers and drop on to the ground. He, Baxter, had hurt and repulsed the most beautiful, most sensitive living creature he had ever met or would meet again. Not once, but over and over. The boy's finely tuned senses were not his fault; neither, perhaps, was it Baxter's that the boy's sensibilities lay outside the narrow band of his own appreciation; it simply made the thing look even more hopeless. But though ultimately the boy's emotional hunger had been such that he had had to cut himself, mutilate himself for a mere caress, there was something of this which Baxter understood, some little in which Baxter grasped; it was a little of what he himself had known always, still did. And was there not a kind of self-mutilation in the recklessness that had brought him to this pass, imprisoned in a mental ward, and also in the brute insensitivity that had made him hold away from himself Kit, this puzzling, strange, unpredictable, wonderful forest-boy who had come to him like a prepubescent angel in the dark, spilling and drawing from him love and radiance of a kind and of an intensity he had never before known? Self-destruction by self-denial, self-destruction by blind recklessness; God, was there no

middle way? He rose from the log and walked about, lifting his face to catch the big cold drops that were still falling from the edges of the leaves, feeling the deliriously cool water on his hot cheeks and on his head. Then he knew that he should have been inside long ago; the provisions of Section 60 were stringent, and the mere thought of being confined to the ward for even twenty-four hours threw him into a panic. He ran back towards the lights of the long building; the first foolish extravagant wish to wait in the clearing until the boy came back – if he ever did – would certainly result in nothing more rhapsodic than an ignominious return to a locked ward or to prison. Yet there was a desert of twenty hours still to contemplate. Would Kit come tomorrow – would he? There would be nothing else worth thinking about until then – and if the unthinkable came about... but no, he *would* see the boy tomorrow evening, he would talk his way into the Unit if he had to, he would be the TV repairman, the gasman, anyone, just to speak to Kit, to look at him even. Putting it differently, – Baxter the Brave, Baxter the *incroyable*, would find yet another way of making an idiot of himself. There couldn't be many more ways left. Arriving at the outside door of the Male Ward he rang the bell and waited, rehearsing his excuses.

Very slowly, with great care, Harold Partridge picked up the note on his desk between both forefingers and thumbs and propped it against the sphygmomanometer before reading it again.

This box of Plasticine (red and green) was suppld. on Thurs. and is now almost totally depleted. Grains of sand are adherent to the remaining portions.

Note: Plasticine cannot, repeat **cannot**, be replaced at this rate.

– A. Trenchard (Nursing Officer)

Partridge had been writing to Administration. He unfolded the letter and added a PS.

Please note my prospective change of address due to altered domestic arrangements. I also feel that the enclosed memo from our Nursing Officer should be drawn to your attention, since I doubt whether a matter around which such strong feelings revolve can be properly dealt with at Unit level.

He sealed the envelope, then opened Christopher Howard's file and added a note, waiting for the rest of the Unit team so that the Case Conference could begin. He considered the file gloomily. Altered domestic arrangements. He wondered then whether to post the letter or not. It had to be faced; it was more than even chance that Sylvia would still be living in the Nurse's Home at, say, Christmas. Well, she would have one more opportunity, which he would offer in his own time, and then...

He heard the rattle of the drug trolley in the corridor, and at once went to the office door. "Ah, Sylvia – if I could just have a word."

"But the Case Conference isn't till twelve-fifteen."

"I know – but if you could just spare me a moment."

"I have the mid-day medications to give out, Harold."

"Yes, I know – but, Sylvia, it was simply that I was talking to the Professor, and there was some advice he gave me, certain recommendations. We might take a minute to discuss them."

"I didn't think you ever followed the Professor's recommendations," said Sylvia in some surprise.

"Perhaps not always, not invariably. But in this respect... if you could just come in it would be easier."

"No, I'm sorry, Harold, it must wait for the Case Conference. We mustn't miss the lunchtime tranquillizer round again; Sister Trapp was most upset by all the noise yesterday afternoon."

Now Trenchard came down the corridor. "Sylvia, perhaps the students could complete the drug round to save time. Ah, good afternoon, Doctor."

Of all insufferable people, thought Partridge, the most insufferable people were those who began saying 'good afternoon' immediately after twelve. "Aren't you rather early, Mr. Trenchard?" he said coldly.

"Punctuality never did anyone any harm, Doctor. And I do like to set an example, in my position."

"It's lonely at the top," said Sylvia. "Ah, here's Vera. Let's go in the office and get started, then. How was the Group?"

"Not good," said Trenchard. "For one thing, I'm unhappy about that boy Christopher, or Kit as he calls himself – very unhappy."

"One would scarcely be expected to feel otherwise about him," said Partridge. "But I think he was coming on a bit, improving."

"Yes, there has been some degree of participation in the Group," agreed Vera. "True, I had been disappointed by his limited verbal interaction in the first session or two, but he has since been able to communicate a good deal more, both in the Group and, in a very real sense, outside of it, and I think it is evident that he is beginning to use the Group in order to articulate felt needs and thus to make meaningful progress. The setback today is a disappointment but, well, it's swings and roundabouts, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't see it that way, Vera," said Partridge. "The boy undoubtedly was responding, I agree; that was evident to me in my therapy sessions. There was more eye-contact and the hallucinations had become less apparent; I found his attention more sustained, and also the affective element – by which I mean the evidences of clinical depression – were by no means as prominent as before. Indeed he really looked most cheerful, elated at times, and I had begun to feel that, by way of our exploratory therapy, worthwhile contact between us had been made, that the boy was to some extent being drawn out of his psychosis. So I agree that he has, at least until today, been improving, but I do question these unwieldy societal constructs of yours. The artificiality of the Group model is, I think, apparent to all of us. If you think that the boy is going to do other than gain yet an extra layer to his psychosis by being encouraged to perform like a glove-puppet within your neo-collectivist microsystem you are sadly misled; actually I thought he would have had more sense than to be drawn into it even to the small extent which he apparently has been. The boy is an individual, a unique individual, and I am happy to know that to some extent at any rate I have helped him to preserve his position in this respect, to foster some healing of, some means of recovery from, any psychic damage that has been done either out of the Unit or *in* the Unit."

"Harold," said Vera, "I do hear what you say, and I am going to be more generous to you than you have just been to me. It has truly been said – and don't we all see it every day – that children will always cause to be replicated, outside of the family, the conflicts they observe within it, largely between their parents; isn't it clear to you that we, and to an extent I include myself, are being drawn into that very trap, are just – "

"Aren't we getting off the subject again?" said Sylvia wearily. "I am concerned about the boy, not about your 'conflicts'. Come to that, the boy *hasn't any* parents. And doesn't it worry you that since last night Kit hasn't spoken to anyone, hasn't eaten a thing, and has been curled up and crying on the day-room sofa all morning. I keep asking him what the matter is, but he just hides his face again. I've never seen him so miserable, not even when he came in."

"There you are, you see," said Vera.

"I see nothing," said Trenchard. "Nor have I done since I came into this Case Conference. I'm sorry, but intellectual discussions may be very interesting to some people, but some others of us are concerned

about a distressed patient, one who appears to be getting worse, and I for one would welcome some advice on how to treat him. And another thing – did you know, Sylvia, that he came back with a badly cut hand last night?"

"I expect he got it playing in the woods," said Sylvia. "He's always mooning about down there. I really don't mind much, especially as he's often with Kevin Cheney; it's nice to see him make a friend. Anyhow, I've filled in an Incident Form."

"I saw the cut and it was quite clean," said Partridge. "I shouldn't worry. It's just one of those occupational hazards for small boys – especially if we want them to live as normal a life here as possible – which I'm sure we all do want."

"Well, there might just be more to it than that, Doctor," said Trenchard. "I found it rather odd that the cut had a plaster on it when the boy got back – fairly neatly applied, too. Now, how did that get there?"

"How should I know? Didn't you ask him?"

"I don't imagine he was in a condition to tell you," said Sylvia. "He'll say nothing to me at all."

"Oh, I got it out of him," said Trenchard. "I told him he wasn't getting out again till he told me. It appears that he met someone who happened to have some plasters on him; a likely story."

"I should think it *was* a likely story," said Partridge. "Plasters don't just appear out of nowhere."

"Well, in that case I like it even less. I mean, the boy being in the woods wandering around and meeting strangers."

"Put that way, I don't like the sound of it either," said Partridge. "Perhaps the boy is getting too much freedom."

"I don't think so, Harold," Sylvia said. "He's really quite well supervised most of the time. But he likes to be alone sometimes, too; I often let him out for about an hour in the evenings. Not just him, but the others, too; they enjoy playing in the trees."

"Nevertheless, he shouldn't be by himself," said Trenchard. "You know as well as I do that there are Undesirables around. If one was to – well, if anything were to happen to the boy, it could undo all the good we've done. The adult block *is* just next door, you know."

"It's well fenced off; we made sure of that," said Partridge. "But I am, I must say, somewhat unhappy; I think we will have to supervise the boy rather more closely than before. Still, let's leave it for the moment; Christopher is going through a bad patch emotionally, and it doesn't seem the right time to place extra restrictions on him, to apply apparent sanctions or punishments."

"That I do support," said Vera. "How can one punish natural human distress, sanction a cry of pain, a call for help?"

"I'm not sure that I'm grateful for your support, Vera," said Partridge. "You can be counted upon to applaud quite unselectively any move away from what you see as control, as paternalism. It doesn't seem to matter to you that the boy has been hurt, might be hurt more."

"A cut hand is nothing compared to the emotional hurt imposed by the kind of repression that affords self-gratification to certain types of adults, and the sooner we recognize the mixed-message situation that we have created *vis-a-vis* the children the better for all of us. And I would like to know what you mean by 'undesirables', Mr. Trenchard. One had understood that the mentally ill and in particular members of sexual minorities were no longer to be stigmatized and, really, to hear such words employed by a so-called mental health professional is just too – "

"I didn't say *anything* about sex," said Trenchard, aggrieved. "Really, Dr. Partridge, now did I?"

"It was implicit," said Partridge. "At least it seemed so to me. And I don't altogether disagree with you; it's something to be kept in mind. But we must get on. Could I see the Night Report now, Mr. Trenchard?"

By mid-day sun was pouring through the long windows of the upstairs day-room, a miniscule portion of the large country house that had ten years previously been converted into the Regional Child and Adolescent Unit. The moldings and deep window recesses stood as a faint legacy of earlier civilizations, one which the gummed-down synthetic-pile carpet and the drip-dry curtains did not completely dispel, and beyond the stone walls the grounds and country beyond were spread out unaltered, or apparently so, since if directed from above the eye mercifully by-passed the Outdoor Amenity Area and the Staff Car Park. Now the clouds of the previous night had vanished and a naked sun stood in the June sky, pouring heat on to the grounds and through the windows, making it seem almost impossible to breathe for the heat, making you screw up your eyes even to look at the wide pools of light on the pale carpets and the easy-clean Formica.

Keven Cheney strained to open a window, but he finally gave up. He looked round at the boy huddled on the sofa. "Come and give us a hand, Kit," he said.

Kit's knees were drawn up; the blond locks flowed from between his bare arms; his face remained hidden. He seemed to shake his head. Kevin looked longingly at where some of the children played on the lawn underneath, then came across to the sofa and asked, "What's the matter, Kit? Why don't you talk to *me* anyway. Aren't we friends still?" He put a hand on the other boy's arm; Kit started violently and half got up, turning momentarily terrified eyes on the youngster. Kevin stepped back, disconcerted. "It's all right, it is really," he said after a moment.

Slowly Kit leaned back again; he pushed damp strands of hair back from his eyes.

"You been crying?" Kevin asked.

Kit nodded. "S-sorry," he said hesitantly, looking oddly bewildered still, looking from Kevin to the window, then round the room, then back at him again.

"Go on, everyone does sometimes," said Kevin. "I did a lot when I came in. Bet you're missing your mum and dad a lot, isn't that it?"

Kit shook his head slowly. "Why – why aren't you outside?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Kept in," said Kevin, perching on the arm of the sofa. "Kicked her, didn't I? But I don't care. It finishes at two today, then I can go out. You'll come too?"

"Yes – maybe," said Kit doubtfully.

"Hey – I didn't tell you." Kevin's face broke into a broad grin. "My mum's come back, my sister rung and told me yesterday. That means I'll be going home, out of here. Great, isn't it?"

"Yes – great. She's lucky," said Kit.

"Who? My mum, you mean?"

"No, your sister."

Kevin wrinkled his brows. "What d'you mean? I don't understand."

The other boy was silent for a moment or two, then he said, "Wish – wish Kit had a brother."

"Why d'you say *Kit*, like that? You mean you?"

"Yes." Kit sat up, curling his legs under him, and ran his fingers along the edge of Kevin's shorts. "These look nice on you," he said.

"Hey!" The other boy bounced up and down on his hands with excitement. "When I go out why don't you come and see me, stay with me perhaps."

Kit's face had lit up. "Promise?"

"Promise." Kevin took his friend's hand and shook it. "Everything okay now?"

Kit dropped his head; he shook it slowly. He swallowed and his eyes closed tight, then tears began to force themselves between the lids and to run down both cheeks. Kevin looked at him in puzzlement and

despair, then shrugged.

"You're weird," he said.

Chapter Five

"In short," said Fogg-Willerby, "in short – the conception that Elysium is to be found between the buttocks of a pubescent schoolboy would strike most people as, shall we say, outlandish at the very least. Would you care to have the window open; it's bloody hot."

"Yes, please. Professor, on the contrary, *your* conception of paedophilia – I prefer to call it boy-love – is outlandish, not to say grotesque."

"Ah, yes – I forgot." Fogg-Willerby pushed the window open and drew the curtains a little to shade his office from the full brilliance of the early afternoon sun. The curtain moved, lifted in the breeze and it felt appreciably cooler. Fogg-Willerby sat down and picked up the case-notes again. "Yes, it was the other you went in for, wasn't it? I suppose *everyone* calls it soixante-neuf? Still, the principle's the same, eh?"

"But boy-love isn't principally about sex, can't you see that? Look, *you* came out with all that stuff about soixante-neuf, not me. And buttocks, Professor."

"I've heard it all before, Baxter, I've heard it all before," said Fogg-Willerby wearily. "The same old paederastic line about one's *own* love being completely pure, completely wholesome and beautiful and the like from fellows who were actually sitting there convicted of God knows how many charges of indecency. You didn't do so badly either, did you?"

"But it doesn't *begin* with sex, Professor, that's what you can't or won't understand. Look, when two people – any two people – are very much in love then their love has to be completed, it is natural that it be completed, by some kind of physical contact, they have to give themselves to each other altogether, one hundred percent. Usually of course it's a man and a woman, but when it's between a man and a boy it doesn't make the boy-lover a beast or a savage, any more than it makes every hetero a rapist.

"Deep waters, deep waters, Baxter. But all right, if I've got it the wrong way round – like most of the rest of the population – and it isn't primarily sex that turns you on, what does? Go ahead, convince me that I'm mistaken."

"I'm not sure that I can," said Baxter hesitantly. "But I've often tried to work it out and – it's as if, very long ago, at a time you can't recall, probably even before you were born, you knew, were friends with, or maybe only once saw a being so perfect, so radiantly lovely that, while perhaps no conscious memory remains, there is such a residuum of love and longing that you spend the rest of your life, off and on, in a state of half-bewildered thralldom to this invisible young god, you are inescapably engaged on a kind of quest, a seeking to find and recapture, yet never quite sure whether one is the hunter or the hunted, drawn on and on after this – this will o' the wisp, given only from time to time glimpses enough to make you think that it might, just might after all be *him*, to make you carry on. There's disappointment over and over, you get lost, you get hurt, but the hope always comes again. You glimpse what you think may be him in a thousand possible disguises – a blond water-elfin the local swimming-pool, a bare-legged Prep-school boy running along the pavement, a dark-haired, black-eyed boy-pixie in the unlikely wrap of the local Comprehensive uniform, a peachy-thighed twelve-year-old center-forward on the local football field. Time and again you resolve to give up this mad, anguished pursuit, to stand still, to live in the real world, but as soon as you do you may be sure that he's there at the next corner, smiling his wicked, enchanting beautiful smile – masquerading as perhaps what you'd least expect, an eager, neatly-uniformed Boy Scout with the face of a Renaissance chorister, or even, if you at last go to pray, as the real-life and quite outrageously pretty choirboy in the front row with his dreamy-blue eyes peeping over his psalter...

Professor, the day came, I remember, when I graduated with a far better degree than I deserved, and standing there in my dark blue gown and silk hood, my parents in the balcony and the organ playing, I resolved a great resolve: "Baxter, today you grow up, today you become a man, today you call a halt to this nonsense once and for all. So I stuck my chin out, stood a little straighter and felt – well, quite edified to be in the presence of such resolution. Professor, just then the Chancellor entered in procession – as he does on those occasions – preceded by a thirteen-year-old page with long, exquisitely golden hair, a loose frilly shirt and magnificently tight black breeches showing off the trimmest, most curvaceous pair of little hips I have ever seen. You know, I just couldn't take my eyes off him all through the ceremony, in fact I had to be called a second time for my degree. And the conviction ringing in my head all the time, *there can be nothing in the world more beautiful, more wondrous, nothing.* That was my graduation."

"I can see that it's going to be a long story. But please go on."

"Well, there isn't so much more," said Baxter. "Or a lot more of the same, rather. You just go on... looking, you see."

Fogg-Willerby made a brief note. "You've thought it through, Paul, no one could say otherwise. Well... everyone has some way of elevating his lusts into some kind of high-minded duty or mission, and I suppose yours is as good as any. In a way I don't blame you, you need to find some meaning for the thing, and what you've done in effect is to hand me back a gilt-edged, sanctified version of what I told you on the first day. Not a glorious vision from some former life – but the memory of some little kid you met at school when you were very lonely, and whom you've since idealized a bit. Like I said, imprinting. Keep your illusions if you like, but don't get into them so far that you think you are someone special, one of the chosen; that's how people get psychotic. And don't expect the rest of us to see it your way, or expect that the laws of the country will somehow be suspended in your favor; that's how people get locked up."

"Well, that's it, isn't it?" said Baxter. "I mean, you just get so blinded by it all, what there is between you and the boy seems so okay, so perfect, so wonderful, that you think simply everyone must see it like you do, must see that anything with so much love, so much caring in it, can't possibly be wrong. It has to be all right, it *must be* all right. Damn it, why *isn't it* all right?"

"Paul – even though you can't see a thing yourself, you still might get a view of how other people see it. Tell me this, if you had a small son of your own, would you have sex with him?"

"Honestly and sincerely – I don't know," said Baxter. "It's very hypothetical and would depend on a number of things. Possibly not."

"If you had a small son aged five, to be more specific, would you have sex with him?"

"No, I would say not. Not at that age, anyway."

"There you are, you see – you do admit the existence of taboos. In this case a combined age and incest taboo. And, Baxter, there's also a paedophilia taboo; there's nothing you can do about it. Coffee?"

"Thanks."

The professor's secretary had entered; she poured two cups of coffee and left.

"But I still can't see that it then becomes a crime," said Baxter, stirring.

"Not perhaps a crime, but certainly a heresy, which is the breach of a cultural taboo, and perhaps worse. Taboos are evolved by common consent and you break them at your own risk; that's something that you should have learned by now, Paul."

"But it's not rational, it's not logical."

"Quite. It's got nothing to do with logic, with stacking up points on this side or that, with convincing people. I didn't get to my heterosexual position as a result of logical argument, by being persuaded, being convinced – and you didn't get to your position that way either. Nor will you get out of it that way; mere argument won't make *you* change, you know that. So why should your arguments work on anyone else?"

"I've no idea," said Baxter frankly. "But yes – I agree that you won't convince *me*. Professor, though there have been reverses and a lot of misery in my way of life, it has also brought me, in the presence of certain boys, moments of sheer joy, of ecstasy, that are still with me, often after many years, and which – as they say in the films – they can't take away from me. Well, *that's* my argument; you've heard it all now."

"More coffee?"

"Thanks; it's very good."

"Turkish. Look here, Paul, do a little homework for me over the next few days. Think back over the times you've got yourself into trouble; analyze them. Try and identify just what the factors were, just what the actions on your part were, that got you into the mess in question – in particular those that got you found out. You may surprise yourself; you may well find that it wasn't actually the sex-drive that operated, but something quite different. Perhaps the paedophilia thing is almost – I did say *almost* – a kind of red herring with you. It might turn out to be not perhaps as real, as powerful, as you imagine."

"That would surprise me very much," said Baxter.

"All the more reason to do what I ask," Fogg-Willerby said. "Would you care to walk me over to my car now; it's insufferably humid in here. That second coffee was a mistake. When you leave, Baxter, perhaps you'll endow a private bar featuring cool draft beer perpetually on tap as a token of your undying gratitude for the insights you have been afforded here. But please let's get outside as soon as possible. My briefcase, if you wouldn't mind."

The heat outdoors was scarcely more tolerable than in the building's interior; the breeze had dropped now, the sky was cloudless and, out of the shade, the sun bounced and shimmered on the tarmac as Baxter, having left the Professor, crossed to a point at which the main hospital enclosure bordered that of the Children's Unit; his main purpose was to seek the coolness of a lane that ran between heavy foliage at the rear of the Unit, but hearing children's voices in the grounds he moved a little further along. He came to a part of the wall where the brickwork gave way to a low fence, then stood quite still.

On a lawn in front of the smaller building the paddling pool had been filled and about a dozen children splashed naked in the cool water, running in and out of the small pool, to and fro through the spray of a hosepipe wielded by one of the nursing staff, shrieking with delight; among them was Kit. Baxter, still partly hidden, gripped the top bar of the fence so hard that it began to hurt. Afterwards he would be able to recall it all only as he saw it now, a sequence in slower-than-slow motion, a scene whose individual elements were each so full of wonder that they could not for a moment be integrated, could not be put together without the whole splitting asunder – the warm broken sunlight on the pale, silvery-wet skin of the boy, the leap and twist of his long bare limbs, the bounce and quiver of his hips as he ran back and forth across the grass and jumped in and out of the water, his laughing, ducking and dodging in the cold spray, his shaking drops of water from his long hair, and a sight for the first time, and then again and again, of how beautifully, perfectly equipped he was as he turned, leaped, turned...

Momentarily, quite irrationally, Baxter closed his eyes tight and kept them shut for two or three seconds; when he opened them again, Kit was nowhere to be seen. He looked around, almost in panic; had he imagined the boy? But the other children were still there; indeed he was for a few moments diverted by the graceful body of a dark-eyed youngster of about eleven – but Kit did not re-appear. He waited, watched, and waited. Perhaps Kit had gone inside and would shortly come out again. He leaned over the fence so far that he risked falling over, even being seen. Then it was too late, and the nursing staff had turned off the water, were rounding the children up; they were running back into the Unit.

"Hello."

The leaves alongside him moved; Kit climbed over the lowest part of the fence and dropped on to the grass. His face sparkled with delight; he held out both hands and Baxter took them. He could only say, "Kit!"

"I saw you and ran round," said Kit. "I know that we don't usually meet till seven, but all today I've hardly been able to wait."

"I haven't been able to wait at all," said Baxter. "Today has been just awful. How did you get away?"

"I asked Staff Nurse if I could run around in the sun and get dry; she said okay. She said to put on something, so I put on my plimsolls." He smiled up at Baxter. "That was all."

Baxter was silent, still mentally dazzled by this near view of the boy's flawless nudity. Then he said, "Let's go a little way down the lane, shall we? You don't mind, do you? No one comes down here."

"I don't care," said the boy recklessly. "Not when I'm with you." Holding Baxter's hand with both of his own, he half-swung from it as they walked along. "Let's go down the main road!"

They laughed, then Baxter said, "Look here, Kitten, I'm really sorry about yesterday. I have to explain to you that – "

"You don't have to, really."

"Yes, I do, You see, Kitten, these tedious things called 'culture' and 'custom' keep cropping up and messing things for us. You were upset because I didn't show you what I really felt, because I hadn't done what *I* wanted to do, wanted to do so much that I could hardly bear it; how daft can you get? Yet this awful schoolmasterish voice in your head keeps telling you that you simply don't touch, hug, cuddle a twelve-year-old boy whom you – well, whom you scarcely even know, have only met about three times."

"To whom you have not, in fact, even been introduced!" Kit laughed, and again swung Baxter's hand to and fro, skipping along beside him. "But, Paul, I thought it was different for us, that was all."

"Of course it was," said Baxter, "but I just didn't see it. You will probably have learned by now, Kitten, that age does not always confer wisdom."

"You see it now," said Kit quietly, and stopped.

Baxter stopped, put both arms round the boy and hugged him, hugged him for a long time. Then he stroked the boy's blond hair, lifted a few strands, tilted his head back and kissed him on the forehead.

"For *that*," said Kit, "our heights don't correspond very well!" He looked up and grinned.

"No, they don't, do they?"

"I know, I'll pop up here." The boy stood on a low tree-stump; now the heights corresponded perfectly.

After some time Baxter slid his hand down the boy's back and murmured, "You're quite dry now. And pleasantly warm, too." Tentatively he slid his palm further down, then over the boy's smooth neat bottom, sliding, patting a little, then keeping it there, pulling the boy towards him again.

"Do you mind my... touching you?" asked Baxter quietly.

Kit shook his head. "You can – you can touch me anywhere," he said shyly.

Baxter went on very gently exploring the boy's warm soft places, sometimes sensing his body tighten or move in response, sometimes feeling his breathing quicken or the boy's face press a little more tightly into his own chest. He continued, then his hand stopped again for some time and he said, "It feels so good just to hold it – just like this, in my hand."

The boy nodded. "It is for me, too."

Something made Baxter ask curiously, "Has anyone else ever done this – touched it, I mean?"

"No one," said the boy solemnly. "No one except Staff Nurse Armitage, that is."

"*What?*" Baxter's head jerked up and he stared at the boy.

Kit giggled. "Well, she baths us, you know, all of us."

"Yes, I suppose she would," said Baxter doubtfully.

"But it's not like this!" Kit said.

Baxter went on stroking for about a minute, then said, "I'm sure it doesn't do *that* when your beloved Staff Nurse gets busy with the sponge or whatever."

The boy laughed again. "*No!*"

He was quiet for a little, then he turned slightly pink and leaned closer to Baxter. "It does that because I love you," he whispered.

An unexpected wave of emotion shook Baxter; he pulled Kit to him, buried his face in the boy's hair, then a moment later whispered in turn into his ear.

"I know," said Kit simply.

Baxter picked the boy up, one arm under his armpits, one behind his knees, carried him for a short distance, then slid him in to an area of soft grass and knelt beside him. His lips moved over the boy's neck, the down over his chest and stomach. The boy's hands were on either side of Baxter's cheeks, then on his head, pressing downwards, pushing, guiding. Baxter thought, well, here goes... Kit gasped and his hips and knees flexed convulsively, then his whole body relaxed again.

"Yes, Paul," he whispered. "Yes – please."

Vertically above me, you can see the edges of trees rimming the white sky and the orange sun. And when you turn your head to one side you can see the near edge of the wood, the trunks frozen and motionless round the black shape of the I. But now the I and its body begin to shrivel back, to contract into the icy dark as flickers of light dart from the warm and grow to ripples of red, scarlet and white pulsing across and across it, then to gathering waves lifting into the sun until its limbs are twisting and breaking as the great body sinks and dissolves in the flames, lifting, then falling, gagging, choking...

Kit's bottom was thudding on the grass, his long bare legs flailing the air as if he were riding an invisible bicycle. For a moment he stopped moving altogether, then his body jerked like a whip – once, then again, and he sobbed out loud. He half sat up, sobbed out once more, and his arms tightened hard round Baxter's neck; slowly he pulled Baxter down and wound his legs around the man's waist, then both remained still for a long time.

At length Kit said quietly, "I've never had one like that before."

Baxter raised his head, with some reluctance. He said, "*Before?* You mean – there have been other – other – "

Kit laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "No – just when I did it myself, silly. You do leap at things, don't you?"

"Yes – yes, of course," said Baxter. Then he asked hesitantly, "What do you think about when you – do it?"

"So if I can't sin in deed, I can sin in thought, Reverend Baxter, can I?" said Kit. "Actually, I thought of you once."

"Really?" said Baxter, boyishly delighted.

"Really. That should be a sop to your vanity; and it's true. Have you ever done it, thinking about me?"

"Often and often," said Baxter. "Both since I met you and before."

Kit sat up and hugged his knees. "That's one of your weird philosophical remarks that I'd have to go off and think about for an hour or two. Actually, I don't think I like it. It doesn't make me seem real

somehow."

"All right, I take it back. Just since I met you – and that *is* true. Don't worry, you are real, Kitten."

"Chris."

"Eh?"

"My name – Chris. Short for Christopher, you know."

"You told me you were Kit," said Baxter, bewildered. "Right at the beginning you did."

"Kit was my baby name – years ago. Then I was Chris." The boy wrinkled his forehead. "I don't know. Maybe I *was* calling myself Kit when we met first... It just came into my head that I'd rather be Chris, that's all."

"Lord," said Baxter, "you're not going to look me earnestly in the eyes and say, 'Paul, I guess I just grew up', are you?"

The boy laughed. "Of course not."

"Actually, I'm rather disappointed," Baxter said. "'Kitten' had become my rather special pet name for you – at least, so I thought. I liked it."

"I liked it too. Okay, then, you can call me that when it's just us."

"But in polite company you're Christopher or the contracted form thereof; I'll try and remember. But shouldn't we be getting back?"

Kit leaned back against Baxter, then turned and snaked both arms around him. "No – I'm going to stay here with you."

"And be late? And be kept inside tomorrow?"

"Lord!" The boy jumped up. "I might be, too."

"You've got lots of little bits of grass attached to you," said Baxter. "Stand still." He engaged his fingers in the delectable task of brushing off every last blade, then said, "Now you are respectable, *mon petit*. Shall we walk?"

Taking the boy's hand, Baxter strolled back the length of the lane, through the slanting bars of late afternoon sun. Soon they arrived at the clearing where they first met, then at the boy's private gap in the fence.

"What will you say when you go in?" asked Baxter nervously.

"*L'amour, l'amour, fait tourner la monde*," said Kit, "or something equally profound. He started tugging at Baxter's hand. "Quickly – just before I go."

"What now?"

"That tree-stump over there – it's about the same height as the other. Remember?"

"I have been employed here both as Charge Nurse and latterly as Nursing Officer for a total of seven years," said Arthur Trenchard. "No, I lie – eight years. In this time I have lived through some, indeed many, changes. If I may say so, your own very welcome arrival as Consultant to both the Hospital and the Unit was one of the major events of this period."

"Mr. Trenchard, is this what you have called me out of my Case Conference to tell me?" asked Fogg-Willerby.

"No, Professor. I am about to refer to an event which took place relatively recently."

"Well, please do tell me."

"Certainly, Professor. Now, as I was about to say, I have no wish to dictate the course of this interview, but I think it would be helpful if at the outset I were to place these papers before you."

"What are they? I really must finish my Case Conference and leave soon. Can't you simply tell me?"

"Yes, I *could* tell you, Professor. But, although I do not wish to appear to contradict you, I do feel it

best that you examine the relevant documents personally. There are three, which I have placed in order. The first, on the smallest sheet, is an Internal Memo written by myself to Dr. Partridge, and the second is a copy of a communication from Dr. Partridge to Mr. Murchison, Sector Administrator. You will see from the final paragraph that it relates to the first item mentioned. The third paper, the longest of the three, is a transcript to the best of my recollection of a subsequent verbal message from Mr. Murchison to myself by telephone; this conversation – if such a one-sided exchange can be called a conversation – took place early this afternoon."

"Well, hand it all over and let me see," said Fogg-Willerby. He read the first two papers, read them again, then spoke very slowly and quietly. "Mr. Trenchard," he said, "would you please be good enough to inform Mr. Murchison that matters involving the ward supply of Plasticine are outside both your jurisdiction and mine. Will that be all?"

"With the greatest of respect, Professor – "

"That phrase is usually, in my experience, the prelude to an elaborate insult. Look, you're a good and conscientious man, Mr. Trenchard, but you must lay this whole matter before the play-lady; she will doubtless know how to deal with it. Now perhaps you will excuse me?"

"Well then, Professor, you would at least be kind enough to let me know your decision about the other matter, about the boy?"

"Ah!" Fogg-Willerby, who had begun to rise, sat down again. He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the desk, then allowed the file he had been holding to fall open. "Um," he said.

"Naked," said Trenchard. "Completely *naked*."

"Yes – so you've already said. Why haven't you discussed this with Dr. Partridge?"

"He went early."

Fogg-Willerby read the third memo that Trenchard had given him and, through his rising irritation, experienced a moment of undiluted pleasure. There was no doubt that Jock Murchison, a sound man who had been holding the reins long before there were such things as Charge Nurses, Nursing Officers and plastic document cases with zips, was never short of a choice word or two for jumped-up bedpan merchants who wasted Administration time.

"Well, where the boy is concerned, I don't see what all the fuss is about," he said at last. "After all, it was a nice sunny afternoon."

"That's not the point. The question is one of – "

"What happened to his clothes, anyway?"

"It seems that Staff Nurse had been bathing them outside, since it was so hot. He says he went for a walk in the sun to get dry, lay down, and fell asleep."

"There you are, then."

"Well, it's not so simple; there are a couple of aspects that concern me. First, we did look in the grounds for him when he hadn't come in after half an hour, and he wasn't to be found in the immediate area of the Unit, suggesting that he had left the grounds altogether. This in turn raises two other questions. First, the public image of the Unit; I mean, if he had been seen, what would people think of a hospital whose patients can escape and wander around exposing themselves in broad daylight. You do know what the Press and these so-called pressure groups in the community are like about the mental hospitals nowadays. Second, there is the aspect I have raised before. This is the safety of the children, and now of the boy in particular. He might have met *anyone*. I need hardly remind you of the proximity of the adult hospital, but, lest you think I intend any slur on that establishment, may I say that of course there are undesirables *everywhere*, both in the hospital and out of it."

"I see; thank you for the information," said Fogg-Willerby drily. "Anyhow, the boy's back with nothing

more than – well, a healthy sun-tan, I expect, so all is well. Actually, I envy him a little; I rather wish that I were young enough to go romping in the fields *au naturel*."

"But I am talking about what *might* have happened," persisted Trenchard. "Professor, the boy might have been molested."

"Mr. Trenchard, I rather feel that I am being molested at this moment," said Fogg-Willerby. "Do you think we could end this conversation now, and that I could get on?"

"No, I do not," said Trenchard, whose neck and lower face had turned a dull red. "I may be speaking out of turn now, but I *shall* speak. Professor, for the last few minutes you have been going out of your way to ridicule just about everything I have said to you, to turn it all into a joke, and this when I have come to you to raise a clinical matter of very grave concern to those of us who work in this Unit, a matter involving an ill child. This boy was, as you very well know, admitted because of a serious schizophrenic illness and, bit by bit, as a result of our combined efforts, there has been a very real improvement. Over the past week in particular he has looked happier, has been eating better, and has communicated much more freely with the Staff and the other patients. Also, these frightening hallucinations he used to have occur much less frequently now. There have been setbacks, of course, but I must say that, even when he returned from having run away this afternoon he looked happier and more relaxed than I have ever seen him. The thing that struck me today also was that, when I called him 'Kit' he corrected the name to 'Chris' – the name he had, of course, used before his illness. I do interpret this above all as a real sign of recovery, or at least partial recovery, and it does therefore make me most unhappy to see the results of our work being placed, as they are being placed, in jeopardy. I know that you see me – I know that everyone does – as Trenchard the sergeant-major, Trenchard the tyrant, but somebody, Professor, has to take responsibility for the discipline, the direction of a Unit like ours, and for the protection of the children in it, and nothing is more easy than for people like Social Workers to jeer from the sidelines, yet even the most unstructured therapeutic community does, I know, need someone – even if from behind the scenes – to impose a measure of order for the good of everyone, to check excess. Nobody, Professor, cares more about the children than I, and nobody would like anything more than to see this boy Kit discharged home happy and well, but this will not be achieved if we do not give the boy the protection to which, even here, he is entitled."

Fogg-Willerby was quiet for a moment or two; then he made a note in the boy's file.

"Mr. Trenchard," he said. "Mr. Trenchard – I do apologize for having seemed to make light of your worries. However, I did feel that it was the best way to set your anxiety at rest. I don't doubt that you have the highest of motives for all that you do, yet I think that you may at times lack a sense of proportion. Still, I had heard that the boy was doing remarkably well, thanks to your good work, and I certainly agree that nothing should counteract this. Perhaps he does need a little supervision."

"Precisely my point."

"But – to cut this short – what is it exactly that you want me to *do*, Mr. Trenchard? Presumably you don't want me to go sprinting across to the Unit with a pair of boy-sized underpants, or to start erecting a forty-foot barbed-wire fence with watch-towers all round the grounds, do you? Why can't you simply talk it over with Partridge in the morning, and come to some agreement between you about this question of supervision? Where did Partridge go, anyhow?"

"Mrs. Saunders from the Regional Health Authority is here; he has to show her round the Unit. You see what I mean, Professor; we *are much* in the public eye. Actually, a new fence wouldn't be a bad idea. I did notice, when I went out this afternoon, that our present perimeter fence is in a state of considerable disrepair."

"Be that as it may – I take it that all you expect me to do now is to agree with you. Well, I do – up to a

point. Is that all?"

"Yes, I am not asking you to carry out any specific actions at present, Professor. I simply want to know that I have your support in establishing more supervision and control in the Unit generally, particularly in relation to the boy under discussion, but also in relation to some others."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Fogg-Willerby, suddenly cautious. "It depends on what you have in mind. We'll arrange a meeting between all of us quite soon and talk it over. In the meantime, I am sure that you can use your initiative to deal with the immediate problem – provided you don't create difficulties where none already exist. Actually, I think I can depend on you in the latter respect."

"Thank you, Professor," said Trenchard. "I appreciate that."

Chapter Six

"I'm giving you one chance, one last chance," said Trenchard.

The boy seated on the bed, his chin resting on his closed knuckles, did not look up or speak.

"Now, put these on and let's have no more trouble," said Trenchard; he held out a pair of underpants.

The boy shook his head. "Go away," he said.

"I'm sorry, Kit," said Trenchard. "I'm sorry, but I can't do that. Listen to me – nothing would be easier than for me to say, 'Well, I'll simply go off now and leave Kit to do just what he likes. I don't care that he won't do what I tell him; it doesn't *matter* that he won't do what I tell him.' But, you know, it does matter. It is not fair to you, it is not kind to you, for us to let you go through life thinking that you can simply do what you wish, that you never have to obey those older and more experienced than yourself. Perhaps if we didn't care about you we *could* simply walk away, I could walk away now. But we do care about you, I care about you. So just be a good boy now, and slip some of these things on for me."

Kit was silent and didn't move.

"Come along now; it's not nice to go around like that, is it? It's not what we expect of a big boy of almost thirteen, is it?"

The boy shrugged.

"Now, Kit, I've been very patient up till now, but I might soon have to get a little cross, and you wouldn't like that, would you?"

Sylvia Armitage come in. "Ah, the return of the wanderer! Off to bed early, then, are we?"

"No, we are not," said Trenchard shortly. "I'm sorry to say that this disobedient boy will not put on his clothes when I tell him to."

"Well, best leave him alone," said Sylvia. "I expect he'll soon change his mind; it gets pretty cool in the evenings still."

"Please, Sylvia," said Trenchard, rising. "Please. That's not the point. And I'm afraid I don't see anything to smile about either."

"I do, rather. I mean, the sight of you waving these underpants like a flag of battle..."

"Kindly leave this to me, Sylvia. I don't really wish to discuss the boy in front of him, but I don't mind repeating my view that he does need some order, some direction, in his life, even over what to you may seem a relatively trivial matter. Please."

"Oh, very well, then." They stood together above Kit, looking.

The I is larger and closer than ever before, its black depth glowing, its pupil huge with greed. Now it approaches at lightning speed, the black body rears behind it, the arms sweep up and apart, ready to close.

The boy cried out in terror, leaped back, and struck out with his full strength, again and again. Then Trenchard too had jumped backwards; he was holding the left side of his face with one hand, his spectacles dangling from the other.

"Very well," he said breathlessly after a moment. "Very well, if that's how you want it. I know exactly what's called for now."

He went out. Sylvia sat down on the end of a bed, near Kit. The boy was crouched on the floor in a

corner of the room, his head deep in his arms, sobbing and trembling, his body shaking all over. After a short time he became a little quieter, and Sylvia started to speak, very gently and carefully.

"It's all right now, Kit – it's all right. He's gone now and there's just you and me. You mustn't be frightened, really; there's absolutely nothing to be scared of. We're all friends here, we all care about you. I know some people have odd ways of showing that they care but, well, Mr. Trenchard is... what he is, and I don't think there's anything you or I can do about that. But at any rate don't be frightened of me – and don't be so upset. Please, Kit?"

He was almost quiet now; his body was convulsed with another sob, then he was still, his face remaining hidden.

"There – that's better. Do try to believe that at least I care about you, Kit, and love you. Look at me now. And there's a tissue."

Slowly the boy turned and peered at Sylvia through two half-opened fingers; he took the tissue.

"That's better. Are we friends, then?"

Kit nodded.

"Good. Now, I won't make you put on your clothes if you don't want to, but you must be hungry, so why don't you just put at least some of them on now, then you can wash your face and come down for supper."

Kit hesitantly lowered his hands; Sylvia knelt beside him, took the tissue and wiped his cheeks. "There – that's my handsome boy again." She stood up. "Come on, then." She held her hand out; Kit took it and started to get up.

"We kept supper warm for you. Wait and see; it's your favorite."

The door opened and Trenchard came in; he carried a steel kidney dish covered with a green cloth; a male nursing assistant was with him.

"Very well, Kit," he said briskly. "Talking's over for now, I'm afraid. And just remember that you have only yourself to blame for this."

"What's the idea?" demanded Sylvia.

"Where persuasion doesn't work I generally find that some Largactil does," said Trenchard, putting the dish down and removing the cloth. "Bring the boy over to his bed, please."

"Now, see here – " began Sylvia.

"See here nothing," Trenchard said. "He's been written up for Largactil fifty milligrams as necessary. That is, at the discretion of the Nursing Staff. We've neglected his medication far too much up until now, in my opinion, as today's performance quite clearly shows."

He broke open the glass ampoule and started to draw up the drug.

"But he was just about to get dressed, if only he'd been left alone," said Sylvia angrily. "In God's name, why did you have to come in at this moment?"

"I didn't hear that last comment," said Trenchard. "And 'about to' doesn't wash with me, Sylvia. Bring him over, Bill."

Gently but firmly the assistant lifted Kit, pulled him struggling and crying across the room and laid him face downwards over his bed. The boy screamed and screamed again; he lunged out and kicked, but was gripped fast.

"And hold his legs, please, Sylvia," said Trenchard. "Otherwise he'll simply hurt himself."

Sylvia, tight-lipped, did as she was told. Trenchard put his hand on the small of Kit's back and vigorously rubbed his bottom with a spirit-soaked swab.

Now almost all of it is in the room, its body oozing in through the open window, its legs scraping

across the floor, very near to me now; I can hear it sliding up and its breathing just behind me; its odor is choking me and now its cold weight is on my body, pressing me down and down. The tip of a leg flickers past my face and I see it covered with needle-sharp hair, black and poisonous, and then I can see its shadow on the floor as its forelimbs are raised and as they open...

"You must find working in a place like this very trying," said Mrs. Alicia Saunders, Chairperson of the Regional Health Authority.

"No, I wouldn't say so," said Partridge through almost clenched teeth. "It's very rewarding, very satisfying in many ways."

The screams from the upstairs dormitory subsided and momentarily all was quiet, but then came another scream longer and more penetrating than any of the others; it died away into sobbing and then at last the normal sounds of the Unit were restored – the thud of children's feet in the corridor, a burst of laughter, the rattle of a meal-trolley.

"You know, it's not always like... I can't think what... I'm afraid one of the children must be causing a disturbance," said Partridge. "I'm sorry about the noise."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Saunders. "I do admire you, being able to put up with all that... noise. I expect you have autistics and defectives and all sorts here."

"No, not exactly," said Partridge, still deeply unsettled. "Children in these categories usually go to a Mental Deficiency hospital; our young patients are children of – if I may use the term – relatively normal intelligence but who suffer from nervous, from emotional disorders. Some with depression, some with schizophrenia-like disorders, school difficulties and so on. There are of course frequently family problems at the heart of it all... Now, this is the dining area. It's where – where the children have their meals."

They passed on. The visit to the therapy rooms, the school area, and the outdoor amenities took some fifteen minutes more.

"Perhaps you would care to take a look upstairs now?" asked Partridge.

Kit was in an armchair in the boys' dormitory, attended by a nurse. His head lolled to one side, his eyes were glazed, and a string of saliva hung from one corner of his mouth; he was dressed only in a pyjama top; His thighs and one of his legs glistened with moisture; an orderly was mopping the floor by his bed.

"I do admire you, I really do," murmured the Chairperson, averting her eyes after a moment. "How you cope with children like that all day and every day I do not know, I simply do not know."

The heat had dropped slightly by the next day; at ten in the morning it was still cool and a wind was moving through the grounds and bringing in high clouds from the west. The sun was masked and later it would perhaps rain.

"That sort of banging and shouting will not help us, Doctor," said Mr. Trenchard.

Harold Partridge nursed the hand which he had brought into forcible contact with the top of his desk, and breathed deeply for a moment or two.

"Then, Mr. Trenchard, perhaps you will tell me just *how* I can get certain things into your head?" he asked. "The fact is, in short, that you grossly exceeded your authority, and you know it."

"I don't think so," said Trenchard. "No, I don't think so. The boy's medicine card read: fifty milligrams of Largactil p.r.n. meaning, if I may refresh your memory, at the discretion of the nurse in charge of the ward. I was entirely within my rights in judging that the degree of the child's disturbance at the time called for medication, and in administering it."

"Well, I've deleted it now," said Partridge shortly, "and I'll think for a long time before I write up any more p.r.n.'s, you can be sure of that."

"You see now, do you not, where the use of coercively-administered drugs gets us," cried Vera Thoroughgood. "Any regime that permits – "

"Please don't moralize, Vera," said Partridge. "The right drugs are helpful at the right place and the right time; what I am doing is questioning the circumstances in which this drug was given, and also the manner in which it was given. The very idea of the boy being held down naked over his bed and... Mr. Trenchard, perhaps you would have preferred to beat the boy; perhaps raising some nice red weals on his backside would have given you even more pleasure than plunging your needle into it, eh?"

"These remarks are quite unworthy, Doctor," said Trenchard, flushing. "I got no satisfaction from the episode whatever; in fact it caused me considerable distress. I acted in what I believed to be the boy's best interests, that's all."

"The Spanish Inquisition said that they were acting in their victims' best interests," said Vera, "Hitler said that he was too; Thatcher says she is."

"Please, Vera," said Partridge, "let's not get away from the main, the central issue. Mr. Trenchard, I withdraw the word 'pleasure', but I do feel strongly about the matter nevertheless; there comes a point where the use of drugs by injection does simply become an unacceptable form of corporal punishment, and I think that this point was quite definitely passed yesterday."

"He needed the drug," said Trenchard stubbornly, "and he wouldn't have accepted it by mouth."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But just what did you think you would achieve by turning the boy into that pathetic near-vegetable that I saw yesterday evening? Well?"

"He was clearly working himself up into a tantrum, into a state of acute psychotic excitement," said Trenchard. "He was frightened and probably hallucinating; the only possible action was to anticipate his getting worse, his hurting himself – as you know he has done often before – or hurting someone else, to anticipate it with, as I said, the appropriate medication."

"That's not how it was, Arthur, if you'll excuse me," put in Sylvia. "When Kit came in, he – "

"Perhaps for the moment you'll allow *me* to speak on behalf of the Nursing Staff, Sylvia," said Trenchard. "I don't think that any internal dissensions, minor though they might be, should be brought out in the larger group. Anything you have to say should be said in the proper place, that is the daily Nurses' Meeting, or the Hand-Over; it should be ventilated there and nowhere else."

"I'm not sure about that," said Partridge. "For now, however, best that you and I talk it over later, Sylvia. Mr. Trenchard, just what happened yesterday? Tell me from the beginning. The first I knew of it all was when I heard a very great deal of noise – noise, if I may say so, which embarrassed me very considerably when I was showing around a visitor whom I wanted to impress with the peaceful, the happy, nature of the Unit."

"That was unfortunate," agreed Trenchard. "If I had known... Anyhow, it's all quite simply told. Sylvia had been showering the kids out on the lawn, it being of course a very hot, sunny afternoon, and the boy wandered away and –"

"I'm sorry, Arthur," said Sylvia, "but he did ask me if he could run around in the sun to get dry. Of course I said he could."

"Be that as it may," said Trenchard, "you didn't give him permission to leave the grounds, which he obviously did. Nearly two hours later he returned, still absolutely and completely – "

"To be fair, I'd taken all the clothes inside by then," said Sylvia.

"Will you *please leave* it to me, Sylvia? And it's no good defending the boy. Doctor, I then took him up to the dormitory, got his clothes, and quietly asked him to put them on, but he flatly refused to get

dressed, or to cover himself up in any way."

"Why wouldn't he?" asked Partridge.

"It's quite clear to *me* why he wouldn't," said Vera. "You were simply going out of your way to make him feel that his being undressed was shameful, was dirty. 'Cover himself up', indeed! The boy quite evidently didn't want to be part of this, to assent to it."

"Your opinions on the matter may not be the same as those of the rest of us, Vera," said Trenchard.

"I doubt that," said Vera. "But whether they are or not, I'm in business here to give my opinion when *I* feel that it is called for, and that's what I'm doing now and that's what I'm going to go on doing. If the boy didn't want to wear clothes then there was no earthly reason why he should. Actually, I rather wish I hadn't been off yesterday afternoon; he's a very good-looking boy."

"Do you mind, Vera?"

"Yes, I do mind, Mr. Trenchard. I mind this whole episode, this whole charade. Frankly, I can think of nobody more likely than you to have drummed up a major confrontation over such a trivial issue."

"It may seem trivial now, in retrospect," said Partridge in a valiant attempt at reconciliation. "Yet perhaps at the time... Anyway, how is the boy now?"

"Perfectly well," said Trenchard. "He took his breakfast like all the others and, if I am not mistaken, he is outside now with them, playing. Indeed, leaving aside yesterday's unhappy affair, Doctor, I feel that the boy is responding extremely well to the Unit regime. In the past few days he has been very much more stable than at any time since admission."

"The child is not a piece of your office furniture, Mr. Trenchard," said Vera. "I do concede-that he has been more outwardly happy and relaxed of late, and also that there has been less acting-out behavior, but whether this is due to your regime – and I note in passing the militaristic nature of the term – or whether it is *in spite* of it is very much open to question. I prefer to believe that any improvement in the boy, any growth, any benefit in the Unit, has come from the relationships that have been fostered by our group-oriented activities and indeed from the one-to-one dialogue that I have myself been able to institute with the boy. Personally, *I* have no doubt why he's so much better, so much more together now."

"Haven't you? Well, I forbear to remind you all of the long and painful analytical sessions that I have spent with the boy, or to attribute any progress to these, lest I be thought egotistical," said Partridge. "Yes, Sylvia?"

"I don't see why we can't simply be pleased that the boy has improved, instead of arguing about it," said Sylvia. "I mean, it was a team effort, wasn't it, to which each of us contributed something, and – well, the results have been quite remarkable, haven't they? There's no doubt about the difference in the boy. You know, even after he came back after having gone off yesterday afternoon, I remember noticing how... wonderfully pleased with life he looked."

"I don't doubt it," said Trenchard. "Besides everything else, he'd missed afternoon lessons. Gloating, more like."

"That's what you can't stand, isn't it?" said Vera, her voice rising. "Just because he escaped from your petty restrictions for an hour or so, your regime, your lessons, your clothes, just because he did something of his own, something that wasn't part of *your* program, something that *you* hadn't scripted for him – that's what infuriates you. And above all, that he'd had the impertinence to enjoy doing it, to be *happy that* he'd done it. It's too much, Mr. Trenchard, isn't it?"

"Dr. Partridge," asked Trenchard, "am I to be continually subjected to these tirades?"

"If you don't like what she says, don't listen to it," said Partridge wearily. "Now, is there anything more we can achieve by further discussion now, or can we...? Yes, Mr. Trenchard?"

"I still think that the boy has far too much latitude here. You must see, Doctor, that while he is placed

in this particular Unit there are certain risks entailed in his running virtually wild. Could I make a plea that, at least for a short time, until he has got over this upset, he be restricted to the Unit and its immediate area, or at least not allowed outside by himself."

"There's something in that," said Partridge thoughtfully. "Yes, one might do as you suggest, at least during this very difficult period."

"I know that your action would certainly have the Professor's support," urged Trenchard.

"Where does he come into it?"

"I was talking to him yesterday. In fact, I raised the matter of the boy's having absconded with him, and he said –

"You mean, you went across to the Professor to discuss this behind my back?" asked Partridge, putting the file down on the table with a bang.

"Certainly; it was the only thing to do. You weren't here, were you?"

"You knew bloody well that I was – or at least that if I wasn't I was coming back. Even if I hadn't been it could easily have waited until today. But no – oh, no. What a splendid, what a positively golden opportunity it was to play us off against each other so that *you* could get your own way yet again. Mr. Trenchard, there's a positively Byzantine element in you that I sometimes find distinctly frightening."

"You mistake my motives completely, Doctor. My concern for the child was such that I felt there was no time to be lost in my consulting with – "

"Let's just leave it, shall we? Simply take note that I, as doctor responsible for this Unit – a fact some people seem to have forgotten – will not restrict this child's movement in the grounds, provided he comes in at the correct times. He is doing well, I do not think he is at risk, and therefore I will *not* support you in applying sanctions or limitations of any kind; I hope that's clear. Can we finish now? Sylvia, can I have a word?"

The balance of the Case Conference left; Sylvia took out a folder and handed Partridge a sheaf of papers. "While we have the chance, Harold, perhaps you'd check the eneuresics' Token Cards. I'm afraid there are a number of blacks this week, but two of the children have three reds and thus of course qualify for a gold, if you agree."

"Sod your token cards," said Partridge.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you don't get it. This is what comes of your consorting with that psychologist, that behaviorist, that Finkermole. Everything with you is squares and circles and noughts and crosses and now these pitiable little sticky stars. Every emotion, every act, every human achievement is reduced, is down-graded into a tuppenny adhesive token, a hole in a plastic card. There – *that's* what I think of your token cards."

"But I've been sticking stars in these all week," said Sylvia.

"More fool you," said Partridge, handing her the torn pieces. "You should have spent the time with the children, with real people. Will you come with me to Mario's tonight?"

Sylvia looked at him for a moment, then sat down. "Listen, Harold, you asked me the other day, and I said –"

"Yes, but no more evasions, please. There's just time to book a table. Now, are you coming with me or are you not?"

"Harold," said Sylvia, "why are you like this?"

"Like this? Like this? Like what? I'm not sure that I know what you mean. Well – yes or no?"

"Of course I'll come," said Sylvia quietly. "What time?"

"Any bloody time," snapped Partridge. He went out, then came back a moment later. "Seven," he said. "At the main gate."

The night was warm, and Kit slept uneasily. At about ten he woke for the second time, looked around, and then half sat up. Someone was standing very near his bed, not speaking or moving to touch him, just looking down. He switched the light on. "Oh, it's you, Kevin," he said sleepily.

The younger boy, dressed only in his underpants, still did not move or speak.

"Anything the matter?" asked Kit.

Kevin said quickly and hoarsely, "She's not coming, my mum's not coming, she's gone off again." Tears began to stream down his face, to drip from his nose and chin; his eyes remained fixed on Kit in a confusion of pain and bewilderment.

Without speaking, Kit lifted the covers of his bed; Kevin slid in alongside him. Kit snaked an arm round the youngster's neck and pulled the small, convulsing body close against him. Kit felt his own chest tighten and for a moment the older boy too cried, cried for his friend, for his disappointment. Then after a while both were quiet.

"It's okay, get rid of it," whispered Kit.

"I don't want to cry any more," said the small boy. "Not now." His arms tightened round Kit's waist. "Can I stay here, can I sleep here tonight?"

"Of course," said Kit.

"Good – I'm nice and warm now – like you." The youngster slid his palms up and down Kit's back then, after a moment, he said, "Oo, you've got no pants on."

"I always sleep bare – at least when it's warm. So should you."

"Take mine off, then," said Kevin. "I'm too sleepy now."

"Lazybones," said Kit. Then he said, "Lift your feet now," and finally dropped Kevin's pants on the floor.

"There – that's better." Kit pressed his palms over the boy's small buttocks and pulled him in against himself again; Kevin did the same, and twined his legs round Kit's.

"Comfortable now?" asked Kit, stroking.

"Yes – very. It's like – well, when my mum was at home, if I was upset, she'd take me into bed and tell me a story, she'd tell it to me till I fell asleep."

After a minute Kit asked quietly, "Shall I tell you a story?"

"Yes, please." Kevin nudged his head into the warm lacuna formed by Kit's shoulder and the curve of his neck. Then Kit, his eyes closed, started to speak very quietly and hesitantly, from time to time pausing for so long that the small boy thought he had fallen asleep, then his murmured narrative would continue again, and again, until long after it was completely dark.

"Once upon a time," said Kit, "a boy lived all alone in an enchanted forest. But there were terrible things, evil things, in the forest, and the boy was afraid. And in a deep cave at the heart of the forest lived a huge eight-legged monster, and the boy was more afraid of the monster in the cave than of anything else in the forest. Both day and night the monster would come out and search for the boy, and the boy ran and hid among the trees and the bushes.

"The boy had not always been alone; some time ago his parents had left him to go to a far distant country, one from which they knew they would never come back. When they said goodbye to the boy they hung around his neck a great jewel, secured at the back with a golden clasp, and told him to guard it well, as it was the most precious thing he possessed – indeed, it was the only thing he possessed. The jewel was white as a pearl, shaped like a huge teardrop, and on the mount was worked the letter K. They said, 'Our dear son, you must never give up this jewel, must never even let anyone handle it, until you meet the one person whom your heart tells you will love and care for you until you have grown up and can care for

yourself. When you meet this person and you give him your jewel, he will take you away to a castle on the other side of the world, in a land with high mountains, clear water, and horses to ride.' They kissed their son, then said goodbye, and he wandered crying into the black wood, holding the jewel that was still warm from their hands.

"The boy met many persons in the wood, and he looked at each one with hope, wondering if this was the one to whom he should give the jewel. There were some who wanted the jewel, but the boy's heart did not tell him that any was the one he should give it to. Some tried to take it by force, but the clasp held firm, and it could not be opened. And there were also those to whom the boy tried to give the jewel, but who did not want to take it. There was a young Enchanter, a good and kind man, and the boy asked the Enchanter to take the jewel, but he would not take it. There was a good white witch who the boy thought would take the jewel, but she did not. And there was a friendly pixie to whom the boy gave the jewel to hold to play with, but soon the pixie went home to his mother, and the boy was alone again.

"Then there came an ogre; he did not want the jewel, but he did not want the boy to have it either. He was unable to break the clasp, so he mixed strong spells and potions so that the boy would sleep, and so that he could take the jewel away while the boy slept, but the boy was saved by the Enchanter and the White Witch. Yet in the end they too went their way and left the boy alone.

"The monster had become hungrier and hungrier; he looked out and saw the boy; he ran out into the wood and the boy hid again, though he knew that soon now the monster would find him. But there came through the forest a poor knight who was weary with many battles; his clothes were torn and he was wounded and stained with traveling. But he saw the boy and took up his sword and stood between the boy and the monster and fought with the monster for very many days. At last the monster fell dead and, taking up his sword one last time, the poor knight cut off the monster's head.

"Then the poor knight rested in the forest; the boy tore his own clothes, soaked them in the stream, and cleaned the wounds of the knight, both those he had received from the monster, and those from the weary battles he had fought over the past months and years. And the knight, in turn, cleaned the cuts and grazes on the body of the boy, those he had received from the brambles and the thorns in the wood while fleeing from the monster. The knight shared his food with the boy, they drank the water from the stream, rested, and grew well.

"Then the boy knew that he loved the poor knight; he asked him to hold but his hands for the jewel but, as he reached up to release the jewel from around his neck, the clasp loosened by itself, and the jewel fell into the poor knight's hands. And the poor knight held the jewel very close, cried for happiness, and said, 'This is the most precious gift I have ever been given.'

"He stood up straight and tall; there was a rushing in the sky and a great white horse came down through the trees and alighted in the clearing. Then the poor knight lifted the boy on to the horse with him, and took him to a castle on the other side of the world, in a land with tall mountains, warm sun, clear water and horses to ride. And the boy and the poor knight lived...

"Kevin, are you awake? Kevin...?"

Chapter Seven

"Kit – what are you doing up there?"

"Hiding."

Yesterday, for the first time, it came into the house after me, yesterday it placed its mark upon me; now perhaps when I come down to the ground and it can see me, I will have to go to it.

"From *me*, Kitten? Come along – come down."

The boy smiled and shook his head. Baxter came across and stood under the tree; he smiled too. "You know, Kit, that's the very tree where you were sitting the first day we met – or at least the first day we spoke; it all comes back to me. So – you've chosen to be a little coy today, have you? Well, I don't mind so much."

He came closer and laid his cheek against the boy's cool thigh, then slid his palms over the bare tender skin, stroking, caressing. The boy closed his legs a little, bringing his other thigh gently against the man's face.

"I'm happy too," said Kit. "Now."

Baxter reached up to lift Kit from the branch, then hesitated, again remembering the first day. "Anything the matter, Chris?" he asked quietly.

"Kitten."

"I'm doomed to get it wrong, aren't I? Kitten – are you a little frightened again, perhaps? Don't be; I'm here, and I'm not going away."

"I was just a little... There was something..." said the boy, seeming a little bewildered. "But it's going, it's going now, I think."

"Good." Baxter held his arms up and the boy wriggled down; Baxter held him, one arm under his knees, the other round his waist; his hold tightened and he asked softly, "All right now?"

"Of course," whispered the boy.

Baxter lowered his head and nuzzled; the boy squirmed pleasurably. "Are you going to do it here?" he asked.

Baxter shook his head. "The forest has a thousand eyes. Wait till we get further away."

Kit grinned mischievously then, with a sudden thrust of his body, he threw Baxter off balance; Baxter tottered, then tumbled on to the grass on his back, the boy sprawled across his chest. "There!" said Kit. He took both of Baxter's hands, moved round, and pinned his arms at full length on the grass. Then he said, "I got into trouble because of you yesterday."

"Because of *me!*" said Baxter, alarmed, trying to sit up but not succeeding. "Who knows about us? What happened?"

"Oh, they don't know about *you*," said Kit, pushing on Baxter's chest. "Don't be so limply wet. But they didn't like me coming in late, and with nothing on."

"No – I expect they wouldn't," said Baxter uneasily. "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. At least, I just said that I'd gone to sleep and forgotten the time. But Trenchard made a mighty issue of it, as always, so to annoy him I wouldn't put my clothes on." He giggled. "You should have seen him with my shorts in one hand and my underpants in the other, trying to get me to 'cover up'. But I still wouldn't, of course."

"Who's Trenchard?"

"The Nursing Officer," said Kit with solemn emphasis. "Like a Matron but without the frock. Vera, that's the Social Worker, says he's a crypto-fascist. That's because he won't let us play ball in the day-room. Anyway, in the end I got the needle."

"The needle?"

"Yes, an injection. A tranquillizer, it must have been, because I slept for ages afterwards. Actually I'd been going to change my mind when I got the injection, but they wouldn't let me. It was awful; I was frightened. I cried and cried."

Baxter had half sat up again; his face colored. "That's one of the most disgraceful things I've ever heard," he said angrily. "I mean, that this man should use drugs, needles, syringes and things, stick things in people just to maintain his own pitiable authority. I've a good mind to complain."

Kit patted his face soothingly. "Will you go up to the Unit and complain now? What will you say? 'What have you been doing to my little boy-friend Kit?', hey? Something like that?"

Baxter shook his head. "No, I suppose not. The trouble is that one is so bloody impotent. The man must be a first-class shit."

"Don't forget that it's all for my own *good*," said Kit, wagging a finger. "At least, that's what Trenchard says."

"That type always does. The trouble in life, Kit, is that what are ironically called the 'caring professions' – teaching, nursing, the Church and so on – have a special attraction for shits, because they provide excellent excuses for doing shitty things to people. You soon get to recognize them, but in your position and mine there's precious little more we can do – except perhaps try not to give them opportunities."

"Just what I didn't," said Kit. "Incidentally, don't you mind my spreading you across the grass like this? I would have expected you to make at least a token effort to release yourself."

"On the contrary, I'm extremely comfortable here," said Baxter. "Though, now you come to mention it, I *would* appreciate having one hand free. If you wouldn't mind."

"I think I could allow that."

Baxter moved his palm down the boy's back and slid his fingers, then his whole hand, under the elastic of his shorts and underpants. It rested for a moment on one buttock, on skin so delicate under his adult palm that he had to press, to slide it a little to know, as it were, that there was any substance beneath it, to appreciate its still-childish chubbiness, then his hand moved down over the lower part of both the boy's small round cheeks, lightly squeezing, fingertips resting in the neat folds underneath, then slipping into the warm soft cleft between, moving up and down, then pushing in a little deeper, pressing, exploring. Kit's chin had lifted; his mouth opened silently, his breath escaped in a long sigh, jerkily. Then he reached down, started wriggling, and said, "Wait a minute."

"What are you doing?"

"Taking my pants down."

Baxter put a hand on his. "No – not here. Kit, let's go to the place where we were yesterday. I don't feel at ease here, not so near the Unit."

"Well, I'd better humor you, I suppose," said Kit. "Let's go, then."

He swung on Baxter's arm in his usual way as they walked deeper into the forest. He sang quietly,

"*Groweth sed and bloweth med,*

"*And springeth the wud nu.*

"How's your Middle English, Baxter," he asked. "That's the Britten setting; we sung it last term."

"Sang. We *sang* it last term."

"I can see you are a teacher; I don't know why I bother with you," said Kit. Then he said, "You know what you said about Trenchard. Maybe he is – well, one of the world's shits, but he probably doesn't know it. He really does think he's doing what's right. Maybe I should tell him." He laughed. "It's like our housemaster in school. He's always spanking the juniors on their bare bottoms – including me. *He* says he does it for our own good. Actually, I don't mind so much; I rather like him."

"Well, you may be spared the task of disentangling your somewhat complex emotions," said Baxter. "Will you ever go back?"

"I hope so," said Kit. Then he stopped and asked seriously, "Paul, what *will* happen to us – to you and me?"

Baxter stopped too. "I don't know," he said. "I really don't know. Kitten, how much longer do you think you'll be in there?"

"Not long, perhaps. Harold – that's my doctor – said that he thought I was going to be all right soon. I *know* I am."

"And what then?"

"Back to my aunt and uncle, I suppose."

They walked further, very slowly now, Kit flicking at the long grasses and dandelions with a switch of hazel.

"So you've been living with them, then? Not with your parents?"

"Mm. They're actually a great-aunt and great-uncle, so they're oldish. My parents were killed in an accident, you see; that's how it all began."

Baxter was silent; Kit said, "Uncle Edward's a headmaster of a rather boring grammar school; they wanted me to go there, but I wouldn't. He'll be retiring next year. He doesn't know what to do about me, doesn't often know what to say to me even. He acts tremendously scholarly and vague; you know, 'Ah yes, the boy, the boy...' but he's really pretty stupid; it's just his cover-up."

"And your aunt – or your great-aunt, rather?"

"She manages things – including him. A bit horsey, she was – still is, a little. *Very responsible*, both of them; it's awful. They look after me because it's their duty – the white man's burden, and all that. I mean, I don't think they *love* me, not like you do."

Baxter turned the boy round, held him close, and kissed him on the forehead. "You might be wrong,." he said. "About them, I mean, not about me."

"But what will happen?" asked the boy anxiously again. "I can't go away from here now, but they say it mightn't be long. Paul?"

"Yes?" Baxter waited for the boy to ask when he, Baxter, would be leaving the hospital, but he didn't.

"Can I come and live with you, Paul?" he asked urgently, taking hold of both Baxter's hands. "I mean when you go out of here."

"I can think of nothing, absolutely nothing, I would like more," said Baxter.

"So I can?"

"It wouldn't be as easy as that, Kitten," said Baxter with reluctance. "You know it won't, love. The big battalions are all against us."

"Please, Paul. I can't go to anyone else – not now."

"You must have a little patience, Kitten. Give me a little time to think, to plan. You know, even if you can't actually live with me, there are other possibilities. We could arrange to live near each other, for example, so as to meet often – every day perhaps."

The boy's face fell and he shook his head.

"Well, let's see," Baxter said. "Nothing's quite impossible in this world, is it? Miracles do happen;

my meeting you here, of all places, was one. For me at any rate."

"And for me, too. That's two miracles; do they come in threes?"

"For us they will," said Baxter, carefully injecting confidence into his tone. "Just wait and see."

"We've reached the place where we came yesterday, haven't we?" said Kit quietly.

"So we have." Baxter slid his hands down over the boy's back, grasped his tee-shirt and pulled it upwards and over his head, dropping it on the grass. He stroked Kit's bare chest for a moment and then bent down towards the boy again, but Kit smiled, shook his head and leaned backwards, bracing his feet against Baxter's, pulling on his arms. For the second time that afternoon Baxter was, not unwillingly, thrown off balance. Then he raised himself to his knees on the grass, eased Kit on to his back, hooked his fingers into the waistband of his shorts and peeled them down and off, then his underpants, while Kit squirmed obligingly to assist him. The boy pointed to his socks and plimsolls. "These as well, Paul," he said, a little shyly. "I'd rather be completely bare when I'm with you."

Baxter did as he was asked, though knots seemed to form in the laces as quickly as he untied them. Finally he added the last of Kit's clothes to the small heap; the boy reached up, put a hand under Baxter's chin and pulled his face round and downwards, directing his line of vision.

"See, Paul – I'm ready for you!" he said.

"That I noticed – just as soon as I began to separate you from those sky-blue underpants!"

"Actually, Paul, it's been like that all the time we've been together this afternoon, ever since you came up to me when I was in the tree."

"Mine too, Kitten."

"Can I see?"

Baxter nodded and reached down but the boy, who had half sat up, was before him, tugging, pulling, probing.

"Gosh – do *I* do that?" he asked after a few moments, his eyes fixed on the wonder.

"Every time, Kitten."

Kit said, "See, my fingers can just get round it and not much more. You know, it makes me feel... I mean, to think that it's because of *me*... Paul," the boy asked almost in an undertone, not looking up, "Paul, do you think I could do, you know, what you did last time?"

"Yes, I'd love that. Do you want to?"

The boy nodded emphatically. "Who'll be first, then – you or me?" he asked.

Baxter laughed. "Neither of us has to be first, o little one innocent in the ways of the world. There's a French term with which you may not be familiar... Flip over, like so, and I'll show you."

Seconds later, from a charge of lightning arcing up through his body from the first breath-stopping contact of the boy's firm lips, the damp lively flicker of his tongue, the voltage rose and rose in successive leaps and jolts until all needles were shuddering deep into the danger sector, into the red, at the instant that the long bare thighs, flip-flopping faster and faster on either side of his head, closed and tightened violently, and at the instant that he felt as well as heard the sounds, utterly wonderful, that exploded from the boy's throat, mingle with those of his own that he could no longer suppress, and as he felt the boy's whole body jump and jump again, the boy's lips, too, tighten and compress, his tongue curl up hard and stay motionless for an instant – then the dynamo was running down, the needles falling in unison, the colors were dimming, and the house-lights of the wood, in pale filtered green, were coming up again all around them.

After what seemed a very long time Kit raised his head and said, "Gosh, Paul, I hope there's nobody around."

"Now who's getting coy?" asked Baxter teasingly.

"It's just that – well, when you're doing it to me I simply can't keep quiet," said Kit. "I mean, I can't help it."

Baxter, slightly tipsy with euphoria, suppressed a giggle. "I've no complaint to make," he said. "Remember who used to pretend to purr when I stroked him – the first time I called you Kitten, wasn't it? I suppose it's the same thing."

"Yes – but a little more so. I'm glad we were right away from the Unit, anyhow."

Kit looked down at the grass, picking blades up and dropping them, then he said quietly, "Paul, I want you to know something."

"What's that?"

The boy pulled Baxter's head down and whispered in his ear. After a moment Baxter said, "Only if it's what *you* want, Kitten."

The boy nodded. "I wanted to let you know that you can, if it's what you want too."

They sat in silence a little apart, the boy still plucking at the long grasses. He picked up a dandelion clock and blew, sending the tiny seeds whirling around both of them.

"You're full of surprises, Kitten," Baxter said. "On some points quite innocent, on others almost disconcertingly well informed."

The boy laughed and shook his head. "Oh, I've no experience, if that's what you mean," he said quickly. "But my best friend in school had... well, someone a bit like you, I suppose. He said that when you love someone a lot, really a lot, then you want him to do that to you more than anything. I didn't believe him at the time, but I know now that he was right."

Baxter slid an arm round him and pulled him close. "It would be the most wonderful thing for both of us," he said slowly. "But it mustn't be here, Kitten, not during a grubby little assignation in the grounds of a mental hospital, not in some dark little hut, or behind the bushes in a park before the keeper comes along. No – it will have to be somewhere fitting the occasion – maybe on a tropical beach where there's no one but us, the clear water lapping on the sand, the sea breeze in the palms, the sun warm on our skins..."

"Or in some great *chateau!*" said the boy, "with a glimpse of the moat through tall windows, and black swans in the water."

"Or in a four-poster in a *schloss* high above the Rhine, among rich hangings, with a faraway prospect of snow on the mountains, the sound of bells, and the pink dawn coming –"

"...with warm sun, clear water, and horses to ride," said the boy dreamily. "Paul?"

"Yes, Kitten?"

The boy was silent for a moment, then he suddenly sat back on his heels and grinned wickedly at Baxter. "I know what you're in here for, Paul," he said.

"Oh – ah, you do?" said Baxter inanely, startled by the sudden change of topic.

"Yes, I do. Shall you say or shall I?"

Baxter considered, then said, "You'd better go on. Say what you know – or what you think you do."

Kit stood up, bounced on his toes and did a handstand. Then he said, "You were put in because of what you did to boys, weren't you? Like what you did to me."

"Who told you that?" asked Baxter evenly.

"It's true, though," persisted Kit, "isn't it?"

"Not – not quite," Baxter hedged. "All right – one boy, then. But it wasn't like with you."

"Ah, I bet you tell them all that," said Kit, still unexpectedly waggish.

"It's true. But how did you find out, Kit?"

"You've just told me. I'd already worked it out, though more or less."

"I didn't want to tell you, Kit – not at first, anyhow. You wouldn't have understood – or so I thought."

"We should have told each other the truth," said the boy reproachfully. "But I can see why you didn't... I suppose."

"How *did* you work it out?" asked Baxter curiously.

The boy, clutching the trunk of a young tree, swung round it dizzily. "Easy. I could see that you weren't like *them*, and I thought at first that you might work in the place, but you didn't seem that type either. Anyway, you told me that you were in because of... something you did so I thought then that perhaps you'd been... upset because of a boy."

"Not so much upset as caught," said Baxter. "As I've said, it wasn't like with you, but the boy *was* a friend, one of my pupils, and one day I simply, so to speak, played with him a little because he wanted me to, but someone came in at the wrong time and – well, here I am."

"So the boy didn't tell on you?"

"No – he was very upset. But it didn't make any difference. It was a stupid place to do anything, actually – in the school showers after games. I dried him and then... stroked him a little. I thought everyone else had gone."

Kit stood on his hands again and tried to cartwheel, unsuccessfully. "Our games master once dried me," he said. "And everyone else *had gone*. So – snap! Almost."

"Did he do anything else?" asked Baxter.

"No – but I might have let him, if he'd wanted to – you never know," said the boy carelessly. "He was quite nice, as it happens."

"You know, Kitten, I'm seeing you in a completely different light," said Baxter, half seriously.

"Snap again!" said the boy. "But we've told each other everything now, haven't we; that's the way it's meant to be. Paul, why did they shove you in this place? I still haven't quite worked it out."

"Well, it seems daft to me, and it may or may not seem daft to you, but where the big world is concerned I've committed a crime. And if you commit a crime they either punish you for it or, if you're lucky, you get a choice of sorts, and you can go for treatment, for rehabilitation – like what I'm supposed to be having here."

"You mean – like doing exercises, getting up early, having cold showers and so on?" asked the boy doubtfully.

Baxter laughed. "No – I'm not in the juvenile delinquent category any more; it might all be easier if I was. It's psychiatric treatment – to make me different, to make me not want to be with boys any more."

"Paul – it *won't* make you different, will it?" asked the boy, naively alarmed.

Baxter laughed again. "Not a chance."

"You don't do the treatment, then?"

"No – and it wouldn't work if I did. But I go along with it – or seem to."

"You pretend?" asked Kit. "I sometimes do that as well, like in the Group. It makes life easier, I've found!"

"Exactly."

"It seems a bit pointless, though," said the boy. "Doesn't it?"

"It's better than prison."

"They'd put you in prison if you didn't do what they said, then?"

"They'd want to," said Baxter. "Though actually I wouldn't have gone, not if there hadn't been any alternative."

"I don't understand."

"They forgot one little thing," said Baxter. "They forgot to take my passport; that I still have. I could

have got out quite easily, you see. I'm not dependent on the pittance of a salary I used to get; I have a little money of my own."

"Why didn't you go, then?"

"I could never have come back to England; I'd have been a fugitive, a Ronald Biggs without the glamor. No – when they offered me the option of coming here, I decided it was best to see the thing through. What's eighteen months in comparison to a lifetime on the run? Kit, have you got a passport?"

"Of course," said the boy, surprised. "We used to travel a lot."

"Give it to me."

"I don't have it here," said Kit.

"I know, I know," Baxter said impatiently. "But could you get it?"

"I suppose so. My aunt and uncle visit most week-ends; I can hardly ask them to bring it, they'd want to know why, but Harold said that I might get to go home with them for a day next week, if everything was okay; I could get it then. But the photograph's not very good; I have better ones."

"It wasn't for the photo," Baxter said. "Just trust me, Kit, and bring it."

The boy, drawing his knees up to his chin, considered Baxter from beneath earnestly furrowed brows. "Now then, Baxter, what are you up to? Tell me everything, or it will be the worse for you."

"I'm not up to anything, m'lud."

"I've heard *that* before."

"Kit – just get it. I'll explain sometime."

"Okay, then." The boy, still hugging his knees, rolled over on to his back in a ball, then came upright again.

"Where are we going first, then?" he asked, grinning. "The sun-kissed tropical beach, or the white chateau with the black swans?"

"Probably neither. Some things are real, some aren't," said Baxter, faintly crushing. "But there's such a thing as insurance."

Kit made a face.

"And it's time to get dressed," said Baxter. "I presume you want me to remove all those stray bits of grass first."

The boy brightened; he bounced to his feet and came over. "There are probably bits everywhere," he said. "You'd better check thoroughly."

"Just what I intend to do. Turn around."

The woods are lit now from end to end; the sun has dropped until it hangs at the end of the long clearing where the wood opens westward and it seeks out new vantages and angles through the cold spaces under the trees, and at last it strikes deep into the black at the east side of the wood and as the light surges around it far beyond the safe circle it stands up tall, stretching and reaching, a huge wonderful oak clothed in spring-time green, its arms moving as the breeze freshens and then, as at its bidding, all the leaves are moving and the whole wood is breathing again. From above it, from a long distance away, birds have begun to come home and to settle in the trees, at first one by one, then in flocks, then in hundreds.

"When there's one it's a crow, when there are several they're rooks," said Kit lazily. "Did you know that?"

Baxter shook his head.

"The spell is broken now," said the boy. "Now they can come, all of them." Then he laughed and laughed.

"You're unexpectedly ticklish today," said Baxter. "There – that seems to be the lot." He was kneeling

on the grass; Kit lay flat on his back, his legs apart, his heels on Baxter's shoulders.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. Though, frankly, I can't see your Mr. Diehard checking you inch by inch for evidence."

The boy giggled. "Trench-hard. I wouldn't be so sure, Paul; I can just see him peering simply everywhere with a magnifying-glass! You don't know him."

Baxter pointed. "If he did, would that happen?" he asked.

"Certainly not; I don't *love* Trenchard," said the boy indignantly. "I wouldn't let him *touch* me."

Baxter disengaged the boy's feet from either side of his neck. "In that case I can eliminate him from the list of people I have to be obsessively jealous of," he said drily. "I think that the Sister or Staff Nurse or whatever who baths you in the evenings would head the list now."

"You'll do that some day – always," said Kit. He started pulling his clothes on. "I'll make you really jealous now and tell you about the boy I slept with last night."

"Just get dressed," said Baxter. "As it happens, I'm not jealous at all; in fact I approve. Boys should sleep together if they want."

"We didn't *do* anything," said Kit, tying his plimsolls. "But he was crying, so I let him come in with me. We'd made friends."

"Who is he?"

"He's called Kevin; his mum went off and left them. He's the only one of the kids I talk to, really; most of the other are very young. Paul, perhaps some day we can have Kevin to stay with us – for a while, anyway?" He looked up rather shyly at Baxter, who laughed.

"The first message has already been received and understood, little brother," he said teasingly. "As for the second, ask whom you like. Your friend Mr. Trenchard, even."

The boy got up. "There you go too far," he said coldly. "Your sense of humor will get you into trouble one of these days, Baxter, you can be sure of it." He caught Baxter's arm and pulled. "Come on. Curfew calls; I'll be late." They went back through the dim archway of trees, Kit as always swinging on Baxter's hand.

"I love you, Baxter," he said conversationally. "Why do I?"

"Goodness knows. It's one of those mysteries, like the Marie Celeste or the Pyramids."

"Here's the fence," said the boy. "Where's our tree-trunk? Let's look for it."

"No – I can't wait," said Baxter. He bent, clasped his arms round the boy's hips, and lifted.

Chapter Eight

"So am I to say what I think, or say what I ought to?" asked Baxter. "You still haven't told me."

"You didn't ask," said Fogg-Willerby. "Say what you ought to; I'll write it in the notes."

"Slowly but surely," said Baxter, "I am filled with horror as I look back upon the dreadful perversion by which I once was gripped but which thanks to the wonderful treatment I have received here is little more than a hideous memory. Now I yearn for normal, natural sexual expression, for the type that can only exist between a man and a woman – and as for little boys – I think that little boys are... are the most beautiful, the most delightful, the most... erotogenic creatures in the whole world. I'm sorry – I just can't keep it up."

"It wasn't bad while it lasted," said Fogg-Willerby, writing. "But how can you be sure that, when it becomes apparent to me that you are not interested in treatment of any kind – as already seems to be the case – I shall not simply send you straight back to prison? Can it be that you perceive in me a certain crude integrity, a crippling degree of benevolence, is that it?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, you're wrong. I simply haven't made any decision yet. But your present views don't discourage me at all; these problems aren't treated in a day."

"I haven't *had* any treatment," said Baxter.

"I know. I'm still thinking about you, evaluating you. We don't rush into these things, we of the profession. We reflect, we scrutinize. Perhaps I'll say that you're unbeatable."

"If you did, I would be the first to agree. Alice, not having had any tea, could not therefore have more."

"I don't follow."

"Not having a disease, one can't have 'treatment'. The original premise is void, thus the proposition fails."

"Don't be silly," snapped Fogg-Willerby. "I really do think that I've been wasting my time with you up till now. There you sit, having lost your job and your chances of getting another, probably also your money and your friends, and banged up here or in jail for eighteen months at least, and you still blandly tell me that you've got no problems and affect to prove it by telling me these stupid riddles. We put people like you in the funny-farm for good, people that can't or won't face the facts, won't live in the real world."

"I didn't choose any of that."

"Neither did the few thousand others who find themselves in prisons or places like this. They say that 'society' did it to them, just like you do, but they're still there. Hard luck, but they are."

"So let me get this straight," Baxter said. "According to you, I'm in a class with thieves, burglars, murderers even. Is that right?"

"Yes – but mainly in your refusal to be honest with yourself about your immediate situation, to see where you are," said Fogg-Willerby.

"I'll tell you the main difference between me and them," said Baxter. "All these people are in prison because they caused hurt to someone else, because they did things to other people that *they* didn't want, to which they objected, about which they *complained*. Can't you see that?"

"Legally," said Fogg-Willerby, "a minor cannot complain."

"Have you ever known a thirteen-year-old not complain about something he didn't want, didn't seek,

didn't enjoy? Don't you *have* any children? Do you know *nothing* about them?"

"Don't harangue me, Baxter. I hadn't finished. I'm simply telling you what the law says – and, whether you like it or not, what you have in common with the other types you listed is that you have all taken something the law says you can't have."

"I didn't *take* anything," said Baxter angrily. "I was given something, we shared something. Damn it, be cynical about it, laugh about it if you like, but we *loved* each other. Is it impossible for you to see any positive aspect in it all, to see what a very great deal a boy may gain from being... loved by a man; the boy *needed* me. Don't you know that the great majority of boys who have sexual relationships with adults are those with the greatest emotional needs – orphans, runaways, children from broken homes, children who are rejected by their parents – "

"Easy game, in other words," said Fogg-Willerby.

"Yes – everyone in need of care and affection is 'easy game' for those who give it to them – one's children, one's relatives, the old, the sick, a doctor's patients even."

"Perhaps. But I'm talking about affection given at a certain cost, am I not?"

"Affection is always a two-way traffic, Professor; you ought to know that."

"So there you are, then, giving this pitiable though hypothetical waif a little love, a little care – provided, of course, that he's pretty enough for you, eh? If he's a plain kid – tough. *He's* got to stay lonely, unloved and so on, hasn't he? Just because, in addition to all his other disadvantages, he has the additional one of not having blue eyes, blond hair, or any of those other star qualities that you listed for me so colorfully last time. Poor kid. But it's even tougher on the pretty one when he grows up, isn't it, when he hasn't got those 'peachy thighs' any more, when he hasn't got that delectable choirboy's treble, when he gets a bit of hair here and there. It's out on the streets with him then, eh? And Baxter's off to find another little Ganymede for himself, eh? My God, the hypocrisy of it all. And everyone, but everyone, can see it except you – you and your kind."

Baxter was quiet for a few moments, then he said, "Professor, I don't expect you to believe all of this but, though I did go on a bit about visual attractiveness, there really is a lot more to it than that. There are certain boys that take one's eye immediately, that's true. But I have in the past been the greatest friends with boys who were – well, quite ordinary to look at; it's *not just the* appearance. Indeed, to go further – I've usually been more at ease with plain boys; the pretty ones tend to make me... nervous. And the same thing applies when a boy gets older; it's less physical then, but the relationship is often more relaxed as a result, sometimes more agreeable in a way. The visual aspect may have attracted you to begin with, but it's the *person* that you actually fall in love with, not the body, and even when he grows up you still love him for the boy – or the man – that he is. It's true, you know, it really is."

The Professor made a wry face. "Well, it's hard to swallow; the things you say don't always match up with one another. But you're generally an honest chap, so I'll do my best. So where we are now is this, is it? There's plenty of love and attention for this... boy or man, pretty or repulsive, *provided* you get a little sex in return. Is that it?"

"No, that isn't it. Well – not quite. What I'm trying to say is that physical love with boys isn't different from any other kind. I mean, sex, like any other expression of love, of caring, isn't something that's given or taken like merchandise, is it? When you 'give' someone a hug or a kiss, say, it's not being *taken* from you, it's not some kind of penance or toll that's being extracted from you. You might just happen to *want* to 'give' it, in fact there might be nothing you want to do more. Professor, why is it that one never says that a man will love, look after, marry a girl only at the *cost* to her of sex, answer me that?"

"I *have* heard it said – and of course it is in a sense the case. Nevertheless – "

"There's exploitation everywhere, in any category of relationship," said Baxter, "but no more among

people who love boys than among your 'normal' heteros."

"As I as going to say, Paul, there's still a difference. Your 'normal' hetero is doing something that has been permitted by society from its beginning; your boy-lover is doing something that cuts completely across the structure of our society as it has almost invariably been defined. Whether you like it or not, the paedophile is seen by the great majority of people as someone who preys on small vulnerable children, who uses deceit, promises, blandishments, pretenses of affection, bribes, even physical force, purely to satisfy his selfish physical lusts."

"My God," said Baxter. "Even after all I've said, you believe that?"

"As it happens, I don't. Yet – "

"Well, why don't you *say it*, instead of mouthing back at me the prejudices of an ignorant populace?"

"I'm not going to join you on some sort of campaign, Baxter. Don't be puerile."

"So what am I doing here, just listening to a load of rubbish that you don't even believe, and that I could hear any day from the idiot on the Clapham omnibus?"

"The idiot on the Clapham omnibus is in the majority, he has the vote."

"So goodbye, civilization."

"I exaggerate, of course. But only in order to get some things into that thick, uncomprehending skull of yours. When someone is too blind to read between the lines, then one is regretfully forced to be specific."

"I'd be obliged if you did. Maybe you would also spell the difficult words for me."

"Now look here, Baxter. You may continue to resist it, but I am trying to get you to where you see, as clearly as it is possible for you to see, just how *most* people view the notion of sex with youngsters. Someone said – I think it was Kingsley Amis – that paedophilia is like *avante garde* music; however much its advocates may argue, preach, and reason, the majority of people will continue to think of it with incomprehension and distaste. *That's* where it is. Get that, then we can perhaps go on from there."

"Go where?"

"People don't change much, you won't change much, but perhaps you can adapt, perhaps you can keep yourself out of trouble."

"You mean, not do it? I'd already worked *that* out."

"No, Paul, you're being deliberately obtuse again. You know perfectly well, in fact, how the admittedly tedious majority feels about paedophilia, you know how your friends feel, how your parents, how your teachers felt about it, and all your life they've been making you feel guilty. And they've succeeded; you *are* guilty, Baxter, whether or not you pretend otherwise; you're guilty as hell."

"No, I'm not."

"You are – and I'll prove it to you. Remember how I asked you to think back a little, to recall the various times that your predilection for boys has got you into difficulties."

"Yes – I did that. One does have a good deal of time for thinking in here."

"I'll predict, for a start, that this present time was not the first."

"This is off the record?"

"I'm not a policeman. Yes, of course."

"There have been other episodes."

"And you've got into trouble because of these... episodes?"

"In some ways. Though not quite so comprehensively as at present."

"And did you manage to remember just *what* it was that got you into trouble?"

"Why, the same sort of thing as now," said Baxter, looking a little surprised. "Boys, that is."

"I *know* that," said Fogg-Willerby impatiently. "But I wanted you to tell me just how you managed to

draw attention to yourself. How did you get caught? The same way every time? Different ways?"

"There was nothing dramatic," Baxter said. "Silly things – a note being found once, a photograph another time – that sort of thing. Boring, really."

"Exactly!" said the Professor. "Exactly! Silly things; you see my point now?"

"No, I am afraid I don't!" said Baxter.

"I've seen people like you on a number of occasions – usually fresh from Court," said Fogg-Willerby, "and each time the story's almost identical with yours. Tell me – just why might a reasonable, perhaps highly intelligent man do something, for once do something completely stupid, quite out of character – leave a note around, put photographs in the post, talk to someone whom he *knows* to be indiscreet, in other words, virtually do his damndest to be found out. Guilt, Baxter, guilt. It's like a heroin addict; he gets the buzz from the heroin, but also he virtually *goes out of his way* to mutilate himself, infect himself, he fails to take precautions, and fails in such a studied, such a deliberate way, that the fatal consequences are very far from being accidental. He has to indulge himself, true, but he also has to punish himself, because he's as guilty as you are. Implanted in him, just as in you and people like you, is the belief in oneself as an evil, an unworthy person, and thus, as a direct consequence, this almost frightening degree of self-punitiveness. You *meant* to leave those letters around, you mean the photographs to be seen, and in this last escapade of yours you knew damn well that there was someone in the next room and that sooner or later they would come in and find out what you were at. You *wanted* to be caught, to be punished and, you know, Baxter, it's your guilt, not your sexual predilections, that will destroy you in the end – if you don't watch out."

"That's the biggest load of rubbish I've ever heard," said Baxter. "Who in God's name wants to be caught?"

"I knew that you would resist it, of course."

"Oh, don't give me that psychiatrists' clap-trap," said Baxter angrily. "If you 'resist' something it means that it's true; if you agree with it presumably it's also true. So if it's *not* true just how are you meant to respond? Or is the guru always right?"

"You haven't been listening to me, have you? I asked a question. Just why, I asked, does a chap with fairly good sense and judgment in most areas act completely irrationally – or apparently so – in one area? And it's not just you, either. How *do* you explain it?"

"One simply gets reckless. You get infatuated with a boy and – well, nothing else seems to matter. I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"And you do the same daft things over and over again. It's not good enough, Paul. Think carefully over what I've said; don't reject all of it out of hand. When you have time examine these passages in your life once again, try and see what your motives were. Perhaps in the end you'll catch a glimpse of the subconscious guilt that has led you into trouble again and again; perhaps you'll see the red light."

"You keep harping about guilt," said Baxter. "Well, maybe somewhere deep down I know that it wasn't what my mum would have liked me to do, it isn't what Great-Aunt Jane would wish to know about, but so what? If you could stop being guilty, then you'd do it all the more, surely?"

"Not at all. You can diminish guilt, but you certainly will continue to experience some – yet this is an emotion which, like many others, you can use positively rather than negatively. The boringly obvious example is what used to be called sublimation – the chap with inclinations like yours who becomes, say, a scoutmaster and does all kinds of worthy things with little boys, and who flagellates himself by going around in shorts, living in tents and eating ghastly food and having cold showers and hikes and everything. Though, of course, they never can see it. But it's given away all the time. You know, one of these types once said in all seriousness, 'When a scoutmaster wears shorts –'

" – then the boys have something to look up to'," said Baxter. "Actually, I'm surprised that such a crudely voyeuristic fantasy has remained in your mind. But I know all about the Scouting bit, Professor, and the sublimation; that's old stuff. I've done it myself, come to that – but I lost my warrant about three years ago. Not as it happens by *looking* up, but for putting my hand up – "

"And doubtless in front of the entire Patrol. What I am saying to you, quite simply, is that you must not use your guilt, your poor self-concept if you prefer the term, destructively. Remember what I said when we talked first; you *can* learn to keep out of trouble. Yet the motivation to be punished is still there, still within you; it shows up, if further evidence is needed, in all the signs of an impaired self-concept that you carry around with you – your nervousness, your diffidence, your self-denigration. And remember, too, when we first met, that crack of yours about your dirty raincoat? *You* said that, Paul, not me. Think on these things, Baxter, think on these things."

Baxter was silent for a time, then he said slowly, "It *does* set one apart to an extent, that's true."

"Other people don't do that to you, you do it to yourself," said Fogg-Willerby. "I won't try to tell you *why* you do it; work it out. You might find that the answer's the same as for the other questions. He got up. "I must be off now. I'm going to be away for a few days – another damned conference – but my deputy, Harold Partridge, will be across from time to time, so you should take the opportunity of talking to him as well. A bit too analytic for your tastes, perhaps, talks a lot, rather introverted; he'll tell you a lot about himself, but he'll also tell you a lot about you. If you listen. Any questions, then, before I leave?"

"All right, given this thing about guilt, Professor – I say *given* it – just what am I supposed to do about it? Have you a pill for that as well, or do I call in an exorcist?"

"Paul, there's an old allegory, written appropriately enough in captivity, about a man who carried a load of junk around on his back just like you do. Many people have believed that his burden represented – in true period language – his sins, but nobody else carried one; it was his guilt. But he got rid of it."

"Well, that was supposed to come from embracing a particular creed. You surely don't suggest – "

"Paul, there's more of what you need outside of organized obeisance to the supernatural than inside it. Work it out, work it out. If you can't when we next meet I'll tell you."

"Christ – being in here is like being back at school and getting homework all the time. History for today, algebra for tomorrow."

"That's right." said Fogg-Willerby cheerfully. "Any *more* questions?"

"What about my Section?"

"Ah, you disappoint me. You can hardly bear not to put me straight back into the magisterial position, the punitive position, relative to yourself. Why do you do it, why do you do it?"

"Because I want to know," said Baxter simply.

"I'll recommend discharge when I think you have developed such an understanding of yourself as will permit you to live your life outside without courting disaster at every turn of the way. Perhaps you've started to make some progress in that direction, perhaps you haven't; I'll need a lot of convincing. Stroll with me to the car; maybe you can start convincing me as we go."

"You see?" said Nursing Officer Trenchard. "You see what happens to boys who go out without permission?"

"You mean that if I had gone out *with* permission I *wouldn't* have fallen out of the tree?" asked Kit mildly.

"Don't be impertinent," said Trenchard. "Now, then, let's have a look at that arm."

"I'll attend to it, Arthur." said Sylvia Armitage. "I expect you want to get on."

"I *do* want to get on," said Trenchard, "and I *would* have got on if this boy had come in at the proper

time, at the time he and all the others were quite clearly told they had to be back in the Unit."

"Well, he's back now, that's the main thing. Roll up your sleeve, Chris."

"That's not the point, Sylvia. Where have you been, Christopher? You didn't leave the grounds, did you?"

"I told you. I was just climbing a tree, and I slipped and fell."

"Well, I'll have to have a quiet word with all of you about tree-climbing," said Trenchard. "And I shall want you to show me this tree tomorrow."

"You'd better take your tee-shirt right off," said Sylvia. "It looks a nasty graze; it'll need a good clean."

"It's okay, I'll just roll my sleeve further up."

"Do as you're told," said Trenchard sharply.

"The boy shrugged, pulled off his tee-shirt and dropped it on a chair.

"Mmm – yes," said Sylvia, inspecting the arm. "It's not very deep, just on the surface. I'll clean it, then put on a plaster. Hello – that's not a tattoo, I hope."

"No." Kit smiled. "I just drew it with biro."

"Well, we'll clean that off too. A pity, though; you've a neat hand. Let's see."

Kit put his hand over the design but Sylvia laughed and pulled it away. "Yes, – very nice. A heart and intertwined initials; you *are* growing up. Who's the lucky girl?"

Kit shook his head and tried to cover his arm again, but Sylvia held his wrist and commenced vigorous work with a swab and disinfectant. "I expect you'll draw another," she said. "A typically grubby little boy, any excuse to make a mess of himself. Still, I expect it's natural, and it's good in a way to see it."

"Personally, I'm very sorry that you have so little to do with your time," said Trenchard. "I'm not sure that all this nonsense is to be encouraged, Sylvia. Nevertheless, all's well that ends well. You must excuse me now. Goodnight."

"What *were* you doing, anyway?" asked Sylvia after a few moments. "They're trying to stop you going out, you know."

"Don't do that – please," said the boy. "I'll come in on time, really I will."

"The thing is that you seem to be by yourself so much," said Sylvia. "I can understand that most of the children are younger than you and perhaps a lot different in many ways; still, I thought you'd become friendly with Kevin and I'd hoped you'd be with him rather more when you went outside. I think that both of you would get a lot out of being friends."

"But we are," said Kit. "I'm going to have him to stay when I leave hospital. When will that be, Sylvia?"

"How did your week-end go?"

The boy grinned. "Do they give you classes in that or do you just pick it up from being with the doctors all the time?"

"Eh?"

"It's just that... Anyway, my week-end was okay. I didn't feel better for being out, didn't feel worse. I feel happy to come back here, actually."

Sylvia shook her head. "That's a bad sign – actually *wanting* to be in hospital; I must talk to Dr. Partridge about you again. But, you know, you're such a different boy from the one who came in to us. I must say, though perhaps I shouldn't, that we've done wonders for you. Do you *feel* different, Chris?"

"Yes," said the boy simply. Then he added. "I'll be leaving soon."

"Now that's what I like to hear," said Sylvia, wiping Kit's arm dry and starting to clear up.

"Confidence. Look, all these clothes are a bit mucky, so we'll take them off so as you can pop into a hot bath, then it's off to bed with you."

"Will you come and sponge me down?" asked the boy.

"Not tonight, Chris."

"Please."

"No, Chris; I have other children to attend to besides you, you know. You must remember that." She got up and, as she did, the door opened.

"Ah, Sylvia."

"Ah, Harold... Working late this evening, aren't you?"

"The Professor's off on another of his jaunts and I've had to see some of his patients over on the other side. Actually, I wanted to have a word with Christopher, but if he's off to bed now – "

"I'm not," said the boy promptly.

"You can take him for half-an-hour, I suppose," said Sylvia. "I can bath him after I've finished with the others."

"Just go ahead into my office then, Christopher," said Partridge. "Sylvia, I wondered if we could have a brief talk about last night. I felt that we didn't altogether – "

"Harold, you have your job, I have mine. Excuse me."

Partridge side-stepped smartly to avoid the drug trolley and went into his office, where the boy was toying idly with the crayons on the wide desk.

"Ah – are you going to draw me another of those amazing diagrams?" Partridge asked.

Kit shook his head. "No - I don't feel like it today, Harold."

Partridge sat at his swivel chair and oscillated slightly. "Then what *do* you feel like doing?"

"Like talking, perhaps," said Kit. He sat back in an armchair and stretched his legs out on the carpet; he smiled.

"Go ahead, then."

"I'm leaving soon." Kit said.

"Really?" Partridge raised his eyebrows.

"Yes – really. I'm all right now."

"All right, are you?" said Partridge. "Good... good." He got up, moved towards the door, then returned to the table again. "Good. Christopher – er, Chris, I'm naturally extremely pleased to hear that. I don't deny it; I don't *wish* to deny it. I am not of the school that derides a phrase like 'all right' as meaningless, not in any degree. I simply take what you say purely in the sense that you *mean* it, and say that I'm happy about it, Christopher – very happy. And yet..."

He had risen again and walked to and fro, engaging in a faint hand-wringing motion.

"And yet, you see, while one may largely be rid of emotional symptoms in their *classic* forms, while one may be to some extent free from what is commonly recognized to be *illness*, yet there may lurk in one – certain unsatisfied... How was your week-end?"

"Okay. Harold, what makes people well? What makes them all right?"

"Christopher... Chris – I have been in medicine and psychiatry for, for ten, twelve years now. I've studied neurology, psychology, psychodrama, group therapy, child therapy, I've been analyzed, polarized, pulverized, and... You know, I really begin to think now, looking at my experience of both myself and that of other people, that the only therapy, the only positive force, the only magic, comes from the care, from the love that one person has for another, and which is returned from one person to another. This is the one vital ingredient, I tell myself."

The boy nodded. "I think that too, Harold."

"Oh – ah, good," said Partridge, looking vaguely at him. "How *are* your aunt and uncle, by the way? Someday I must..."

"They're fine. But, Harold, how can you *know*?"

"That it's real, Christopher, you mean? That it will last?"

Kit nodded again.

"In your case, flesh and blood. A sense of affinity, of binding. For you it's easy; I envy you, to some extent. But outside of the family relationship..." He rose and prowled about the carpet again, tugging at his fingers to enumerate the points. "First – one looks into oneself. One asks oneself... how would the world be *without* this person in it, would it, for me, be a world worth living in? As simple, I think, as that. That's the beginning."

"Ten out often so far," said Kit quietly.

"Eh?"

"Sorry to interrupt, Harold. Please go on."

"Next, I have to look at the evidences of whether such a feeling is returned, is reciprocated, and if so – "

"Another ten, I'm pretty sure."

"Just keep quiet for a moment or two, Christopher, please; I rather lose my thread if you speak. Now... these evidences are difficult to describe, to characterize – looks, words, smiles – yet perhaps if that love truly exists it is equally a truism that the *full expression* of that love will be sought, will be longed for, not by one but by both, that they will be..."

Partridge stopped talking and sat down. "I'm sorry, Christopher, I'm allowing myself to be drawn into preoccupations of my own, into matters hardly relevant to your situation, into... I'm sorry."

Kit had got out of his seat; he slid round behind Partridge, briefly put both arms around him, and squeezed. "You're the best therapist I've ever had," he said.

"I'm the *only* therapist you've ever had," said Partridge gloomily – "you have no basis for comparison. Sit down."

The boy sat in the armchair again, tucking his heels up under his bottom, hugging his knees.

"I must admit that you *do* look extraordinarily happy," said Partridge. "It may be that this Unit has therapeutic qualities of which I am unaware."

"Maybe *you* have," said the boy.

"I doubt it," said Partridge, shaking his head. "Christopher, let's talk some more. Now, I would not wish, particularly at this stage, to re-awaken memories, reflections, that you found in any way unsettling or painful, yet I think perhaps a time does come when one can look back without distress, without unease, over the road that one has traveled, can look almost with detachment, indeed ought to look, at those fears, those specters that have in the past waylaid one – yet not entirely with detachment either; it's not the right word. Chris, it's an ancient wisdom that the nameless becomes powerless when identified. In the old rite of exorcism, one not unknown even today, the *naming* of an evil spirit, of a demon, was equivalent to the calling out of such a spirit; once named he lost his power, once named he had to depart. Oddly, this ritual lingers in, of all places, the House of Commons where an MP, having been 'named', must leave. Do you follow?"

"I think I do," said Kit. "You mean, you switch the light on, and there's nothing there?"

"Yes – yes, another but quite good way of putting it. So – let's switch the light on, Chris, if that's the way you want to understand it. When we first talked there were some drawings that I remember you making; I kept them on file. Let's have a look... Yes, here they are. Now, this one. I wrote a note that it was said to have something to do with the South Wood; what struck me was the contrast between the

meticulous nature of the original drawing you made and the impatience and – well, relative crudity of the diagram that overlaid it – the eye, the radiating lines or spokes. Come and look at it with me."

Kit stood behind Partridge, looked at the drawing, then traced the lines with his fingers; he appeared bewildered.

"Yes, I do remember doing that," he said slowly, "though it seems an age ago now. But... yes, there was the wood, it looked so green and gentle, but if you went too far into it there was the web, then the center – and – and then... there was... the... I would – Kit would..."

He had begun to shake uncontrollably; Partridge put an arm round his waist. "It's okay, Chris, it's okay," he said. "You don't need to be frightened any more, you know. Here – here's a tissue."

The boy had nestled tightly against him; it was some time before he became quieter. Partridge found that his palm was in contact with the area of bare skin between the boy's rumpled tee-shirt and his shorts; he put his other arm round Kit, and while he waited for him to grow completely calm his mind roved back over the unpleasantness and the rejections of the previous night and for a few moments he derived unexpected comfort from the boy's warm proximity. His hand slid to and fro, up and down, then at once he sat upright and somewhat abruptly pushed the boy away. "Sit down, Christopher," he said shortly.

Too late he saw the hurt in the boy's face, saw the eyes, still damp, begin to fill again. He went round the table and crouched in front of Kit's chair, taking both his hands. "I'm sorry, Chris. You don't understand."

The boy wiped his eyes with his fingers, looked up, and nodded. "I think I do understand," he said. "There can only be one, can't there? For you – just like for me. I suppose that's as it ought to be, but..."

"One what?"

"One person. But can't we have... well, other friends, too? I mean, people you like a lot?"

"Yes, I see what you mean. Well, of course one can, Christopher, but..." Partridge stood up again and walked over to the table. "There's the professional relationship, you see."

"It doesn't let you like someone, then?"

"No – I didn't mean that," said Partridge a little irritably. He sat down. "Chris, I don't think we ought to get diverted from the main issue. A moment ago we were looking back, briefly, at some of the fears you have experienced in the past. That was distressing, upsetting for you, I know, yet I think it is nevertheless important for one to demonstrate to oneself the capacity to look backwards on such old fears and fantasies without any longer being mastered by them, destroyed by them. But this is not to say that one must not now look forwards. Why don't you draw something for me now?"

Kit shook his head.

"Well, then" said Partridge. "Is there something else you would like to do, eh? What would make you feel good, Chris?"

"I felt good a minute ago," said the boy.

Partridge swallowed and rapped his fingers uneasily on the desk. "I really think you oughtn't to make so much of – of..." He got up and turned to look out of the window. "It's crazy," he said, very quietly, at length. "To look like that, to feel like that, when he's..." He turned round. "Damn it, you're a boy," he said impatiently.

"I'm not a boy," said Kit. "I'm a person. That's what Vera said."

"Vera?"

"Yes – I've been having talks with her too. She says that no one's a male, a female, a boy, a child or whatever, but just a person, and if you want to be with someone, to touch someone, to love someone, labels like that don't matter. Because when you do, then it's always all right."

"Yes – that I can believe."

"You can?"

"I mean – I can believe it's the sort of thing that Vera would say. But it's all somewhat advanced for... child psychotherapy, isn't it?"

"No, I agree with her," said Kit. "I *know* it's true."

"Do you, indeed?" asked Partridge. "You weren't I suppose, afforded anything in the way of a practical demonstration, were you?"

"Ah – you forget the professional relationship!" said the boy teasingly.

"Of course not."

"Well, that's something. Christopher, listen – Vera is very convincing, that type always is, but she *is* in a minority. In point of fact, everybody knows that – "

"What one knows is the primary bar to experience," said Kit. "Non-knowing is the circle through which comes happiness and fulfillment."

"Good God, did she tell you that as well?"

"No – my father did. I still remember it exactly."

"You're a very remarkable boy," said Partridge after a moment or two. "Sometimes I ask myself what you're doing here, now."

"I told you, I'm leaving soon," said Kit. "You never listen."

Although it was well after seven, the South Wood was still light; the sky was as cloudless as it had been all afternoon.

"Paul."

"Where are you?"

"Up here, silly."

The leaves parted. *And the man who had come through the wicket gate looked up, and suddenly it was bright, and the place was warm with an abundance of love, at which his bonds loosened, and the burden fell from his back, and he saw it no more. And the man ran through the woods, laughing, leaping, and crying for joy.*

"I say, are you all right, Paul?"

"Come down here, Kit. Now."

Chapter Nine

"You had no right, Mr. Trenchard," said Partridge, "you had no authority whatever to act as you did. I would not have imagined even you capable of such extraordinary behavior."

"In that case, Dr. Partridge, you are obviously under a misapprehension about where my authority begins and yours leaves off. May I remind you that I, as Nursing Officer of this Unit, am the one ultimately responsible for the welfare of all the children in the Unit, with or *without* consultation with the relevant members of the medical staff."

"Nonsense; patients come to the hospital to be treated by a doctor. He, and primarily he, is responsible for them. You know very well that you should have consulted the Professor before taking such an extreme step. What time are they arriving?"

"I have no idea, Doctor. Quite soon, I imagine. Anyhow, the Professor is away."

"Then you should have asked me."

"I am sorry to have to remind you yet again; Dr. Partridge, that in this day and age the role of a senior member of the nursing profession is no longer that of mere subservience to –"

Partridge thumped the table. "For God's sake, Trenchard, muck up all my patients' lives if you must, expose the Unit, the staff and the children to disgrace and scandal if you like, but don't give me a bloody seminar. *Please!*"

"Any adverse publicity will be of your own making, Doctor. It will, no doubt, be considered quite unbelievable that a boy in our care should be allowed to wander at large when a known child molester is confined *in the very same hospital* and that a situation could arise where the child was exposed to the attentions of this man not just once but, as far as I can make out, several times. Quite frankly, when I drew attention some weeks ago to the risks the boy might run if allowed such freedom, I had no idea *how real those risks were*. Naturally, I felt it my duty immediately to inform the proper authorities of what I knew."

Partridge sat down, tugged at strands of his hair, and stood up again. "But you *don't* know, Mr. Trenchard. You can't be certain."

"I'm as good as. And I think that further investigation should be put into other hands now."

"But surely, Mr. Trenchard, consideration of – well, the effect of the adverse publicity on the Unit might have held you back, might still hold you back, even if you don't have regard to the effect on our young patients."

"It is precisely that which I was considering, Doctor. Questions of 'adverse publicity' and the like are secondary."

"Well, I don't suppose *you'd* do badly out of the publicity," said Partridge bitterly. "You probably thought of that too – *Alert Charge Nurse Exposes Hospital Scandal*. Very fine, that would sound."

"I didn't hear that remark, Doctor."

"Don't patronize me, Trenchard. On second thoughts, I imagine you didn't actually have in mind the likelihood of cheap publicity for yourself; I don't think you're capable of thinking that far ahead. And a certain amount of your reasoning I can understand, I suppose. Some people might even say that you'd been clever in a sly, prying sort of way, I mean peering at tattoos, jotting initials down in your little notebook and so on. But how did you get on to this – what's his name?"

"Baxter. Simple – I just went across to my opposite number on the adult side and went through the names with him; it didn't take long. Then I inquired why Baxter was in there and... need I say more?"

"Don't be so damned smug; you still have no evidence."

"Perhaps, perhaps not – but let me tell you that I've had my suspicions for some time. In fact, I followed the boy once and thought I heard voices, his and a man's, and I might well have caught the two *infragrante delinquo*, but I was impeded by some barbed wire and... had to return to the Unit."

"Really, Mr. Trenchard, one ought not to laugh, but –"

"Then please don't, Doctor. And, incidentally, if you really want 'evidence', you might like to know that Mr. Baxter has just made himself scarce; he didn't come in yesterday evening and he can't be found, though they've searched the grounds twice."

"Ah... I see," said Partridge, momentarily at a loss.

"And you know as well as I do, Doctor, that the police must be informed of the absence of a Section patient," said Trenchard, pressing his advantage.

"I know that, Mr. Trenchard. But the duty to inform the police, or more correctly in this instance the Home Office, rests purely with the doctor in charge of the case; this was the Professor. Equally, an issue having to do with a patient in *this* part of the hospital, namely the boy, should first have been referred to me."

"It's all one hospital, Doctor," said Trenchard. "And I must say I'm very surprised by your attitude – very surprised. It doesn't seem to matter to you that a young patient in your care might have been assaulted, might have been traumatized; it seems as if you're more interested in hushing the matter up."

"We don't know that there *is* anything to 'hush up', Mr. Trenchard."

"Then no one has anything to worry about, have they?"

"Oh yes, they have. You might well have started something that none of us can stop; I wish you had let me look into it first. Where's Sylvia, by the way?"

"It's her day off."

"Even more convenient. A clear field for you, so to speak. Look – perhaps Christopher and this man did meet; in fact, from what you say, they could even have been meeting fairly regularly, but it could have been quite harmless, you know. It's well known that pubertal boys go through these phases, these fleeting reciprocal attachments. When you were a boy didn't you ever get into anything like that? With an older boy, say? No, I don't suppose you did."

"You suppose correctly, Doctor – and remember that it's an incident involving a convicted sex offender we're talking about, not one involving merely two young boys."

"Quite so – but if Christopher had indeed been subjected to the terror and trauma and what-not that you've chosen to imagine, he would scarcely have picked out Baxter's initials with loving care on his forearm, would he? I gather these entwined initials were quite beautifully done; I wish I'd seen them."

"That's a very naive view, Doctor, if I may say so. You underestimate the *influence* of these men, the *hold they* can have on a young mind."

Partridge rose, walked to the window, fiddled with the Venetian blind, and broke it. "I ask myself again, Mr. Trenchard, whether you speak from direct experience or at the prompting of some form of perverse fantasy. The former alternative you have denied." He sat down at the table. "Anyhow, whatever damage has already been done, perhaps we could possibly both agree that our main purpose now is the protection of this poor boy. *Can* we agree on that?"

"Most certainly, Doctor. As I have just been telling him repeatedly, if he tells me the *truth*, the *whole* truth, then he has nothing whatsoever to fear."

Partridge lowered his face into his hands for a moment, then looked up again. "Mr. Trenchard, there are times when I could simply burst into tears of despair, throw up this job, and go into a Trappist monastery for life. You have actually been interrogating the boy?"

"Yes, I did put a few questions to him; no point beating about the bush. In fact he would be much better telling everything now to a person he knows now, rather than have the police drag it out of him later."

"We punish you now in order that you may not be punished in the fires of Eternity," said Partridge softly. "Have you ever read James Joyce, Mr. Trenchard?"

"No – I can't say that I have, though I believe that one of his films was quite disgusting. Hardly an appropriate subject to introduce at this particular time, I should have thought."

"Perhaps not. I'll see the boy now, Mr. Trenchard. Alone."

"You can't. He won't come out of his room."

"All right, I'll go and see him there. Tell me first, what do the rest of the staff know about this?"

"I've told my nursing colleagues about the matter in outline; they were content, in general, to leave things to me. The children of course know nothing."

"I hope not," said Partridge. "I sincerely hope not." He crossed the long corridor, then went upstairs to the dormitories. In the boys' room the curtains had been drawn and it was almost dark; Kit sat on the end of the bed almost as he had seen him on the first day, his face lowered and hidden, his hair spilling through his fingers, the ends just touching his long, naked thighs. Even from the door Partridge could see the tear-damp on the boy's hair and fingers and he stopped for a moment where he was, unexpectedly overwhelmed by a wave of personal misery. Then he swallowed, cleared his throat and crossed to the boy, putting a hand on his arm. "Christopher," he said gently, "it's – it's all right."

The boy cried out and jumped to his feet, then he saw who it was and sank back on to the bed again. Partridge, slightly startled by the boy's reaction, had released his hold and stepped back, then he went and sat by him. "Christopher," he said hesitantly, "Mr. Trenchard has just been with me; he's told me everything – at least his side of everything – and I must tell you that I find myself deeply saddened, not primarily to know about... what may or may not have been taking place over the last couple of weeks, but largely by the way in which the matter – and also you – have been handled today. My wish is simply to help, to support you; I want to acknowledge that right away, at the outset."

The boy was silent; after a few moments Partridge saw that he was not going to respond, and went on, "Christopher, I expect that you are frightened, apprehensive – but this is something we are unable to deal with in any real way while there exists – as I sense there *does* exist – a feeling of resentment in you directed at all of us, and perhaps particularly towards me as your doctor, because of... what you are having to undergo today. Perhaps you see me as having been unavailable to you and thus, by implication, ineffective in my role as potential protector. You see, I do feel myself deeply conscious of the centrality of the transference relationship at this point in your therapy, the stage during which I am vested with a surrogate paternal relationship in respect of you; I am he who defends, who protects. Thus in your mind, *as you conceive it*, the bitterness of imagined desertion, of abandonment must assume a more acute, a more potent guise. For my part – a degree of counter-transference has been very much apparent to me during our last few sessions, and I have to say to you, Christopher, that I have been feeling more and more towards you a sense of... emotion closely akin to – er... Chris, why don't you speak to me?"

The boy shook his head, breathed deeply a couple of times, then said, "Kit doesn't... Kit w-wont..." Then he choked and was silent again.

"My God," said Partridge quietly, getting up. "Oh, my God." After a moment he said aloud, "Well, let's at least have some light."

"No!" The boy rose at once and caught Partridge's arm, then pulled the curtain completely shut. "It's – it's... Don't let it, please..."

"All right, Chris, all right." Partridge quietly led the shaking boy back to his bed again. He sat down,

then the door was thrown open and Vera Thoroughgood came in, walking across the room very quickly. "Look!" she cried out as she came. "Look what we're doing to that child. Can't we stop it? Harold, can't you stop it? You must – here and now."

"I – I really don't know that I can," said Partridge helplessly. "I simply don't know what to do, Vera."

"But you do," said Vera. "You really must stand up and be counted here and now, Harold. Don't you understand that by consenting to the system *as it is* you contribute to its advancement, you become truly part of it?"

"No – frankly I can't. But, as it happens – "

"Harold, I would not have expected even you to flaunt your alliance with the forces of repression so openly. What on earth possessed you to call the police?"

"I didn't call them; Trenchard did," said Partridge. "Vera, I find myself as always shocked, saddened even, by your extreme, your stereotyped view of the function of a psychiatrist, your heavily biased conception of – "

"Well, *be* shocked," said Vera. "That way you might hear me. Harold, are you satisfied with what your medical-model psychiatry has, in a very real sense, manufactured here today?"

"Sssh!" said Partridge to the boy, who had begun to sob aloud. "There is a good deal more practical validity in the medical model, Vera, than you are ready to acknowledge. Illness is *loss of function*; this is the central premise from which effective therapy must proceed. It is the end and it is the beginning."

The phone rang. Partridge answered it. "The police are here," he said quietly.

"Send them away," said Vera.

"Don't be silly; I can't," said Partridge. Holding the phone, he listened for a few moments more, then he said emphatically, "No, not on any account. They can talk to him here – *and* with myself present – or not at all." He listened again. "Yes, all right."

He put down the phone and said, "They wanted to take him down to the police station; I'm not letting them do that. And there's a medical examination; they can do that here as well."

"Well, at the last minute, some of the reactions of a human being," said Vera. "Though too late, I'm afraid, to be meaningful."

Partridge sat down and put a hand on Kit's shoulder. "You probably heard just now, Christopher, that these policemen have got to ask you a number of questions. I'm afraid this is unavoidable; you must simply try and be as brief and as accurate in what you tell them as you can. I'll stay here and make sure it doesn't get too upsetting for you. Just answer the questions and tell them what you know, that's all. I understand how you must feel, but for a few moments just do your best to pull yourself together and –"

"I never thought I'd actually hear anyone say that," said Vera. "I mean, actually *say* it – today, in nineteen eighty-three."

"I say it all the time," said Partridge. "There is an insufficient degree of recognition of the fact that by a conscious effort of will, by an individual act of assertion one can, so to speak, override one's – "

There was a knock on the door and it was pushed open. "Detective-Inspector Caton, Detective-Constable Todd," said one of the pair who came straight in. Why 'plain-clothes', for God's sake, thought Partridge. Did anyone else, anyone else at all, wear those zip-up waterproof jacket-things over suits *and ties*? "Perhaps, perhaps you would care to sit down," he said uneasily, rising and waving a hand in the direction of the adjacent beds. "I am – er – Dr. Partridge, the – er – doctor here. I will remain if I may and give – er – what assistance I can."

"Certainly, Doctor," said Caton. He sat heavily on the end of a bed, removed an elastic band from his notebook and examined the contents. "Now, son, you're Christopher, aren't you, though I believe you prefer to be called – let's see..."

"Christopher," said the boy, not looking up.

"I see. Now, Christopher, I just want to emphasize that if you answer my questions as truthfully as possible you have nothing whatever to fear. Do you understand?"

"The police may not make threats in order to extract information," said Vera. "Did *you* understand that?"

"And who might you be?"

"I'm here to remind you, among other things, that a minor may only be questioned in the presence of his parents, his guardian or a duly appointed Mental Welfare Officer."

"The parents are, I understand, deceased, and the legal guardians cannot be contacted."

"I know that. Therefore, as the Social Worker on the Unit, the duty of Mental Welfare Officer devolves upon me," said Vera. "And I have to point out to you that you were using threats, in contravention of Judges' Rules."

"I was not aware of using threats, madam."

"Then you should have been. You said, *if* you answer truthfully you have nothing to fear, the clear implication being that –"

"Look, can we – er, get on with it?" said Partridge unhappily.

"Yes, but please ask your Social Worker not to interfere with Police questioning."

"I'm here to interfere," said Vera. "And I *will* interfere in order to protect this child at any point at which it appears to me to be necessary."

Caton pointedly turned his back on Vera. "Christopher," he said, "I want to keep it simple, so just listen to my questions. There is no need for you to give long or unduly complicated replies. First – do you know or have you met a Mr. Paul Baxter?"

The boy made no response; his shoulders remained hunched, his face in his closed hands. He had stopped crying now.

"You do know him, don't you?"

After another few moments of silence Caton said. "Now, look, I can understand that you may have formed some kind of friendship with this man, and you may think you can in some way protect him by saying nothing, but it won't do either of you any good, you know. You won't help him, and you won't help yourself. We know almost everything now, so you may as well co-operate, or both of you will be in even worse trouble when you already are."

"Just a moment, Inspector," said Vera. "I don't think –"

"You see, Christopher," said the Inspector, "there are two ways of doing this, son, aren't there – there's the easy way and there's the –"

"Now, see here –" said Vera, starting forward, but Partridge put a hand on her arm.

"Please, Vera, just let's get this over with, for God's sake."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Caton. "Well, son? Found your tongue yet?"

Kit didn't look up or speak; with a quick motion Caton rose. "Very well – if that's the way you want it. But I'll give you a moment to change your mind, I can't say fairer than that." He strode to the far end of the room and stood looking out of the window.

The younger detective leaned forwards towards the boy, clearing his throat and spoke quietly. "Listen, Chris – don't let him upset you. Mr. Caton can be a hard man sometimes, and I'm not saying but what he isn't being a bit tough on you. Actually, why don't you just chat to me, tell me all about it? Mr. Caton's a fair man, I know that, and I think I can get him to lay off, perhaps even have him pop back to the station and be getting on with something else; I can see he upsets you. How about it then, Chris?"

The boy slowly raised his head; he turned cold eyes on the man opposite him. "So you're the nice guy,

are you?" he asked deliberately.

"Eh?"

"I said, you're Mr. Nice Guy, are you? Next, I suppose, if you can't smarm anything out of me, back comes King Kong again. Did you practice it in the car on the way down? It's rather boring, actually."

"Now, see here." The man at the window turned round sharply. "That attitude will get you nowhere, sonny boy."

Todd, the Constable, had colored slightly. He leaned forward as if to take Kit's arm; the boy moved to avoid him and slipped on to the floor, hitting his elbow against the edge of the bed. Holding it, he got up and glared at the man. "Let me alone," he shouted.

"Not till you tell the truth," said Todd, getting up as well.

"You've no right... You've no right..." Suddenly the boy collapsed on his face on the bed and started to sob loudly again.

"Harold – you've got to stop this," said Vera. "You've *got to*"

"I agree," said Partridge. "Excuse me, I have to get to an external phone."

He went out of the room, then came back. "Dr. Parsons has just arrived," he said. "I've asked him to wait in the Clinical Room with a nurse."

"Thank you, Doctor." Caton came over to the bed and looked down at Kit, who had gradually become quieter. "Christopher – I'm sorry, son, we didn't mean to upset you. Anyhow, no more questions for the time being anyway, because the doctor's come to have a look at you. Perhaps this... lady would show us down to the other room now." He indicated Vera, who went over and put her arm round Kit; she took out a tissue and wiped his eyes. "Come along downstairs now," she said quietly. "You've just to see the doctor for a moment or two, then it's all over, I promise you. Come – let's go."

In the clinical room Dr. Parsons greeted them pleasantly. "Ah, Christopher, as I remember. I gave you your medical when you came here. And now this. Piece work all of it, of course, but it gets one out of the surgery." He looked at the two policemen, who had accompanied Kit into the room. "I hardly think..."

"You might need some assistance, Doctor, I'm sorry to have to say," said Todd.

"If they're staying, so am I," said Vera.

The doctor shrugged. "So be it. Sorry about the crowd, Christopher, but I'll take you behind the screens, so you don't need to be shy. Okay?"

Kit nodded.

"Very well, then, I want you to undress, but you can keep your underpants on. Want any help?"

Kit shook his head; ignoring the screens, he obeyed. The doctor, manipulating a lamp, scrutinized his body carefully. "Hmmm – no marks, no bruises. Just one partially healed scratch on the forearm, and that's already recorded in the notes. Now, Christopher, just one more thing. Go over behind the screen, slip your pants off, and lie on the couch on your tummy. This will only take a moment or two."

The boy's hands went, uneasily, to his waist; he looked at the doctor, who was donning a rubber glove. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

Hesitantly, the doctor explained.

"No." Kit stepped back.

"Now, come on – be a good chap," said the doctor. "I'll send the others out if you like."

The boy shook his head violently and burst into tears.

"Do what you're told, now," said Caton.

"Kindly do *not* adopt a militaristic posture here," said Vera heatedly. "The methods of the police in our present-day society are one of the scandals of the age; the Scarman Report was quite clear on that issue."

"The scandal of the age is the influence of middle-class leftists who impede the police in their essential work of law enforcement and peace-keeping," said Caton. To Kit he said, "I'm sorry, son, but it's the hard way." He gripped the boy's arms and pulled him across to the couch, pushing the screens aside as he did so. Kit screamed and kicked out, connecting with the steel trolley and scattering instruments in all directions. Todd came over and, on Caton's instructions, seized the boy's underpants and jerked them down to his ankles.

"Now, on the couch, like the doctor says," said Caton. "And we'll go on holding you for as long as we have to."

"Take your hands off that child," shouted Vera. She ran forward, pushed the Inspector and, with the advantage of surprise, she gained repossession of Kit; she dragged him back across the room and locked her arms round him.

"Don't either of you dare to come any closer," she said furiously. "Even in this day and age the police may act legitimately only in a consensus situation; they are not, and must not become, a mere tool for the forcible endorsement of oligarchical values, a mere instrument of Thatcherite totalitarianism." She stopped and pulled Kit's pants up hard, snapping them back into place. Todd grabbed at the boy, but once again Vera pulled him back out of reach. Kit was crying hysterically now; he squirmed out of Vera's grasp and turned to face the two policemen. "Let me alone – let me alone," he shouted between sobs. "You bastards – you bastards! Even *he* never did anything unless I wanted him to, even *he* wouldn't have... wouldn't have..."

The boy stopped and was suddenly quiet. Todd stepped back and looked at his senior colleague; a momentary smirk crossed the latter's face, then he said, "You got that, didn't you?"

"Every word, Inspector."

The door opened and Partridge came in. He addressed Caton without preamble. "I've just been in contact with this boy's Consultant, and he asks me to inform you that the boy is medically unfit either to be questioned by the police or to give evidence."

"Certainly, Doctor, certainly," said Caton with great geniality. "Naturally I would not wish to cause unnecessary distress. I think we can call it a day now, can't we, Todd?"

"It's all right, Harold," said Kit quietly. He was pale and puffy-eyed but more composed now. "I'll co-operate with the medical and get it over, but you'll have to let me go to the toilet first."

"Fair enough," said Caton. "Run along, then. Better go with him, Todd, but wait outside. Just come back when you're ready."

An uncomfortable silence prevailed in the room when Kit had gone; Caton was making notes, Vera stood with her back to the room, in icy displeasure, looking out of the window, Partridge prowled uneasily around, picking instruments off the floor and putting them on the trolley, then lifting them up and putting them down again. At last Caton closed his notebook, snapped the elastic band round it and restored it to his zipped-in pocket. He looked at the wall-clock. "He's taking rather a long time, isn't he?" he asked. "Did he have far to go?"

Partridge shook his head. "Just to the end of the corridor," he said. "I'd better go and see if everything's all right."

The Thursday Case Conference was always a relatively small affair, a tidying-up operation between the main round on Tuesday and the week-end. Medication had to be reviewed; that is, the requisite number of squares had to be initialed on each patient's drug chart to cover the days until Monday, and then all reports had, after discussion, to be filed in the correct section of the clinical notes – Medical Reports on blue paper, Social Work Reports on yellow paper, Occupational Therapy Reports on green paper, and

Other Reports on other kinds of paper. This done, the week-end leave forms had to be filled in and signed and the small bottles of tablets for the patients going on week-end leave had to be issued.

"That completes the pills now," said Partridge. "See that no one forgets theirs, Sylvia, won't you?"

"Oh, she'll see to that – no question about it," said Vera emphatically. "Even if a child cannot remain physically within the institution, no effort is likely to be spared to ensure that he takes the institution *with* him in the shape of on-going bottled medical interventions and controls. Even an escape for a couple of days is not permissible."

"And make sure that the bottles are properly labeled, Sylvia" Partridge said. "Some of them came off last time."

"And make sure that you label the children as well," said Vera. "No – I forgot; that's been done already. *Those* labels won't come off."

"Not now, Vera," said Partridge dispiritedly. "Is that all?"

"Just one more form to sign, Harold. It's for Kevin Cheney; his mother has re-appeared and wants to take him home now. Is that all right?"

"Yes, yes. It's nice to have at least one piece of good news; there's been precious little today."

"Harold," said Sylvia. "Since you've raised it – don't you think that the one topic on everyone's mind is the very one that we've been carefully avoiding all morning. But the whole Unit knows about it – or at least everybody knows at least something – and there are whispers, rumors, mostly exaggerated, and just a completely horrible, dreadful atmosphere in the place. Wouldn't it be just as well to talk about it all openly?"

"It wouldn't do any good," said Partridge. "Not at the moment, anyhow. There'll be plenty of talking about it in due course, rest assured of that. For the moment – well, life must go on."

"Say what you like, but I'm glad that that poor, victimized man got away," said Vera. "Where's he gone?"

Partridge laughed shortly. "A long distance away, if he's got any sense. Somehow I don't think the English police will be seeing Mr. Baxter again. I wasn't thinking about him, though, but about the boy. Inquiries still continue, as the police say, and I think that a discussion among ourselves now about poor Christopher would only be upsetting for everyone."

"I think you're right," said Sylvia after a moment. "Incidentally, should we arrange to fill Kevin's bed now?"

"There was that enuretic from St. Anselm's I promised to take in shortly. That's one of the things we could discuss now, Sylvia, if you could join me in my office for a moment."

Baxter woke gradually. The pitch of the aircraft's engines had changed; he leaned forward to where he could see out of the cabin window. They had lost height now, the last wisp of cloud had vanished, and the dazzling blue of the Atlantic was spread out on all sides, but with a jagged line of hills rising straight ahead and only a few miles away.

The stewardess touched his shoulder. "Last call for drinks, Mr. Baxter. Can I get you anything?"

"A gin and lime, please. With ice."

"And for your son? An orange juice, perhaps?"

Baxter looked at the sleeping child in the window seat beside him and smiled. "Yes – I think so."

The stewardess nodded, then a look of mild concern crossed her face. "Is he all right? Has he hurt himself?"

Baxter gently shook his head. "Just a few scratches. He put his hand through a window, silly boy." The stewardess went to get the drinks and he prodded the boy's arm. "Wake up, Kit. We'll be there

soon."

The boy stirred, rubbed his eyes, and looked out of the window. Now the great sweep of the bay was visible, the spectacular green cone of Pão de Açúcar standing behind and above it, the sun glinting on the cluster of tiny white buildings on its summit.

"Rio," said the boy sleepily. "There's a picture in one of my schoolbooks."

Together they watched as the plane dropped further and then turned parallel with the shore to complete its descent across a succession of bays half-ringed in silver and emerald, crescent after crescent, until they could see the slow movements of the broad flotilla of yachts at anchor, and the white crests of the waves riding in to tumble on the rocks and sand.

"The other side of the world," said Kit in a near-whisper. "Warm sun, clear water, and horses to ride."

Baxter laughed. "You've been dreaming, little brother," he said. "It's the altitude, probably. Let me fasten your seat-belt now; we land in five minutes."