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Jay Edson

KOAN

by Jay Edson

CHAPTER I

His awareness of their slender and eager young bodies lying beside him was exciting, and a little frightening. One was fair skinned and one darker. They might have been about eleven, and they were naked, as he was. The darker one said to him, “We can help you, Joe,” and then reached over and took his penis in his hand. Joe already had an erection, and soon was brought to an orgasm.

After rolling out of bed, Joe wandered over to the stove and turned the fire on under a small saucepan of water. This was the first time he ever recalled having an unequivocally erotic dream about boys.

At the sink, he selected the least dirty cup he could find, rinsed it out and dried it in a cursory manner on the only thing he was wearing, his T-shirt. Once again he made a mental note to buy some dishtowels.

Joe’s attention was briefly captured by the label as he scooped out a heaping spoonful of instant coffee. It was advertised as a “blend of fine instant coffees from one or more of the following countries: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay.” He wondered whether he was contributing to the exploitation of South American “campesinos” somewhere in order to support his one deeply ingrained drug dependence: caffeine. Since he had begun to have Artemio Maritnez, an eleven-year-old Hispanic boy, tutor him in Spanish, he had been thinking more about such things. Artemio had told him his father had been a “campesino” — a peasant.

Joe placed his steaming cup of coffee on a clear corner of his dresser. After removing his T-shirt he paused briefly to stare at himself in the mirror on the opposite wall. At thirty-two, his hair was thinning and he had the build of someone who gets only irregular exercise. He did not cut a heroic figure. Maybe Karen wanted someone with better-defined muscles, he thought, and was just embarrassed to admit it. Or maybe she wanted someone who could hold an erection longer. He picked up his coffee and went to the shower. These days women were demanding more.

As painful as their relationship had been, Joe missed his wife. He also missed his daughter, and the mundane and reassuring routines of family life. He had expected it to be only a brief separation, to give Karen her “space,” as she had put it, to sort out who she was and what

she wanted. The one thing that was becoming clear was that she didn't want him. It was hard to mobilize enthusiasm for doing anything when his plans affected only himself.

The apartment Joe had rented in order to give his wife "her space," was a renovated motel room. Being the oldest of three motels, the Paul Bunion Plaza, as it used to be called, had gone under after the Anton Pulp and Paper Mill went into a slump. But as a somewhat seedy apartment complex for low-income and transient people, it was thriving. A cheap partition extended about three quarters the way across the main room, dividing it into a small bedroom and an rather cramped everything-else room. The bedroom was furnished with a dresser, a couch that opened out into a bed, and his TV and VCR. The everything-else room contained a sink, a gas stove, and a secondhand refrigerator. Joe knew he was paying too much for too little, but he couldn't seem to find the energy to make any changes to improve his situation.

The one redeeming feature of the apartment was the shower. Here Joe could luxuriate in an old-fashioned blast of water that was uninhibited by any water-conserving nozzle. With the warm water beating down pleasurably on his back, and with his coffee cup balanced precariously in the soap dish, he allowed the images of the previous night's dream to emerge more vividly into his consciousness. The boys had not yet begun to develop their secondary sexual characteristics. He could see them in his mind's eye, slender and lithe, one dark and the other light. In response, he could feel an arousal in his groin.

Drying himself, but not bothering to dress, he returned to his everything-else-room and fixed himself a bowl of Cheerios, without bananas. He was sure that buying bananas supported an exploitative economic structure in Latin America, and he wanted no part of it. His dependence on coffee was bad enough. Of course, if nobody bought these products, that might make the lives of the campesinos even worse. He didn't see any way around this dilemma at the moment.

He continued to ponder the image of the two boys in bed with him as he sat down to eat his Cheerios. What was a dream like that supposed to mean? Was he really homosexual? A couple of times back in college he had been unable to get an erection with his first girl friend. Could that be because unconsciously he was not heterosexual, or not fully so? He couldn't remember ever having been attracted to a man physically, and had enjoyed sex with his wife until their relationship started to go sour; but who could know what was in the unconscious?

What was it they called a man who was attracted to children? A pedophile. A "friend of children." At the Junior High where he taught general science, he had always had an easy and

affectionate relationship with the children; and he did like to spend time with them in scouts and other activities. He might indeed have been described in his community as a “friend of children.” In the context of the dream this term took on a new and sinister connotation. Was his ostensibly laudable interest in the welfare of children really just a front behind which lurked darker, only partially conscious, designs? Or was his dream just a stupid and random set of images that didn’t mean anything special except, perhaps, that his life was thoroughly screwed up at the moment?

He picked up the phone and dialed.

1 He was calling me.

Joe did not hesitate to call me even though it was 6:30 in the morning. He knew that I was an early riser. I am Demetrios Glyphis — Father Glyphis to those in my parish — Demetri to my friends. I am fifty-two, huge and ugly. I played guard in college football and have tried to keep in shape since then. Perhaps that’s why I don’t need much sleep.

Joe Michaud and I had become acquainted in a book discussion group some years previously. The club had drifted along for about six months and then shipwrecked on the inability of people to tolerate disagreement. But we salvaged a friendship from the wreckage. I was glad to have an intelligent and fairly open-minded person with whom I could share ideas, and he seemed to find comfort in talking with me about his personal concerns as well. He wasn’t Catholic, but for all practical intents and purposes I became his priest and confessor.

I picked up the receiver.

“Father Glyphis here.”

“This is Joe.”

“Ah, what’s on your mind?”

“What do you think about dreams?” he asked.

“That’s a pretty broad question,” I said. “Do you want the two dollar answer, or the fifty dollar one?”

“Do you think they mean anything?”

“Sure.”

“What?”

“Well, that depends on the dream of course.”

1 “Do you think they show us the unconscious mind?”

“I think they sometimes reveal feelings and thoughts we have not yet put into words.”

“And do they have religious significance?”

“They may.” I thought about how I should answer this. “In a dream Jacob saw angels — that is to say, messengers — ascending and descending a ladder that went to heaven. It’s hard to miss the implication here that dreams are a place where communication occurs between the human and divine levels of reality.”

There was a long pause at the other end of the line.

“Maybe you just wanted the two dollar answer,” I said.

“No, that’s interesting,” he said.

“Well, I didn’t want to bore you.”

“That’s one of the first things I noticed about you,” he said.

“That I’m boring?”

“No. Just that sometimes you talk like a textbook.”

I laughed. “Is that a compliment or a criticism.”

“Just an observation,” he said.

“I used to teach school,” I said. “Guess it comes from that.”

There was another lull in the conversation.

“Do you think dreams predict the future?” he asked.

“They may, but I think that’s not usually their significance.”

“What’s their usual significance?”

“They show the meaning of the events of our waking lives.”

“I see.”

“So, what is this sudden interest in dreams?” I asked. “Did you have a dream you wanted interpreted?”

“Not really.”

“I see. Just curious, eh?”

“Yes,” he said. “Just curious.”

“It sounds like you have something on your mind, Joe. Suppose we get together this evening.”

“I’m leaving on a camping trip with the scouts. I’m supposed to meet them at nine.”

“When do you get back?”

“Sunday, that is tomorrow afternoon, about three.”

“Could you drop by in the evening, after the trip?”

“Yes. I would like that.”

“I’ll see you about six-thirty, then, at my office. I’ll order some pizza.”

That telephone call was Joe’s first effort to tell me about the momentous events taking place in his life and within his soul. It was the first of many fragments I was able to gather over time — fragments out of which I was eventually able to construct a complete mosaic. Every story is a mosaic, and every mosaic an interpretation. I could have selected other fragments, or ordered them differently. Nevertheless, some interpretations are more truthful than others. A truthful interpretation begins with hard facts. Therefore I have been diligent in gathering and corroborating information. As I was a participant in the events, some of my knowledge is from direct observation. In addition, I was a confidant to a number of the key characters, and I made a point of interviewing the others. Also I studied the court records very carefully. Obviously I’ve had to allow myself a little poetic license in reconstructing the scenes where I was not present. Also I’ve had to alter some of the identifying information to protect — well, to protect everybody. But the basic facts are as I present them.

There was a flue going around, and only six scouts showed up at nine for the trip. When the other leader called to say he too was feeling poorly, Joe decided to take the six boys by himself. They canoed to Frog Island where they set up camp.

It was Sunday morning. Perched precariously on rocks at the edge of the lake, Joe held a tube of Ipana tooth paste in his left hand, and in his right a toothbrush with which he was vigorously scrubbing his teeth. He was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. The sun had just risen. A boy of eleven, in pajama bottoms, approached. He was dark, Hispanic, with curly black hair.

“Joe, can we skinny-dip?” he asked.

Joe reached down to the lake for a handful of water, almost fell in, and tried again. He succeeded on the second try. After sloshing the water around in his mouth he spit it out onto the pebbles at the edge of the lake. “Hi, Temio. You up already?”

“Everybody’s up.”

Dressed in an oversize T-shirt with a picture of a rock band on it, a second boy joined them. He was shivering. "Did you ask him, Temio?"

"I don't think he heard me."

"I heard you, Temio."

"Well, can we?"

"I thought you came out here to earn merit badges, not just goof-off."

"I'm working on my skinny-dip badge," the boy in the oversize T-shirt said.

Joe laughed. "You're skinny enough, Jason. If you take a dip you should have it."

"Then we can?" Jason asked.

"Give me a minute to think." Joe looked out across the lake. He knew that only an occasional boat came by. They were on the island by themselves. Still, he hesitated.

"Please," Temio said.

Joe shrugged. "Why not?"

Jason ran down to the beach, threw off his T-shirt, and slipped out of his underwear. With a whoop he dashed into the water. Temio wiggled out of his pajama bottoms and bounded into the water after him.

A plump boy in a bathrobe emerged from his tent and ventured down to the edge of the lake to see what the commotion was about. "Did you tell them they could do that?" he asked when he saw the two boys swimming. His eyes were wide with astonishment.

"Yes, I did, Mat. Do you want to go?"

"Not me." Mat shook his head vigorously.

Three other scouts gathered at the edge of the lake. As soon as he saw Temio and Jason splashing each other in the shallow water, one of them abandoned his clothes and ran to join them. The other two were slower to respond, but eventually give in to taunts and dares.

Only Mat held out.

"Why don't you go in, Mat?" Joe asked.

"I don't feel like swimming this morning." Mat pulled his bathrobe more tightly around himself.

"You don't have to skinny-dip. Go put your suit on."

"Naw."

"Come on in, Joe," Temio called to him.

“Not this time.”

“Joe is too much of a weenie,” Jason shouted.

“Not man enough, are you?” Temio teased.

Joe smiled and turns to Mat. “What if we went in together?”

“They’ll make fun of me.”

“Why?”

Mat patted his ample belly. “They’ll call me names.”

“Not if you’re with me. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Joe began to undress. Mat wavered. Then he smiled shyly and removed his bathrobe.

“Maybe I’ll leave my underpants on.”

“Good idea,” Joe said.

Joe was no sooner out of his pajamas than he heard Temio calling to the other boys.

“Look, Joe’s coming in.”

“I can see your thing,” Jason shouted.

For a moment Joe was taken aback by this frank reference to his genitals. But he quickly composed himself for a retort. “Don’t you have anything of your own to look at?”

The other boys approved this response with hoots and laughter. “Jason can’t find his,” Mark, a bigger, blond boy shouted.

In defense of his honor, Jason jumped on Mark and tried to dunk him, but was himself flipped into the water.

“Joe’s still dry,” one of the other boys shouted.

Temio took the cue. “Lets drag him in.” Under Temio’s leadership the boys emerged onto the beach. Grabbing Joe by the arms and legs, they pulled him into the water.

It was exhilarating. Joyful. They chased, splashed, insulted, wrestled, yelled and dunked. The sun itself seemed to approve their happiness. Even Mat finally removed all his clothes and threw himself into the play. The boys didn’t tease him. He was, after all, their friend, and he told the best ghost stories of anyone.

When he returned from the camping trip that afternoon, Joe took nap and showered. Finding that he still had an hour before his appointment with me, he fixed a cup of coffee and settled into the one comfortable chair in his apartment. He glanced over the lead stories in the

weekend edition of the Independent Times, dated June 9th and 10th, 1989, which he had not yet finished perusing. The most prominent articles dealt with the continuing struggles between various factions in the former Soviet Union, and similar conflicts in central and southern Africa. The common denominator, as he saw it, was the breakdown of oppressive regimes that had successfully suppressed the conflicts between various ethnic and religious groups. So often there seemed to be the need for choosing between oppression and ethnic conflict — two forms of violence. He thought of the bloody struggle between the Hindus and the Moslems after Gandhi successfully obtained India's liberation from English rule. Even Gandhi, who wished for neither form of violence, faced that dilemma. It was depressing, and more than he wished to ponder at the moment.

Then his attention was drawn to a story that provided an update on the latest accusations against the Little Rascals Day Care Center. How many of these scandals were going to emerge? Babies being sodomized by whole groups of adults practicing Satanism. Little girls having broom stick handles and knives shoved up their vaginas. Trips to outer space and to other planets. Ritual sacrifices of infants. Children thrown into shark-infested waters. What a bizarre and seemingly endless list of atrocities! Could all of these things be real? What did it all mean?

It reminded him of something he had noticed in our local newspaper. He put down the Independent Times, and rummaged through the unsorted pile of flyers, junk mail, letters and miscellaneous papers on his table until he found the most recent copy of the Anton Weekly. There were the usual weddings, funerals, and birthday parties. Someone had been doing fifty in a thirty-five miles-per-hour zone. The town council was up in arms against the fire chief. Then there was a peculiar little story about another family missing its cat in a presumably mysterious manner. A letter to the editor warned there was a satanic cult in the area that was taking the cats. The anonymous writer of the letter attacked the police for not being able to track the cult because "everybody knows who some of the cult people are."

Stories about a satanic cult in the South Anton area had emerged once previously a couple of years before in relation to a more serious matter -- the David Saunders incident. David had been in Joe's science class at Anton Middle School. He remembered David as a likable kid, and as a good student, but also as a child who didn't seem very happy. When he was twelve, David had turned up missing one day, and was never found. He might have lost himself wandering in the woods around Anton, of course, or he might have drowned in one of the many lakes in the

area. However, local amateur investigators had all sorts of theories as to why neither of those possibilities was likely. One of the dominant theories concerned the existence of a cult. “Where facts are sparse, theories abound,” Joe had written in a letter to the Anton News at the time. He felt the need to caution people against confusing idle speculation with plausible theory. A group of local citizens was trying to get the incident aired on the TV program “Unsolved Mysteries.”

Joe set the newspaper aside and thought about the camping trip from which he had just returned. It had been, as one of the boys said, “awesome.” As he anticipated a season of camping with scouts, with friends, and by himself, a tiny hint of appetite for life began once again to flicker within him. He had always lived for his summers on the surrounding lakes.

He was startled by the phone. He staggered out of his easy chair, and grabbed the receiver.

“Hello?”

“When do you plan to see Samantha?”

“Oh God. I don’t know, Karen. This Saturday morning, I guess.”

“What time?”

“Is ten o’clock okay?”

“That’s fine. She really felt let down to find out you didn’t see her this weekend.”

“I was camping, Karen. Samantha can’t very well come on a boy scout trip.”

“You could have let her know.”

“I did.”

“The day before yesterday. That’s not good enough.”

“I forgot until then. I already apologized. What more do you want?”

“Just try to be more dependable. Samantha is your daughter, too.”

“I know that.”

“Sometimes you don’t act like it.”

“I’ll be there Saturday at eleven. Okay?”

“You said ten.”

“That’s right. I mean ten. I’ll have her back Sunday at five.”

“It’s important.”

“I know. I know.”

“I’ll have her ready.”

Joe slammed the phone down a little harder than he intended.

Most of the wall space in my study is taken up with book cases. In the few spaces that are free I have crammed some of my favorite prints. On one wall there is a print of a Michelangelo painting showing Mary, Elizabeth, Jesus as a small boy, and John the Baptist. It's a circular painting. I never tire of it. In the one fairly large open wall space, behind my desk, I have a fine print of a dinner party by Renoir. It's to help remind me of the goodness of this creation. I study it carefully whenever I feel any wayward impulse toward asceticism. When I receive visitors I generally sit in a big swivel chair at my enormous antique desk. Above and behind the chair on the opposite side of the room, I have a photograph of an ancient Greek statue of Poseidon. I admit that my quarters are bit cluttered, and my desk is ostentatious, but I think most of my guests find my room hospitable.

Dispensing with formalities, Joe flopped down in the big easy chair across from me.

"Help yourself," I said, nodding at the pizza box on the coffee table to his left. I opened him a beer.

"I think you may have competition," Joe said. He waved a copy of the Anton News in my direction. "Competition?" I feigned a worried look.

"Some people think there's a satanic cult around here."

"Really? What can they offer that the Catholic Church can't?"

"Lots of sex and violence, I guess."

"Hmmm. That will be some stiff competition."

Joe chuckled. "I don't think it amounts to much. There was a letter in yesterday's edition that claimed Satanists were killing cats. But I think it's probably the work of coyotes, or maybe fishers."

"Very likely. But don't dismiss the idea there actually may be some sort of cult."

"As in satanic?"

"Well, not something linked in with a worldwide conspiracy under the direct leadership of Satan, complete with magic powers, as you might find depicted in a grade-B horror movie. But cults of one sort or another do exist."

"You mean like Jim Jones and Charles Manson," Joe said. "That sort of thing?"

"In a lot of ways Jones and Manson were very different. But, yes, something like that."

Joe shrugged. "I don't know. It all sounds kind of far out to me."

"It might be. I'm not sure myself," I admitted. "But I read an article last week in the Journal of Religion and Society about modern day cults."

"What did it say?"

"It put forward a theory that it called 'the underground hypothesis.'"

"What is that?"

"The general idea is that whenever a widely felt human need or impulse is denied or suppressed by the main stream of society, it will crop up in a social underground — often a cult."

"What kind of needs are you talking about.?"

"Whatever is considered most abhorrent. It might be homosexuality, even though that is a little more accepted at this point in history. Or it might be pedophilia, or even celibacy."

Joe laughed. "I see. It sounds like you might be talking about the church."

"That's no joke," I said. "The church was seen as a fanatical cult by the larger society during its early history. But what I'm talking about now is groups that are at odds with the mainstream of society — groups that have an investment in being secretive."

"Because of the kinky sexual practices?"

"Yes, that, but also because they might be involved in some illegal ways of making money."

"Drugs?"

"Drugs, yes. Or maybe a bit of child pornography or prostitution."

"You think something like that is going on around here?"

"I honestly don't know. Can't find any hard evidence."

"I heard some rumors while out on the camping trip," Joe said.

"Oh? What were they?"

"Well, just out of curiosity I brought up the stories of the Satanic cults as we sat around the campfire. It was on my mind because of the articles and letters that have been cropping up in the Anton News."

"And?"

"Of course you've got to remember we were talking about it while we were sitting around the fire to tell ghost stories," Joe cautioned me.

"And children do have very active imaginations. I understand that."

“The most talkative one was a kid named Mat Sampson. He lives in a foster home in South Anton. He’s likable — anxious to please — gullible. So his reports are almost totally unreliable. However, his friend, a boy named Jason, confirmed most of what he said. A lot of the talk about a cult revolves around a teenage boy, or a young man, named Norman McLain.”

“I know the boy,” I said. “Or at least I used to. He would be around nineteen or twenty by now. Something like that.”

“That fits with what they said. According to them he rents a small house, a renovated hunter’s camp, on a woods road that links up with Passaquamus Mountain Road. If it’s the road I’m thinking of it goes down to a washed-out bridge on Willow Creek. I’ve been trout fishing there. It’s a beautiful spot.”

“Maybe you can show it to me sometime.”

“Sure. There’s a house about a half a mile up from the creek that more or less fits the description the boys gave.”

“And Norman lives there alone?”

“Apparently. But they say he has visitors, some of whom stay there for a week or so at a time.”

“Out-of-staters coming up to hunt maybe?”

“Not likely. They come year around.”

“I see. Did you ask the boys how Norman earns his living?”

“I did. Apparently he used to cut stove wood for local people; just by himself; didn’t work for a regular woods operation. But they think now he deals in drugs.”

I shook my head. “It fits.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, Norman was one of those boys who was destined for something out of the ordinary — the sort who either does something great, or makes a complete mess of his life, a Malcolm X type.”

“He does sound out of the ordinary.”

“Did your campers say anything more about the cult?”

“They said the cult has rituals in a big field down behind the camp several times a year.”

“What’s supposed to happen during these rituals?”

“Oh, the usual satanic stuff. Sex orgies mostly, with some animal and human sacrifices.”

“Human?”

“Mat swears they kill babies and eat them.”

“And his evidence for this?”

“Things he’s heard.”

“Anything that could be checked out?”

“Mat couldn’t give me a single name of a person who had actually seen either the orgies or the sacrifices.”

“So the sum total of actual physical evidence for all this boils down to a few missing cats, who may well have been carried off by coyotes or fishers.”

“There was only one other thing. The rumors in South Anton clearly connect the incident of David Saunders’ disappearance with Norman. There’s no hard evidence here, either, but apparently a couple years ago, when it happened, David and Norman were friends. David was only about twelve at the time, and Norman about seventeen, but they hung out together.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“But a missing boy and a peculiar friendship hardly add up to a satanic cult complete with orgies where they rape children and butcher babies,” he said.

“That’s true. But you can’t just ignore the stories either.”

“So what do you make of them?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “Rumors circulate in communities even when there is little factual evidence for the events they report. But the fear that produces the rumors is based on something. Maybe it’s a frightening person, a dreadful possibility, or just an impulse or idea in the collective mind coming to the surface — but it’s something.”

“There you are, talking like a text book, again,” he said.

I laughed. “Maybe I’m a frustrated textbook writer,” I said.

Joe took a bite of pizza, and I went to get another slice. We both ate in silence for a few minutes.

“I went skinny-dipping with the boys on the camping trip,” Joe said.

“That’s good,” I said, with my mouth still full.

“I’m not so sure.”

I washed my bite of pizza down with a gulp of beer. “Why not?”

“Suppose they tell their parents.” Joe said. “How would they understand it?”

“Just skinny dipping can’t be that big a deal,” I said. “I remember, when I was a boy, men and boys used to swim naked together at the YMCA, and nobody gave it a second thought.”

“That was then.”

I knew, of course, that he was right. That was then. But I persisted. “Norman Rockwell did a painting of some boys skinny-dipping in a stream. It was on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post, perhaps the most mainstream magazine ever produced.”

Joe shook his head. “You know how it is, Demetri. Nowadays every look, every hug, every kiss, every touch is scrutinized, especially if it’s from a man. God preserve the coach who gives one of his junior high football players an affectionate pat on his behind!”

“Yes,” I conceded. “The behind has become an officially designated not-all-right-place.”

Joe laughed. It was a short nervous laugh. Although I knew he needed to talk more about it, I didn’t protest when he changed the subject.

CHAPTER II

About a week and a half after the camping trip on which the boys went skinny-dipping, Joe went to see Rachel Martinez, Artemio's mother. He had been friends with her for some years, but had begun seeing her more often after his separation from his wife. He studied her from across the tiny breakfast table crammed into the kitchen of her trailer. Her World Day Celebration sweat shirt, faded jeans, lack of any makeup, and long straight black hair suggested, correctly, that her heart was with the flower children of the sixties. He liked her mouth — wide, and not conventionally beautiful, but expressive and strong. But especially he liked her dark and gentle eyes.

"So, how did Artemio finish up the school year?"

Rachel shook her head. "It's been a bad year. They passed him, but his grades were terrible."

"I gathered he wasn't doing well."

"It's not just the academic issue. He's spending too much time by himself, and when he does hang out with other kids, I'm a little nervous about who."

"Anybody in particular?"

"His best friend seems to be a boy named Michael Quint."

"Really? Michael was in one of my classes. He's a foster kid. Seems kind of confused, but he's not really a big problem."

"He's not, but sometimes he hangs out with a twenty year old guy in South Anton, named Norman McLain."

Startled to hear the name of the young man I had told him about only a couple of days before, Joe's eyes widened. "You're kidding!"

"You know him?" she asked.

"Only by reputation."

"The rumor is that he's dealing in drugs."

“Yes, that’s what I’ve heard too.”

“What interest does a man like that have in a twelve year old boy?”

Joe shrugged. “It’s hard to know.”

“It is,” Rachel agreed. “But I know I don’t want Temio going by his house.”

“I think you’re wise to be careful.”

“The issue has already come up. Temio had a chance to go four-wheeling with Michael and Norman and I had to tell him he couldn’t. He was really mad about it; said I was treating him like a baby.”

Joe frowned. “Some of my scouts were talking about Norman last week. They think he’s into Satan worship.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. Father Glyphis seems to feel there might be something to it.”

“On top of everything else, that’s all I need — to have my son hanging around a bunch of stupid Satanists.”

“This year has been a bitch, hasn’t it,” Joe said.

Rachel looked down and smiled. “I guess the high point was when Temio got caught peeing all over the couch in the teachers lounge.”

Joe laughed. “I remember that. They asked me to come and talk with him about it. They thought that because I knew him, I might be able to get something out of him.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Almost nothing; said he didn’t know why he did it.”

“Probably he doesn’t. The school recommended I send him for counseling.”

“He mentioned to me he had a social worker.”

“It’s a woman named Ann Pinkham. She’s new to the community.”

“What’s she like?”

“Young. Nice. I don’t know.” Rachel picked through the clutter on the table in search of a pack of cigarettes. She located the pack under an Andre Gide novel, laying face down, open to her place. “She seems a little inexperienced, but I guess she’s all right.”

“Does Artemio like her?”

“I can’t tell. He doesn’t say much. I don’t think he dislikes her, but he doesn’t seem real excited to be seeing her either. I think he needs a man.”

“What happened to his father?”

“He’s dead.”

By the time he realized this was all she was going to say about it, an awkward silence had already grown between them. “Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

She lit her cigarette. “It’s okay. You’re friends with Temio and me, so naturally you’d be curious. Has Temio never said anything to you about his father?”

“Not much. Said he was a ‘campesino.’ That was about all.”

Feeling he had probed too much into her personal life, and wanting to change the subject, Joe glanced around the little kitchen in the hope of finding something that would suggest an alternate topic. His eyes lighted on a strange little etching that was framed and hung above the refrigerator, where it looked very out of place. It appeared to be in the renaissance style, and depicted soldiers killing some babies while their mothers tried, ineffectually, to intervene. “I’ve always been curious about that picture.” He gestured in its direction.

“It’s the killing of the innocents.”

“Like when Herod was trying to kill the baby Jesus?”

She nodded.

“Why do you have it above your refrigerator?”

“It reminds me that every good thing we dream about, hope for or try to create is likely to get smashed by the world.”

There was a long pause while Joe digested this. “That’s a little heavy,” he said finally.

She laughed. “I suppose it is. But the baby is also a sign of hope. When the angel announces to Joseph in a dream that a divine child will be born, he’s saying something new and hopeful will emerge in the life of his people.”

“It’s just that a few thousand babies have to be massacred first.” Joe made the gesture of someone having his throat slit.

“That does seem to be the way of the world,” Rachel said.

“But in the Jesus story, he’s finally victorious.”

“Yes. That represents the fulfillment of the promise.”

“Are you a Christian?” Joe asked.

“I don’t know how to answer that. I go the Catholic church and feel okay about most everything Father Glyphis says. But probably my beliefs wouldn’t seem very Christian to a lot of people. I guess I’m not sure what I really do believe.”

“Does Artemio go too?”

Rachel nodded. “Yes. I used to struggle with whether I should make him go, but it’s never been an issue. He just comes with me when I go. He seems to like it, even. I always hated church when I was little.”

“It’s hard to know what a child will like sometimes.”

“It is,” Rachel agreed. “And speaking of things that Temio likes, I’ve been meaning to tell you he loves giving you Spanish lessons.”

Joe’s face brightened. “He’s a good teacher. He insists we talk only Spanish, and is very patient with me.”

“He likes you a lot,” Rachel said. “Whenever he comes home from your lesson he always tells me the things you talk about, and makes fun of your accent. He loves the way the two of you can joke around about things; and he’s very happy to have the chance to earn the money.”

“It’s worth it to me. It’s good he’s kept his Spanish.”

“We still use it here at the house. Partly that’s habit I guess. That’s what we spoke when he was little. But also I use Spanish here because I want him to keep that piece of who he is.”

“I think that’s good.”

“Why is it you want to learn Spanish?”

“I don’t know exactly.” Joe tested his coffee to see whether it was still too hot to drink. “I think I’ve never been one hundred percent happy being an American.”

“Well,” she said. “I’ve never been ten percent happy being an American.” They both laughed.

“There are things I like about this country,” Joe said. “But I’ve always had the fantasy that some day I would go to live somewhere else, like you did.”

“And you think that might be a Spanish-speaking country?”

“Well, they’re the closest.”

“So would you be interested in learning more about the politics of the area?”

“Yes. I would.”

“Let me get you something.” Rachel went to her small living room, and began looking through the books crammed into shelves lining two of the walls. For the most part, she collected novels, but she also had a smattering of books on South American politics and on religious and spiritual themes. The room, like the rest of the trailer, was clean but cluttered and rather cramped. Despite the apparent disorder, she had no trouble finding what she wanted and soon returned with a book on South American politics by Noam Chomsky. She handed him the book. “Read this. Then maybe sometime when I feel up to it I’ll tell you about Temio’s father.”

At that moment the door flew open and Artemio burst into the room. He was shirtless and very dark from the sun. “Hey, Mom. Hi, Joe.” He went to Joe’s side in a couple of bounds, and gave him an enthusiastic hug. Dressed in blue jeans and sneakers, he was sweaty and dirty from his outdoor play. “I saw your car outside, so I knew you were here. What you up to?”

“Talking to your mom.”

“About me?”

“We’ve got better things to talk about than you, Temio,” his mother said.

“What’s better to talk about than me?” Artemio feigned indignation.

“At least I’ve brought my child up to be modest,” Rachel said.

“I’ve got to pee,” Artemio said, turning to leave.

“Why don’t you call up the Anton News and tell them?” his mother suggested. “They might want to do a story about it.”

Artemio giggled. “No time for that now,” he said. “I can’t wait.” He dashed down the narrow hall of the trailer.

“Modest in every respect,” Rachel said to Joe after Artemio slammed the bathroom door shut behind him.

“By the way, I want to ask you something before he gets back,” Joe said.

“Yes?”

“Would you and Artemio like to go with me on a camping trip next week?”

“What days?”

“Thursday and Friday.”

When Rachel paused to think, Joe felt a little embarrassed. It reminded him of when he was fourteen years old and asking a girl to a dance. He didn’t mean for it to sound that way. It wasn’t a date, exactly. His idea had been that they would be friends going on a canoe trip.

"I can't," she said finally. "Maybe another time. I've got to go to Boston. I'm talking to an editor. Looks like I might get one of my children's books published. At least there is this editor who likes the kind of thing I do."

"Ah, I wish you luck."

She paused again and said, "Maybe you could take Temio."

"Would he want to go?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Ask me what?" Artemio had just emerged from the bathroom.

"How do you know it was you we were talking about?" Rachel asked.

"Just do." He smiled smugly as he returned to the kitchen.

"Would you like to go on a camping trip with Joe next week?"

He looked at Joe. "Really?" Joe confirmed the offer with a nod. "That would be awesome," Artemio said. "What days?"

"Thursday and Friday," Joe said.

"I thought we were going to Boston, Mom."

"Well, I've got to go to Boston on business. But you don't have to come with me if you don't want to. We wouldn't have much time for visiting museums and that kind of thing."

"No aquarium?"

"Not this time."

"Can I bring a friend, Joe?"

"Who did you have in mind?"

"Michael Quint. You know him. He said he had you for science."

Joe looked at Rachel. She shrugged.

"I suppose so," Joe said, "as long as his mother says it's okay."

"No problem. He's got a foster mom that lets him do anything he wants."

"Do you have a snorkel mask?" Joe asked.

Artemio nodded his head yes.

"I'll buy him one," Rachel said.

Joe smiled at Artemio. "It's settled then. I've got an extra mask I can bring for Michael."

They hadn't been together five minutes when the bickering began. Why, Joe wondered, was it such a big deal who would get to "ride shotgun" on the way to the boat access? Artemio gave in and let Michael have his way, but he pouted during the forty-five-minute trip to the place where they were going to put in.

As Joe negotiated the rutted and treacherous jeep trail down to the access, the boys began arguing about who was to paddle in the stern in the boys' canoe.

"I'm stronger," Michael said.

"But I asked first," Artemio countered.

"I know more about steering. You'd just get us messed up."

"I know as much as you do."

"Not likely" said Michael.

"Can the arguing," Joe said. "You'll take turns."

"I get to go first," Artemio said.

"I've got an idea," Michael said. "I'll take the one-person canoe and you and Joe go in the big canoe."

"The one-person canoe is for me," Joe said.

"Why?" Michael asked.

"I want you two to paddle the large one. It will teach you teamwork."

"We already know team work," Michael said.

Joe sighed. "I could use a little help getting things down to the canoe."

Listlessly the boys followed Joe's instructions to carry this pack, or hand him that sleeping bag. But they took little initiative themselves.

"Michael's letting me do all the work," Artemio said.

Joe decided it was easier to do most of the work himself.

The boys ultimately came to an agreement that one would have the stern on the way out and the other on the way back. Even then they had to flip a coin to see who went first. Artemio won the stern position on the way to the island.

As they started paddling across the lake, the sun was still low. A gentle mist was rising off the lake. Joe felt it was sad that such a perfect day was being lost on the two boys.

"Stop trying to steer from the bow," Artemio shouted.

"I've got to because you can't steer right."

“Let him try,” Joe said. “It’s the person in the stern who does the steering.”

“Okay, I’ll let him try.” Michael rolled his eyes and began to paddle forward without making any accommodation at all to the needs of the moment. When they ended up stranded on top of a rock that was just barely submerged beneath the surface, Artemio asked Michael why he hadn’t said anything about the rock, or tried to push them off to one side before hitting it.

Michael cocked his head to one side. “You’re the one who is supposed to be steering.”

“But the bow-person is supposed to watch for rocks.”

“Joe said I was only supposed to supply power, not have anything to do with steering.”

“I didn’t mean you shouldn’t use common sense,” Joe said.

“So am I supposed to steer or not?” Michael asked.

Joe felt it might help to drown the boy. Instead he patiently explained the roles of each of the paddlers, and asked them to try to become more of a team. Michael took on the air of one who has been unfairly maligned for the rest of the trip to the island. Artemio pouted. Joe hoped things would go better when they reached their camp site.

It was mid morning when they arrived at the island. After unloading the canoes, the boys collapsed into the chaos of gear on the ground and complained of exhaustion.

“Can we go skinny-dipping like we did on the scout trip?” Artemio asked.

Eyes wide with surprise, Michael looked at Joe. “Did you let them skinny dip?”

Joe glared at Artemio. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to spread it around.”

“Sorry,” Artemio said. “I won’t tell anybody else.”

“Awesome,” Michael said.

Artemio was a little chagrined from being rebuffed by Joe, yet he persisted. “But, can we do it?”

Joe shrugged. “On weekdays hardly anyone comes by. I don’t see how it could hurt anything.”

The boys were soon out of their clothes, but it was a cool morning and they stood on the beach shivering while they tried to work up the nerve to dive in.

Joe opened a small lawn chair — the one luxury he always brought camping, and set it on the beach. Then he took out a beer from the cooler and sat back.

“Aren’t you coming in,” Artemio asked.

“It’s still too chilly for me,” he said. But he knew it wasn’t just the coolness in the air. He was afraid of what people might think if word continued to get around about his being naked in the woods with groups of boys. He also was a bit surprised to discover the growing intensity of some of his own feelings surrounding the experiences — surprised, and a little distressed at how much he enjoyed it.

“Last one in is a wimp,” Michael said, and the boys raced down to the water and dove in.

They swam for about twenty minutes before deciding to take a break. Michael went to catch frogs. Artemio flopped down on his back on the sand beside Joe’s chair. Joe looked down at his slender brown body and at the receptive dark eyes staring back at him. “I’m glad your mother said you could come,” he said.

“She likes you. Said it would be good for me to spend time with you.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Did you want to...come on the trip?” He had almost said, ‘spend time with me?’

“Of course.”

“What happened to your father, Temio?” Joe asked. “Your mother told me that he died.”

There was a long pause

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Joe said. “I don’t want to get into your business.”

Artemio sat up. “It’s okay. My dad was one of the desaparacidos.”

“The desaparacidos?”

“The dissappeared ones. See, in my country sometimes people would just disappear. We never knew what happened to them, exactly — just that one of the death squads got them. Sometimes their bodies might show up later on, thrown on a garbage dump — sometimes not. So we were just supposed to forget them, see?”

“And you can’t forget.”

“How can I forget my dad?”

Joe knelt down beside him and put his arms around him. “I’m sorry,” he said. He could feel Artemio’s body relax some under his touch.

Artemio looked up. “Michael’s going to come back and see me crying.”

“So what? You’ve got something to cry about.”

“He’d call me a sissy.”

“Well, okay. Let’s go for a swim then. Maybe I would like to skinny-dip after all. It’s warmed up a little.”

Artemio brightened. “Really? It’s fun.”

Joe slipped out of his shirt and shorts and went with Artemio to the water. When they were up to their knees he scooped up a little water and washed off Artemio’s smudged and puffy face.

“I’ll bet I can beat you to the rock,” Artemio said, indicating a boulder about thirty yards out in the lake. They dove in and started swimming furiously toward it. When he saw he might win, Joe slowed down a little and they both arrived at the same time.

“I win,” Artemio shouted.

“No way. This is my second time being here. The first time I was so far ahead I dove back in to come back and see what was keeping you.”

They both laughed, and climbed up on the rock together.

Michael had returned from his frog hunting just in time to see them racing to the rock. He was already in the water, swimming out to them.

When they tired of playing in the water Joe suggested they get dressed, set up camp, and prepare for lunch. Included in this was the always unpopular task of gathering and sawing fire wood. Much to Joe’s surprise, however, there was no arguing about where to put the tent, who should do what job, who wasn’t doing his share, etc.. Swimming together seemed to have resolved the tensions. Decisions came easily, and the work was done quickly. Soon the hamburgers for lunch were broiling on a wire mesh grill over the open fire, within a neatly laid-out campsite. Even doing the dishes was accomplished without a struggle.

After cleanup they went swimming again. This time they decided to put on their snorkel masks and explore the rock formations just off shore. Joe watched the boys gliding between and around the submerged boulders while the sunlight, filtered by the water, rippled in irregular patterns on their naked bodies.

Being naked felt so good Joe couldn’t bring himself to put his clothes back on when they emerged from the water, and without any discussion of the matter the boys followed his lead. After a surprisingly short period of time it felt natural to all of them to be naked. The boys didn’t even want to put on T-shirts when they decided to paddle over to a nearby stream to see if they could get through it to the next lake.

“Then you’ve got to use sun-block,” Joe insisted.

“It’s greasy,” Artemio said. “I’m dark enough so I don’t need it.”

“I read that even black people can get sunburned,” Joe said. “I just takes longer.”

“Well, I’m half Indian, you know. Indians never had to wear sun-block. And they mostly ran around naked.”

“Maybe they didn’t have to contend with the ozone hole.”

“I’m tough. I can even handle the ozone hole.”

Finally, Joe came up with his most convincing argument: He told Artemio he wasn’t going to take him along unless he either put on a T-shirt and used sun-block. Artemio allowed himself to be dowsed with a liberal dose of suntan lotion.

The exploration of the stream was strenuous but productive. It led to the small lake shown on Joe’s topographical map. It was a lake without a single camp on it, and without a regular road coming into it. If one ignored the signs of previous woods work on the adjacent hillsides, it was possible to imagine oneself in primordial times, when humanity lived as a part of the natural order rather than encapsulated against and dominant over it. The eagles, the loons and the beaver they spotted spoke to them of the majesty and beauty of this order. The rotting carcass of a great snapping turtle, being eaten by maggots, reminded them of its shadow side.

“This is why human beings have tried to separate themselves from nature,” Joe said to them as they stood on the beach staring down at the turtle. Michael was poking at it with a stick.

“Because we’re afraid of turtles?” Artemio asked with a grin.

“Because we’re afraid of death,” Joe said.

“People die in cities too,” Michael said.

“True,” Joe said. “But we want to get every bit of control over death we can.”

By the time they were sitting around their camp fire after supper, dressed in shorts and sweat shirts for protection against the cool of the evening, they were a tired but contented group. They had been telling ghost stories. Michael had just told one that included the devil.

“Do you think the devil is real,” Joe asked.

Michael blew out his marshmallow, which had become a torch, and gingerly sucked the charcoal crust into his mouth. “Yes .The devil is real. But he’s not how people think.”

“What’s he like?”

“The devil gives you what you want, and he isn’t mean to people who love him.”

Joe was startled. He had frequently questioned children about their beliefs regarding ghosts, God, the devil, dreams, night fears, life after death, UFOs and the like. It was a kind of avocation for him. But he had never heard a child talk quite this way before. "Then you see the devil as being almost like some people say God is."

"The devil is better than God," Michael said with conviction, "because the devil lets you have what you want."

Artemio was scandalized. "Who told you the devil is better than God? That's a lie. The devil hurts people and burns them in fire after they die."

"It's God who sends people to hell," Michael said.

"Well, the devil makes them want to go there."

"Do you believe in a fiery hell that God sends some people to after they die?" Joe asked Artemio.

"Yes...no...I don't know. Mom says maybe hell is just what people create here on earth by being so mean and breaking all of God's rules. But some kids at church say they've seen photographs of hell."

"See, you don't even know what you do believe," Michael said.

Artemio glared at him. "I know the devil isn't better than God. That's stupid."

"One thing that makes you feel the devil is better than God is that he lets you have what you want." Joe directed this observation to Michael. "Is there anything else that makes you think the devil is better?"

"God throws you away when you do something bad. The devil doesn't."

"He accepts you?"

Michael nodded.

"These are unusual ideas about the devil," Joe said. "Has anyone talked with you about them?"

"Yes. I heard. . ." He paused, and then corrected himself. "No. I just thought of these things myself."

Well, they're stupid ideas, I think," Artemio said. "What do you say, Joe? Aren't they stupid ideas?"

"I don't know if I understand it just as Michael does," Joe said. "But I don't like to call anybody's ideas stupid if it's what they really think."

“You just don’t want to say he’s stupid,” Artemio said. “Maybe he’s smart, but he has a stupid idea.”

“I think it’s getting late,” Joe said. “I’m ready for some sleep.”

“I itch.” Artemio scratched at his back.

“I imagine your skin is dried out from the sun,” Joe said.

“What can I do?”

“I’ve got some skin lotion I could rub on you,” Joe said.

“I itch too,” Michael said.

“There’s plenty of lotion for everybody.”

Inside the tent a small residue of warmth left from the day’s heat remained. Artemio took off his sweatshirt and lay down on his sleeping bag. Then as if it were an afterthought, he added, “Should I take my pants off too?”

Joe shrugged. “That depends on whether your butt also itches, or whether you just itch down to your waist.”

“My butt itches too.” Artemio giggled, slipped out of his shorts, and arranged himself face down in front of Joe. Joe rubbed the lotion on his shoulders, his back, his buttocks, and the backs of his legs. When he finished, Artemio turned over and rubbed the lotion on his own front on the places that seemed a bit burned.

When it was his turn, Michael also opted to remove all his clothes. As Joe began the massage, he could feel tremendous tension in the boy’s body. He was like a coiled spring that was wound too tight. But as Joe rubbed his shoulders and back he could feel the tension let up in Michael’s body. He seemed almost like a baby. Then, just for a second, the image of him holding Michael on his lap and feeding him from a bottle flashed into his mind. Weird, he thought.

Michael yawned. “We want to sleep out under the stars.”

“It’s okay with me if you two want to do that,” Joe said. “But I don’t think I want to — too many mosquitoes out there.”

When the rubdowns were finished, the boys gathered up their sleeping bags and went to find a comfortable place under the stars and near the lake.

After they left, Joe undressed and crawled into his sleeping bag. He found himself lying awake thinking about the day’s events long after the boys’ departure. He was faintly disappointed they had decided to sleep under the stars. He felt lonely.

The things Michael had said about the devil were disturbing. In Michael's mind the devil had become a counterculture god, Joe reflected. He wasn't the personification of evil anymore, but was the one who legitimized our basic needs, accepted us with all our shortcomings, and protected us from the tortures of the self-righteous God of the churches. It was the devil's role to save us from the God of the TV evangelist who upheld impossible standards for how we should be, and excluded us from the circle of acceptable humanity when we failed. He wondered where Michael got those ideas. Was it from Norman McLain? Joe wanted to meet this curious young man. Was Norman really a part of some sort of satanic cult? If so, what did that mean — killing babies, drugs, sex orgies, weird rituals in graveyards, stealing bodies, and raping children? Was it just the confused and somewhat primitive religion of society's rejects and malcontents, who were seeking the acceptance and validation the world of respectability withheld from them? What really was out there? Michael had almost told him something about it, but then caught himself. Who or what was he protecting? All these questions orbited around the even more basic question that had been raised in his mind by Michael's ideas: What was good and what was evil? How incredibly simple are the questions that baffle us most.

Joe was startled out of his contemplations by a noise at the door of his tent. It was Artemio. Sleeping bag in hand, and wearing only his T-shirt, he was staring into the tent.

"I'm scared," he said.

"Of what?"

Artemio gestured vaguely toward the darkness.

"I see," said Joe. "Of everything out there."

Artemio grinned and nodded. "Michael's asleep, but I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about the ghost stories and about hell."

"Well, come on in."

"Can I crawl in with you?"

"Too cramped," Joe said. "But if we each open our sleeping bags all the way we can use one under us and one for a cover."

When the adjustments were made, Artemio snuggled up against Joe and sighed with relief. "Michael wanted us to sleep out so we could skinny-dip in the moon light without telling you," he said. "I didn't want to, 'cause I know how strong you feel about our going in the water without you there. But I didn't want to tattle either."

“You haven’t gone swimming yet. Your hair is dry.”

“Michael went to sleep. But if he wakes up he’ll want to go.”

“Why don’t you just make enough noise to wake me up, or even just tell him you want me to go too? That way he can’t call you a sissy, but you won’t have to break the rule about swimming unsupervised.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

“I really would be upset if you broke the swimming rule.”

“Don’t tell Michael I told you.”

“Hey, I’m cool.” Joe gave him a little squeeze.

“Can you give me a back scratch again?” Artemio asked.

“Sure.” Joe sat up and pulled the sleeping bag back. Artemio squirmed out of his T-shirt and stretched out on his stomach. Joe began the massage with his shoulders and upper back and worked down. As he massaged the child’s buttocks and legs he felt himself becoming aroused, yet he could see nothing wrong with this so long as the boy was comfortable. “Is this okay with you?” he asked.

“It feels good,” Artemio said, so Joe continued right on down to his feet.

Then Artemio turned over onto his back. “You can do the front now.”

“I guess we’ve got to toast the bread on both sides, eh?”

Artemio giggled. “I’m already nice and brown. Do you think brown is nice?”

“Beautiful.” As Joe began to stroke the boy’s chest he looked down and saw Artemio had a very firm erection.

Artemio must have noticed him looking. “Sometimes my thing gets that way.” It was almost an apology.

“That’s okay. Mine does too. It happens to everybody. It’s called an erection.”

“The guys call it a hard-on,” Artemio said.

“Right.”

They fell silent. Joe massaged his stomach and thighs. Then, as Artemio didn’t seem to mind being touched there, he took hold of the boy’s penis and gently rubbed it too.”

“I won’t touch you there if you don’t want me too,” he said.

“That’s okay. That feels good too.”

Artemio allowed himself to be massaged gently around his genitals for a minute and then asked, “Do you have a hard-on too, Joe?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see it?”

“I guess so.”

Artemio sat up and looked down at Joe. “It’s bigger than mine.”

“When you get older it gets bigger,” Joe said. “Yours hasn’t begun to change yet, but it’s fine just as it is.”

“Can I touch yours?” Artemio asked.

Joe was surprised he might want to do so, but said it was okay. At first Artemio touched his penis very gingerly, as though he were afraid it might break. The peculiar combination of diffidence, reverence almost, and fascination, that he sensed in Artemio’s attitude made Joe think of how a stone-age man might approach a totem or a sacred place. It was as though Artemio felt his adult, erect penis possessed manna — possessed a power that was to be desired, and yet at the same time was fearful, and dangerous. When Artemio seemed confident it wasn’t going to hurt him, he began to examine it in an almost scientific manner, testing its firmness and size.

Although Artemio wasn’t especially trying to stimulate him, the process of being examined was very exciting, and Joe came to an orgasm. Artemio was at first a little startled, and then interested. “That’s the seed,” he said.

“That’s right.” Joe pulled an old T-shirt out of his pack to clean himself up with. “I hope I didn’t get any on you.”

“When I do it, nothing comes out.”

“When you get bigger it will. Then you can make a baby. But you won’t want to until you’re big, and married.”

“I know that.”

“You say when you do it nothing comes out. How do you do it?”

“I just rub it like so.” Artemio demonstrated how he masturbated. “And pretty soon that tickle happens.” He continued until it was clear from the way he flushed that he too achieved the intended results.

Joe was tired and wanted to lie down. When he pulled the top sleeping bag back over the two of them, Artemio once again snuggled up close. It was clear what had happened hadn't diminish the boy's attachment to him.

"Did you ever do these things with anybody else?" Joe asked.

"Not anybody big, like you."

"With other kids, though?"

"A couple of times."

"Like with Michael?"

"Michael wants to do things I don't like."

"I see. Did you ever talk with anybody about all this?"

"Well, I told Father Glyphis I played with myself sometimes. It was in confession. I thought it was a sin."

"What did he say?"

"He said `everybody does it. Don't worry about it.'"

"He said that?"

"Yep."

Joe was surprised. But what did he know about what priests really did say to boys in confessional, or how many boys were scrupulous enough to talk with them about masturbating? Still, there were probably limits as to how tolerant any priest would be.

"I think it would be better if you didn't mention to Father Glyphis what we did," Joe said.

"I won't tell anybody about it," Artemio said.

"Do you talk about things like this with your counselor?"

"She's a woman. I don't think I could talk with her about it."

They both fell silent. In the stillness they could hear the frogs croaking along the shore and the loons wailing out in the lake. The moon had risen and its light shone into the tent through the mosquito netting at the doorway.

Joe felt peaceful and fulfilled, more so than at any time since his separation from Karen. Yet he couldn't entirely escape from an uneasiness that chafed at his soul. In part it was worry that others might find out. He didn't even want to imagine the possible consequences of that. In part it was his own conscience struggling with the rightness or wrongness of what had happened. Yet the boy had liked it — invited it, really. How damaging could such a thing be to the child?

Certainly Artemio didn't appear to be injured as he lay there peacefully snuggled up against him, breathing rhythmically. At the moment, in any case, it seemed worth it, regardless of the possible consequences.

He was floating tranquilly in the borderland between waking and sleeping when suddenly he felt the sleeping bag yanked off him. A light flashed in his eyes.

"Hey, what are you fags doing here?" someone asked.

Startled out of his sleep, Artemio sat up and shouted, "No, don't."

"What the hell are you doing?" Joe said.

"Scared you, didn't I," Michael said. "I'll bet you thought it was the fag police."

"We're not fags," Artemio said. "You're the fag."

"That's not even the right word," Joe said. He wanted to protest against the use of the offensive term 'fag.' But it was more than that. "Words ..." he continued. "It's different than the words." Then as he became more awake he realized all this would make no sense to the children. He couldn't even make sense of it himself. "Nobody's a fag," he finally said.

"You sure looked like a couple of fags, all curled up together like that," Michael said.

Joe shook his head. "Anyhow, why did you wake us up like this?"

"Temio left me out there all by myself. I came to get him."

"Why don't you just bring your sleeping bag in here and sleep with us?" Joe asked.

"Temio and I wanted to sleep outside."

They were at an impasse for a moment. Then Artemio said, "Why don't we go for a swim? Then I'll sleep out with you."

Michael looked at Joe. "I don't think he'd let us swim in the middle of the night."

"I'll make a deal with you," Joe said. "Suppose I come swimming with you for just a little while? Then you agree that everybody will go to bed and stay there until morning so I can get some sleep."

"It's a deal," Michael said.

The water was warmer than the air, and surprisingly easy to enter. The mystery of the night had its effect even on the boys, and all three were quiet as they swam in the moonlit lake. Joe was tired, and the boys fearful of what might be lurking in the shadows and beneath the dark surface of the water, so they didn't stay long. Soon Joe was back in the tent and the boys were lying in their sleeping bags, side by side, near the shore.

“Did he do you?” Michael asked.

““What do you mean?”

“I mean did he stick his dick in your butt?”

“You’re always thinking about that,” Artemio said. “We didn’t do anything.”

“I don’t believe you. Did he want you to suck his thing?”

“No.”

“How come you didn’t even have your shirt on if you didn’t do anything?”

“I let him rub me.”

“Did he rub your dick too?”

Artemio was silent. “No,” he said, finally.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, maybe,” Artemio said. “Just a little.”

“I knew it,” Michael said with a hint of triumph in his voice.

“I want to sleep,” Artemio said.

CHAPTER III

Relying on recovered memories from people in therapy for the backbone of her presentation, Marion Bierce painted the picture of a worldwide network of Satanists who were engaged in the kidnapping and breeding of children for use in their ghastly rituals. Graphic and horrifying scenes of infants and children being tortured, raped and mutilated overwhelmed the critical faculties of most of the participants in the workshop. Many of the children, we were told, were eventually sacrificed on altars. Survivors were damaged for life, and frequently developed multiple personalities as a defensive response to the overwhelming trauma they experienced. We were implored to believe the victims.

I was unsure what I believed about the overall picture of Satanic Cults that was presented in this workshop. Learning about Satanic Cults, however, was only one of the agendas I came with. Marion Bierce was the head of Protective Services for the branch of the Department of Human Services that was assigned to Anton. Several of my parishioners had encountered her in one context or another, and I wanted to know more about her. In this respect I was well rewarded for my efforts.

Marion Bierce is a tall and rather handsome woman with high cheek bones, probing eyes, and gray hair. During the workshop she manifested a commanding presence. People listened, and they squirmed when she looked at them. What surprised me was the ease with which Marion shared the most intimate secrets of her life. She described in detail to the entire roomful of people how, when she was nine, her stepfather, George Groff, first sexually abused her. It was shortly after her mother started on the evening shift. Always having wished for a father, she said she had at first responded eagerly to her stepfather's demonstrations of affection. Then, when things went too far, he told her it was important never to let her mother know. "It would really devastate her," he said. By the time she desperately needed to tell, it was too late. They were coconspirators, equally sharing the guilt.

It was not until she was seeing a therapist as an adult that Marion was able to remember the full extent of her abuse. Her therapist emphasized that the choice to engage in sexual intercourse was solely George's responsibility, and she strongly urged Marion to prosecute him. This was understood as a crucial part of her therapy, as well as a means of bringing the guilty to justice. In response to her therapist's encouragement, Marion did come forth with allegations, but they did not lead to a conviction. George was active in the Episcopal church, a leader in town politics and an officer in the Lion's club. To believe her claims would have shaken the community's image of itself. It was Marion's firm conviction that in a small town, image always took precedence over truth. It was in fact this hypocrisy that enraged her more than anything else — this unwillingness of a community to look at its own shadow side — this propensity for excusing the inexcusable rather than face uncomfortable facts.

Given this background, her readiness to "believe the victims," as well as her willingness to go to almost any length to catch and prosecute the perpetrators, was understandable. Her position as director of the Child Protective unit of Human Services gave her ample opportunity to pursue her passion. She had the reputation for being an excellent investigator and a hard-line advocate for the prompt and severe punishment of offenders. Although she was sure that a well-orchestrated network of satanic groups operated in the state, as of yet she had been unable to uncover more than a few mentally unstable adolescent dabblers in the occult arts.

As soon as she was finished with her client, Ann Pinkham invited Marion Bierce to come in. Ann's office was tastefully decorated, and thoughtfully arranged. Two comfortable chairs faced each other at a distance that was intimate, yet allowed each person to feel that she had her own personal space. Ann's informal manner of dress, blue jeans and a shirt with a Native American design, gave a feeling of softness and vulnerability which was reinforced by her slight build. Ann was a social worker who had only recently received her master's degree. Her present position with the Anton branch of Four Counties Mental Health Services was her first job as a child therapist. Her lack of experience was perhaps offset by the unaffected, goodhearted concern she demonstrated for her clients.

Although Ann had more formal education, she felt intimidated by the formidable middle-aged woman facing her. At the same time Ann rather liked Marion. This was a woman who would be straight with you. Perhaps there was something to learn from her.

“I must tell you at the outset that I don’t really have anything very definite on either of the boys I called you about,” Ann said.

“The reporting law doesn’t say you’re to have proof,” Marion said. “You’re to report when you simply have *reason to suspect* that some form of physical or sexual abuse has taken place. I presume there was something about the situations that made you uneasy or you wouldn’t have called me.”

Ann nodded. “I guess it’s what you call ‘red flags.’ I went to the workshop you co-led on sexual and ritual abuse.”

“Yes, I remember seeing you there.”

“I’ve studied some of your handouts. Michael has virtually all the characteristics you describe for children involved in ritual abuse. Yet he’s never told me anything definite.”

Marion nodded. “Yes. The Department suspects he may have been ritually abused. That’s one of the main reasons he was referred to you for therapy. As you know, children of this kind are taught not to talk — taught very well.”

“He is secretive, but he does express himself through his artwork.” Ann pulled out a manila folder full of drawings on scraps of notebook paper. The devils, monsters, slinky women, and war-scenes done in a surreal style showed more sophistication than would be expected from an average twelve-year-old. “He’s fairly talented, actually.”

Marion glanced through the pictures. “Notice some of the sexual themes in the drawings of the woman?” She pointed to one of the pictures. “Does he tell you anything at all?”

“Mostly about his boredom. He doesn’t like his foster mom very much. Says she lets him do what he wants, which he does like. But from his description she seems a little aloof.”

“She has her strengths and weaknesses as a foster parent,” Marion said. “But she will keep him, which is more than four previous placements were willing to do. This kid doesn’t ingratiate himself to foster parents.”

“He is a little difficult to warm up to,” Ann said. “I think he hates women.”

“Probably does. Anything else of interest that he talks about?”

“He does talk sometimes about seeing a twenty-year-old who lives out in the woods, a guy by the name of Norman McLain.”

“Interesting.”

“Why?”

“We know about Norman. We suspect he’s connected with a pornography network.”

“Really?”

“Can’t prove anything. But your information is very helpful. It’s by tracing out these kinds of connections that a picture gradually begins to emerge.”

“I see.”

“So tell me about this Artemio Martinez.”

“What you say about patterns might fit here, too. I was seeing both boys independently. I was surprised to find out they knew each other.”

Marion smiled. “That doesn’t surprise me. Kids with problems gravitate to each other. Naturally it’s these same kids that get referred to you.”

“I suppose that’s right. I first found out about the friendship when Michael told me he had gone on an overnight camping trip with Artemio and a friend of his.”

“Who is this friend of Artemio’s?”

“A man named Joe Michaud.”

Marion wrote the name down. “What do you know about him?”

“He’s a teacher at the junior high. He seems respected in town. He’s a scout leader.”

“I see. Do you know anything about his personal life?”

“He’s separated from his wife — lives alone in a motel room. He visits Artemio’s Mom — probably has a relationship with her.”

“It could be that Artemio is the one he’s interested in,” Marion said.

Ann shrugged. “I don’t know. I met him once at a meeting at the school. He seems like a pretty nice guy.”

“It’s the nice guys you have to watch out for.”

“But at this point we don’t know anything,” Ann said.

Marion looked at her notes. “Yes. I didn’t mean for it to sound like I was accusing him. At this point we don’t know.”

Joe fidgeted uncomfortably in the easy chair and took another sip from the bourbon and coke I had prepared for him. “There’s something I want to talk with you about, Demetri.”

I nodded and settled into my chair opposite him.

Joe glanced around my study. His eyes rested for a minute on the Leonardo da Vinci print, and he stared at the naked baby Jesus sitting in his mother's lap. "It's a bit difficult."

"I'm a priest," I said. "You aren't likely to tell me anything I haven't heard."

He smiled. "I guess you hear all kinds of things in the confessional."

"Is what you want to talk about, like a confession?"

"You might think of it that way. If I told you some things maybe you could treat it like a confession — you know, with confidentiality and everything."

"A confession is when somebody confesses. If the devil himself came and confessed to me his plans for the overthrow of heaven, I would feel honor bound to hold it in confidence."

"Even if he were a Protestant?" Joe asked.

I laughed. "Well, that might throw a different light on the subject."

Joe fell silent. I allowed the silence to continue for a minute, and then tried to encourage him. "As your friend, and if you like, as your priest, I can listen."

"I had a dream, about some boys, Demetri. They were in bed with me — a dark one and a light one. They played with me." He paused. "Sexually, I mean." He studied my face. I smiled and nodded, hoping to convey simply an open receptivity. He continued. "One of them said, 'we can help you Joe.'" He waited as though he had asked a question and was expecting an answer.

"You are worried, then, about this dream?" I asked.

"It's confusing to me."

"Of course. Yet it's only a dream. If they put us in prison for our dreams there would hardly be anybody on the outside."

Joe sat forward in his chair. "Yes. What I told you is only a dream. But what I am concerned with is more than dreams."

"Yes?"

"Sometimes when I'm camping with boys I let them skinny-dip."

"That's hardly a sin."

"I find them very beautiful."

"I'm sure they are."

"Sometimes I feel. . . aroused."

I shrugged. "Feelings aren't sins either."

Joe may have felt that I wasn't understanding. "These feelings are at least partly. . . sexual." This last word, uttered with a certain disdain, stood in isolation, as though Joe were trying to distance himself from it.

"And that doesn't seem right to you," I said.

"It feels. . . very good in one way . . . even innocent. . ."

"Very good in one way," I repeated. "And yet. . .?"

"And yet I think these feelings must be abnormal. I'd never thought of myself as homosexual, or as a pedophile, but I don't know what to make of what's happening. Maybe it's some sort of crazy reaction to my separation."

I interrupted with a wave of my hand. "Feelings are feelings. What's to be gained by attaching harsh labels to them?"

"But I need to understand. . ." Joe persisted.

"Understanding and labeling are two different things. We can talk about that. But first let me ask you something you may or may not wish to answer."

I was afraid of offending him, of course, but it seemed to me that there was something more than dreams and feelings bothering him. And I felt if I were going to help, I needed the whole story.

"Ask," he said.

"Have these feelings ever led you to *do* something you felt ashamed of — something that seemed wrong?"

Joe slumped in his chair, and took another sip of his drink. This time, I decided to wait.

"Once," he said finally.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He did — and he didn't. However, his need to talk the thing out, and to make some sense of his experience, proved to be the stronger side of his ambivalence, so he set aside his embarrassment and told me in some detail exactly what had happened during his camping trip with Artemio and Michael. Driven in part by his guilt and his need for punishment he took pains not to spare himself by skimming over the embarrassing details.

When he was finished, I was slow to break the silence. "Is that all?" I asked finally.

"Isn't it enough?"

I shrugged. "I could use another drink," I said. "And you?"

He nodded, and I took time out to refresh our drinks.

“Socrates tells us that Eros is halfway between human and divine,” I said as I settled back into my chair, fortified with a bit of Jack Daniels and coke.

Joe stared at me blankly. “Does that connect?”

I smiled. “Be patient. You’ll see the connection in a minute. Socrates says Eros is the desire for the Good, for beauty, for the immortal — for God, if you will. Some would say it’s the desire to become God, or to return to God. Others would have it that Eros is the very word of God placed within our souls, urging us to seek or to become new expressions of His Love.”

Joe waved me to a stop. “You’re going to fast,” he said. “I’m not sure I follow all this.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“I’m interested. Just slow down.”

I laughed. “Okay. Back to Socrates. Eros is the desire for the Divine Good. If Eros had that which it desired, it would already be divine. Being the desire for something that is absent, however, it is less than complete, and therefore less than divine. Yet it draws us out of ourselves and directs us toward that which is divine. Therefore it is more than human. In the Symposium he calls it a ‘demon,’ or as it, might better be translated, a ‘spirit.’”

“I’ve heard of the Symposium, but never read it.”

“It may be Plato’s most entertaining dialogue. The setting is a drinking party in ancient Athens. The dialogue takes the form of a conversation about the nature of love. For the most part the kind of love they’re talking about is love between a man and a boy. I guess that makes it particularly relevant right now, but I think the same idea would apply to any kind of love.”

“He’s talking about sexual love, then?”

“Yes and no. Certainly what we would think of as sexual energy is an aspect of this. The experience he’s talking about is one of being ‘in love,’ however, and not just a state of sexual arousal that happens to find an object. Eros manifests itself in the world as a state of being in-love-with-another. When it becomes simply sexual desire seeking discharge on any other who can be found, something has already gone wrong.”

“So is he saying that love between men and boys is a good thing?”

“That depends. In Phaedrus he says that whether love between men and boys leads both parties to something higher, or tends to drag them both down, depends on the kind of discipline and control that’s exercised.”

“You’re talking about whether the two actually engage in some kind of sex, I take it.”

“That oversimplifies it. One would have to look at the whole relationship. In general, Socrates clearly feels that a love relationship that’s never permitted to be expressed in an explicitly sexual manner is the most direct and effective route to heavenly bliss. However, he goes on to say that if sometimes the lover and the beloved allow their feelings physical expression, but the relationship is mainly about higher and more noble things, it’s still helpful to both. But if the relationship is based purely on seeking sexual pleasure it’s destructive to both.”

“Supposing Socrates is right, where does that leave me?”

“You’re asking what this says about your relationship with Artemio?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. This is all new to me.”

“Do you love Artemio?”

His eyes grew wide and he looked at me as though I had said something astonishing. He paused. Then he said “Yes. I really do. I think. . . I think I’m in love with Artemio.” He would probably never have put it this way without my prompting, but I was sure that those words, more than any others, would accurately name and clarify his experience.

“Does that feel okay to you?”

“Not really. Well, yes. . . and. . . no.”

“How ‘yes’ and ‘no?’”

“Loving him feels good. It feels like something new and good growing in me. It feels alive. Yet the sexual thing. . .”

“What sexual ‘thing’?”

“The sexual feelings. . . you know.”

“They aren’t okay?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They aren’t . . . normal.”

“Normal?”

“You know. It means I’m a pedophile.”

“No, I don’t know. It sounds like you’re calling yourself names again rather than trying to understand. I really don’t know what *normal* is.”

“Well, okay. So we could get into a big philosophical conversation about what that word means, but almost everybody thinks that doing sexual things to boys is no good.”

“Doing sexual things, and having feelings are not the same.”

“You’re saying that it’s okay to have dirty thoughts and feelings if you don’t act them out.”

“No, I am not saying that. You’re saying that. The people you’re afraid of are saying that, and worse. They’re saying that it’s sick, or evil, or perverse, just to have the feelings. And to ever act on those feelings makes you an unspeakable creep.”

“If you aren’t saying that, what are you saying?”

“That the love you feel for Artemio, even the part that feels sexual, is good. One could even call it “wholesome.” It’s potentially the most creative and healing energy in your life right now, and in Artemio’s life.”

“And what about what I did?”

“The sexual thing?” I said, mimicking the disdainful manner in which he had previously uttered this phrase.

He allowed himself a faint smile. “Yes, the ‘sexual thing.’”

“In my mind we’re into a gray area here. All things considered, though, letting it become explicitly sexual will tend to create problems.”

“So what do I do now?”

“You need to stop hating yourself, for starters.”

“But what if I’ve damaged him?”

“Don’t be silly.”

“But that’s what everybody seems to think.”

“Your relationship is helpful to him.”

“Yet the actual sex is not.”

“I’m not certain about that. I think Socrates may have been wrong on this one point.”

“Which is?”

“The issue of whether a love relationship between a man and a boy leads to higher things may not depend, as Socrates would have it, mainly on whether it’s expressed sexually. Socrates had an unfortunate prejudice against physical life.”

“On what then would it depend?”

“On whether the man puts the child’s needs first, I think. Whether or not there’s anything intrinsically wrong with such a relationship becoming overtly sexual is a difficult point. But it may be academic. In our society it creates problems for everybody.”

For some minutes neither spoke. Finally Joe asked, “Don’t priests give people penance when they’ve sinned?”

“I’m not sure you have sinned.”

“I feel like I have.”

“You want penance, then.”

“Isn’t it what should happen?”

“Okay. Let me think.” I had to do some quick consultation with my own inner “demon” about his request. Shortly an answer came that satisfied me. “Did you ever read “The Little Prince,” I asked.

Joe nodded.

“Do you remember where the fox tells the Little Prince that you have responsibility for what you have tamed?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you have tamed Artemio.”

“Yes. I guess you could put it that way.”

“So your penance is to assume responsibility for him.”

“How do you mean?”

“Think about what Artemio needs, and stop worrying so much about your own purity. That will take care of itself.”

“What do you think Artemio needs?”

“He needs a man who will love him for one thing.”

“I can see that.”

“If you let yourself be that man, you’ll be able to see what his other needs are.”

Joe, Artemio and Rachel sat at their table in Governor's, eating banana splits. They were on their way back from the presentation of "Columbus" by the Bread and Puppet Theater at the University of Maine. Joe had invited them to participate in the outdoor pageant that enlisted local people to dress up and act the parts of life-sized puppets. Ostensibly a two hundred year celebration of Columbus' discovery of the New World, the pageant was political in nature, and very critical of Western Civilization's imperialistic and anti-ecological tendencies. Rachel had been unable to be a participant due to other commitments that made it impossible to come to the rehearsals. She had permitted Artemio to go with Joe, however. The theater group itself held an Saturday evening indoor presentation which Joe attended with both Artemio and his mother. The pageant Joe and Artemio participated in was held the following afternoon. Rachel had come to watch.

"Well, what did you think of my debut into acting?" Joe asked.

"I'm sure you were excellent," she said. "But to be honest I couldn't tell who you were."

"We were a Caribou," Artemio said.

"You told me that. But which one?"

"The fourth one in the line."

"Ah, I thought that one had something very special about it."

"Joe was the rear end." Artemio giggled.

"Some people might think that it lacks dignity to begin one's acting career as the ass end of a Caribou," Joe said.

Rachel laughed. "I don't know whether it's a compliment to say you made a very good Caribou's ass."

"Actually, the part demands a great deal of sensitivity."

"It was hot under those gunny sacks," Artemio said. "It wasn't as easy being a Caribou as you might think."

"The main problem for me was that I never did get to actually see the performance," Joe said. "You can't see much from the inside of one of those puppets."

"It was hard even for me to see," Artemio said. "And I was in the front part."

"The Caribou looked very beautiful from the outside" Rachel assured them. "It was very striking to see them slowly lumbering down the hillside on the way to their slaughter. The whole pageant was very beautiful."

Joe turned to Artemio. "I guess it gives a different picture of Columbus and the conquering of the New World than you get in American History class."

"Everything they teach us in American History is a lot of lies," Artemio said.

"Lies?" Joe looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

"They show it as if America is always good. Like this country is always the heroes. They don't show the kinds of things that the U.S. does in Spanish-speaking countries."

"Like supporting the government that took your father away from you?" Joe asked.

Artemio nodded and looked down. Rachel placed her hand gently on top of his.

Joe looked at Rachel apologetically. "Maybe I shouldn't have said anything. . ."

"It's okay. We talk about these things."

"It's why I peed on the couch at school," Artemio said.

Rachel and Joe glanced at each other, and then at Artemio.

"I don't quite understand," Rachel said.

"It was because of the Monroe Doctrine."

"The Monroe doctrine?"

"Don't you remember when I came home and asked you about the Monroe Doctrine? They told me about it in American History, and you explained what it really meant."

"I think so, but I can't remember what I said exactly."

"What does the Monroe Doctrine mean?" Joe asked.

"It means," Artemio said, "that countries from Europe have got to leave countries in Central and South America alone."

"That's the general idea, I guess," Joe said.

"But it also means that the U.S. gets to do whatever it pleases to all the countries over here. It gets to be the boss. If it doesn't like somebody they elect down there, it gets to change it. If it likes a dictator down there, then it doesn't matter what the people want."

"But I don't see what that has to do with you peeing on the couch," Rachel said.

"It was because of that doctrine that they killed my father. That's what you explained to me, Mom. Don't you remember?"

"I didn't put it quite that way, I don't think. But it would be logical to conclude the way you have."

"So that's why you peed on the couch in the teacher's room?" Joe asked.

“I did it where Ms. Curtis always sits. She’s my history teacher. She’s the one who told me about the Monroe Doctrine.”

Rachel suppressed a laugh. “But, honey, she just told you about it. She didn’t create the Monroe Doctrine.”

“She made it sound like it was okay,” Artemio said. “Whenever she describes things this country did down there she makes it sound heroic.”

Rachel looked at Joe. He shrugged. “I’m sure he’s right,” he said. “She’s very much an America-right-or-wrong kind of person.”

Rachel looked at Artemio. “Why didn’t you tell me this before now?”

“I was afraid that you’d tell the teachers.”

“And why would that have been so bad?”

“Because then the government might hear about it and send a death squad after me.”

“Because you peed on the couch? A death squad would come after you?”

“Because I did it against the government,” Artemio said.

“Oh, Honey.” Tears came to Rachel’s eyes. “Come here.” She held out her arms and he came to her and allowed himself to be hugged. “They won’t hurt you. All this time you’ve been afraid. They don’t do that here.”

“Why not here? They did it to Dad.” Artemio was also crying.

“I know dear, but. . .”

“America let that happen there. Why not here?” Artemio said, through his tears.

“It’s hard to explain, honey. And in a way you’re right. It doesn’t make sense to support governments down there that do things we would never permit here. But so far, at least, things like that really can’t happen here. Too many people would be against it — people with power.”

Artemio pulled away from his mother and wiped his eyes. “People are staring,” he whispered.

Rachel took out a tissue and blew her nose. “I’ll try to look respectable. Let me go splash some water on my face.” She got up from the table and went to the restore.

“You have really thought a lot about the Monroe Doctrine,” Joe said.

Artemio nodded. “I have.”

“How would it be if you took that as a topic for your National History Day Project.”

Artemio looked interested, but after thinking about it, he sighed. "They would never accept it."

"Why is that?"

"Because I would say bad things about the U.S."

"Being able to criticize what our country does is one of the main values we have. You could include stuff about the Bread and Puppet Theater and have it be about dissenting from American policies in the American way. It could be very good."

Artemio thought about the idea. "I could do my own Bread and Puppet Theater with hand puppets I could make. That would be awesome."

"That would be great," Joe said. "I could help you. And if you ran into trouble at school, I would support you."

When Rachel returned, Artemio explained the idea of doing a National History Day project on the Monroe Doctrine.

As they were at the cashier's counter paying their bill, Artemio ran on outside to the car. Rachel looked at Joe and smiled. "I haven't seen him this animated for years. He really loves you."

"He's a cool kid," Joe said.

"You are good for him," Rachel said.

Joe wondered what she would say if she knew what had happened on the camping trip.

Later in the week Rachel invited Joe by for a breakfast of blueberry waffles. It was a school morning. Artemio ate with them, and then dashed off to catch the bus.

"Temio told me all about the camping trip," Rachel said, pouring Joe another cup of coffee.

"Oh?" Joe felt adrenaline pumping into his veins. His hand holding the coffee cup began to shake.

"Hey, hold your cup steady, or I'll pour the coffee all over the table."

"That's enough coffee." Joe managed to set the cup down without mishap. "What did he say?"

"How much fun everybody had. And he told me about the skinny-dipping." She smiled while she studied his reaction to her comment.

He grinned and shrugged. “Well, I guess we did go skinny-dipping. Actually, the boys asked me if it was all right. I was kind of surprised at how. . . casual they were about it.”

“It wouldn’t be anything new for Temio. He and I go to nudist beaches and gatherings from time to time.”

“I see. He didn’t mention that.”

“Probably not. I’ve told him it’s just as well for now that he not mention it to other people — not that it’s a big secret or anything I am ashamed of. But you know how it is in a small town.”

“I guess I do. But Temio didn’t say a thing.”

“He’s pretty good about knowing how to keep his mouth shut when he needs to.”

“That’s good,” Joe said.

There was a knock at the door. “Come in,” Rachel shouted.

It was me. When I saw that Rachel already had a guest, I apologized.

“No bother,” Rachel assured me. “You’re too late for the waffles, but do come in. We were just talking about skinny-dipping.”

“One of my favorite topics. But I only have a minute.”

“Enough time for a cup of coffee,” Rachel said.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” They both insisted that they would be happy for me to stay. Of course it would have been awkward to say otherwise, but somehow I felt they were sincere.

“So what were you saying about skinny-dipping?” I asked. I seated myself with care on a kitchen chair that I feared might not be able to support me.

“Joe let the boys go skinny-dipping on his camping trip with them, and I was just telling him that sometimes Temio and I go to nude beaches.”

“Did you tell him about me?”

“What’s to tell about you?”

“That sometimes I go with you.”

“I figured it would be up to you to say anything about that. Knowing the potential for scandal in a small community, I’m pretty careful. . .”

“Joe’s trustworthy.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“I am scandalized,” said Joe, looking at me with an expression of mock horror.

I laughed. “A priest going skinny-dipping. It is scandalous. But why? What is there about the idea of a priest going skinny-dipping that’s so awful?”

“Priests aren’t supposed to have bodies,” Rachel said. “You know that, Father. You’re supposed to be pure spirit.”

“That’s the popular idea,” I said. “But it’s bad theology.”

“How is it bad theology?” Joe asked.

“What was the incarnate God incarnate in?”

“In a body,” Rachel said. “But didn’t He just put it on like an ill-fitted suit of clothes, just long enough to perform a rather distasteful bit of work?”

“Bad theology, again. The orthodox position was that He was (is!) fully God and fully human — *fully* both — spirit *and* flesh. Of course that makes no logical sense, but that’s the whole paradox the early church struggled with. It’s like light being both wave and particle. It can’t be both, but it is. Or again its like mind and body. We are fully both — fully spirit — fully matter, neither reducible to the other, each operating according to its own separate laws, yet inseparably one in every act. These are God’s Koans.”

“Koans?” Joe asked.

“A Zen idea,” I said. “Koans are questions that admit no intuitively comprehensible answers.”

“Everywhere I turn I run into questions like that,” Rachel said.

“You are not alone. It seems that every quest for truth ultimately come up against one.”

“So there’s no point in dwelling on them,” Joe said.

I shook my head. “That doesn’t follow.”

“Why not? If there is no answer, there is no answer.”

“Contemplating them forces the mind into another level of awareness. At least that’s what a Zen master would say.”

“I think I prefer questions with answers that make sense,” Joe said.

“I do too. But it seems that God gives us Koans instead.”

“That’s what they’re saying in Quantum Physics,” Joe said. “Light seems to be wave-like in one situation and a particle-like in another. But maybe someone will still come along and make sense of it.”

I shook my head emphatically. “I think not. When you go into the matter deeply enough you see that trying to make sense of it is like trying to conceptualize a square circle. Progress won’t help us on this one. The koan expands and deepens, but never resolves. Logic forces us to choose — spirit or body.”

“The body without the spirit is a quagmire,” Rachel said.

“Right,” I said. “And the spirit without the body is a second quagmire. You can see this problem unfolding in history. The middle ages chose spirit, and ended up burning witches and heretics in the name of love. The modern world has chosen matter and is ending up destroying the earth in the name of progress.”

“So where do we go from here?” Joe asked.

“From here we go skinny-dipping,” I said with a laugh. “In skinny-dipping body and spirit become one. It’s a sacrament.”

CHAPTER IV

With growing anxiety, Joe negotiated the rutted road down the hillside. The cabin came into sight, more or less as he had remembered it. It fit the description of Norman's place that the scouts had given him. He pulled in behind a blue Scout in the driveway, and paused to glean whatever information he could from the surroundings before getting out of his car. The Scout was not new, but it appeared to be in reasonably good condition. It was not a vehicle for hauling wood. The cabin was old but appeared to be freshly painted and to have a new roof. A single electric line came to the house, and went no farther into the woods.

Following his knock he heard shuffling inside. The door opened a crack. "Who is it?" The figure within was indistinct.

"Joe Michaud."

After a brief pause a tall, slender young man dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt opened the door the rest of the way and invited him in.

"You don't know me," Joe said, "but I think we have some friends in common —"

The young man interrupted him. "I know who you are."

"You do?"

"You're a science teacher over at the junior high. Sit down."

Joe accepted the comfortable easy chair offered him, and studied the room. One wall boasted a collection of guns, bows and arrows, and swords. Available space on the other three walls was filled with posters of rock stars and groups. A couch and two easy chairs, one of which Joe occupied, formed a matching set. A large stereo system dominated one wall. On the opposite side of the room Joe could discern a small but adequate kitchen area complete with a stove, a sink, a refrigerator, and a compact but eloquent bar. It was all new and tasteful — not exactly the sort of room Joe had expected to find in an old hunter's cabin out in the woods. The youth settled into a wicker rocker placed at a comfortable angle with Joe's easy chair.

"You are Norman?"

The youth nodded.

"I heard you sell some pretty arty photographs here."

"What kind of art do you like?"

"Pictures of children are a special interest."

Norman stared at him for a moment, and then smiled. "I'll see what I can find."

He retreated through a door at the back of the cabin and emerged after a few minutes with several eight-by-ten photos. "These are thirty dollars a piece. They're fit for framing." He handed the stack to Joe.

They were pictures of three boys and two girls, all of whom were naked, playing in the water and sunning themselves on what was left of an old bridge. They appeared to be between eight and fifteen years old. Joe didn't recognize the children, but thought the bridge was the broken one farther down the road. Although the children were naked, there was nothing actually pornographic about the pictures. Still, by selling them it appeared to Joe that Norman could be incriminating himself. He was surprised he was willing to take such a risk so casually.

He selected four of the pictures and handed the rest back to Norman with a hundred and twenty dollars.

"Michael told me all about you," Norman said.

"What did he tell you?"

"Enough." As he said this, Norman rubbed his crotch in a fleeting gesture.

"I think the pictures are all I'm interested in."

"You know, Mr. Michaud, boys need men." He thumbed through the stack of pictures that Joe had just handed back, and selected a photo which included the image of a particularly attractive boy of about twelve. "A lot of people don't know how much boys need men." He pointed to the boy in the photo. "Attractive, isn't he."

Joe nodded.

"And men need boys," Norman continued. He sat back down in the wicker rocking chair. "Michael tells me you're nice to boys."

Joe grunted noncommittally in response.

"I know another boy or two that you might be helpful to."

"In what way?"

“That would be up to you and the boy,” Norman said. He put the stack of photos in his hand face down on the coffee table between them. “You know the kinds of things a boy needs.”

“Do you know Artemio Martinez?” Joe asked.

Norman thought a moment. “The name sounds familiar. Perhaps Michael mentioned him.” “He’s not the kind of kid who should get involved in. . .in things he might not understand.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Artemio is a very vulnerable child.”

“You seem to like this boy.”

“I want you to leave him alone. Also I want you to leave Michael out.”

“Out of what?” Norman raised his hands in questioning manner and looked genuinely puzzled.

“Whatever he’s into.” Joe said. “I think I have enough information to make things difficult for you. So I’m asking you to leave those two kids out. Understand?”

Norman smiled. “It seems you’re a little possessive. You must trust me. I believe people of any age ought to have a chance to get their wishes fulfilled. It’s a children’s rights issue. But I would never make a child do anything he didn’t want to. Keep in mind, Mister Michaud, before you attempt to do anything noble, that I have some information that could make things a little difficult for you, also.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you sometimes get a little too friendly with the boys on your camping trips?”

Joe wanted to remove the smirk on Norman’s face with his fist. But he simply glared at him, not knowing what to say.

Norman continued. “Not that I care, you understand. But how would that look. . . for a teacher? And of course there could be criminal proceedings.”

Joe glared at him.

Norman stood up. “I think maybe we’ve talked enough for one time.” He ushered Joe to the door.

“At least leave Artemio out of this,” Joe said as they paused in the doorway. It was more of a plea than a threat.

Norman ignored the comment. “Remember, Mister Michaud, you really might be of help to a boy or two. That way everybody gets taken care of. And nobody gets hurt: not me, not the boys. . . and not you.” He smiled.

As he drove back home, Joe mulled over everything that had transpired between himself and Norman. He felt humiliated at having been outtalked and outmaneuvered by a smart-ass young man who was hardly more than an adolescent. He wondered what Norman actually knew about the camping trips. Michael may have told him about the nudity and the back rubs. Did Norman somehow also know what happened between him and Artemio? It was distressing. He really should have had a better plan when he arrived. But the thing he found most deeply upsetting was that he really was tempted by Norman’s offer. He glanced at the manila folder containing the four photos on the seat beside him. The children were very beautiful. And if, as Norman suggested, they were not having anything forced on them they didn’t want . . .

The idea was exciting.

A couple of weeks after Joe’s “confession” to me Michael arrived at Joe’s motel room late one Sunday afternoon, without invitation or warning.

“Can I come in?”

Joe hesitated. He was preparing to watch “At Play in the Field’s of the Lord” on his VCR. Being a story about cultural conflict between Christian missionaries and a Native American tribe in the Amazon basin, it contained a great deal of nakedness, and some violence. “I suppose so.”

“If you don’t want me to stay, just say so.”

“It’s not that. I was just going to watch a movie.”

“Can we watch it together?”

“I’m not sure whether people would consider it an okay movie for a child.”

“Awesome .Has it got naked women in it?”

Joe laughed. “Probably does, Michael.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Maybe I just worry too much about what other grownups might think.”

“Now that’s a fact, Joe. You really do.”

After setting the movie up, Joe sat down on his couch to watch. Michael snuggled in beside him. It was a long movie, on two cassettes. After the first cassette Joe got up to prepare

them popcorn. When it was ready he put it in a bowl and brought it back to the couch. He glanced down at Michael, who was stretched out comfortably on the couch. "I went to see Norman," he said.

Michael bounced upright with the abruptness of a trap that has just been triggered. He stared at Joe, his eyes wide with apprehension. "Why?"

"I think Norman may be involved in some things that aren't so good." Joe studied the boy's face. Michael avoided his gaze.

"What did you tell Norman about me," Joe asked.

"Nothing."

"Norman seemed to know we were friends."

"I guess I told him you took us camping."

"Did you mention the skinny-dipping?" Joe placed the bowl down on a small coffee table.

Michael stuffed a handful of popcorn into his mouth before answering. "I suppose so. That's no big thing to Norman."

"Anything else?"

"What else would I tell him?"

Joe shrugged. "The back scratches?"

"That's just between us."

"People might misinterpret the back scratches."

"I know that."

Joe sat down on the couch beside Michael. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to hang out with him," he said.

"I don't hang out with him."

"You have some kind of relationship with him."

Michael shook his head. "You shouldn't go there, Joe."

"That's what I'm telling *you* Michael. I don't think *you* should go by there."

"They won't hurt me."

"Who are 'they'?"

Michael squirmed and looked at the floor. "I can't say."

"Why can't you say?"

“I don’t know who they are, Joe. But you shouldn’t mess with them.”

“Have you met them, or are you just taking Norman’s word for it that `they’ even exist?”

“I’ve already said too much. You just need to stay out of this whole thing. Okay?”

“If this is such a dangerous thing that I need to stay out of it, why do you think it’s safe for you, Michael?”

“Look, I’m leaving if you keep pushing me about this.” Michael stood up.

“Okay, Okay, Michael. Calm down. We’ll let it go for now.”

“For good.”

“Relax, Michael. You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to.”

“Just don’t tell anybody I said anything. I could get into big trouble.”

As they watched the second cassette of “Playing in the Fields of the Lord,” the popcorn and the cokes they shared had a soothing effect, and soon Michael was stretched out on his side with his head in Joe’s lap.

When the movie finished, Michael turned over onto his back but remained with his head still in Joe’s lap. “What they did to the Indians sucks,” Michael said.

“It did.”

“I wish I could live in a place like that.”

“Like in the tropical rain forests with the Indians?”

“Yeah. That would be cool — no school — being in the woods — not having to wear clothes.”

“You like not having to wear clothes?”

“Yeah. It was cool when we went skinny-dipping and ran around naked on that island. Can we do that again?”

“We’ll see. It might happen.”

It was getting dark outside. The delicate features of Michael’s face brightened and dimmed as if from some inner rheostat as cars driving by on the highway outside controlled the amount of light in the room. In relaxation, the face had lost the hardness that sometimes gave it the appearance almost of an adult. Here was the vulnerable, open, needy face of a child. Here was the real self finally peering out from behind the mask that Michael usually wore.

Joe gently stroked the boy’s hair back from his forehead and thought about his encounter with Norman the previous Saturday. Was he deceiving himself that there was something

essentially different about his feelings for Artemio, and to a lesser extent for Michael, and a pervert's feelings for some boy he hires to molest? His feelings for Artemio seemed good, clean, beautiful. Yet perhaps perverts too felt clean. From the inside, something that looks very nasty from the outside might seem pure. Which view, then, would be the true measure of its value? Was it economic exploitation that turned something good into something base? Was it coercion? Were there, in fact, two different things that looked very similar from the outside — like mushrooms and toadstools — one of which poisoned and one of which nourished? Or was it all toadstools?

“Let me come and live with you, Joe,” Michael said.

Joe was startled. The thought was at once enormously appealing, and terribly frightening. But the ambivalence that the question created in Joe required no resolution by a decision on his part; it was simply the wish and the fantasy of a child who had very little sense about what was actually possible in the real world.

“It would be nice, Michael, but it can't happen.”

“Why?”

“Because I am not a licensed foster parent for one thing.”

“You could get licensed.”

This thought had in fact already occurred to Joe. But he was aware of the suspicions that would be created if he, a man living by himself, would apply to be a foster parent. He didn't want to be stared at, to be scrutinized.

“My life is too much up in the air right now,” he said. “I couldn't take on that kind of responsibility.”

Michael turned over on his side, with his back to Joe, but with his head still in his lap.

“Aren't you happy where you are now?” Joe asked him.

“Martha likes the other kids in the home more.”

“You feel she shows favoritism?”

“She *does* show favoritism. Also she drinks too much. Then she bosses everybody around and gets to screaming and hollering. Nobody likes her then — not even her favorites.”

“Have you ever told your worker at human Services about this?”

“They don't care.”

“But maybe they could do something about it.”

“All they could do is put me in another foster home. They wouldn’t like me there either. At least Martha lets me do as I please. And I’m used to her.

“Where’s your family, Michael?”

“What family?”

“Your birth mom, and your birth dad.”

“I don’t know who my dad is.”

“And your mom?”

“I don’t know if she wants to see me.”

“Maybe you could ask your social worker.”

“Mom will ask for me some day.”

“But maybe you need to initiate it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Joe, okay?”

“Okay. I just worry about you. Kids need a grownup, you know; someone who cares about them.”

“Let me stay with you tonight. We could go get pizza and watch another movie.”

Joe frowned. “Even if your foster mom said yes, and I doubt she would, it wouldn’t look good.”

“What do you mean, ‘look good?’”

“People would ask what interest a man my age would have in a boy your age.”

“It’s none of their fucking business.”

“They could make things very difficult for us.”

“I could make up a story about where I would be. Martha never checks up on my stories.”

Joe shook his head. “It just wouldn’t work.”

Michael was silent. Finally he got up from the couch. “I’ve got to go.”

“I could take you out to get some pizza, and then drop you by your house.”

“No. I can get home by myself. I’ve got some friends I want to see in town. I’ll eat with them.”

For some time after Michael left, Joe sat in the dark and stared at the light patterns on the wall created by cars passing by on the highway outside. Finally he ate a bowl of cereal and went to bed.

During the summer Joe spent a great deal of time with Artemio, helping him with his National History Day Project. One aspect of this was watching selected videos that pertained to the topic. Some of these, such as “Alcinda and the Condor,” “The Mission,” and “At Play in the Fields of the Lord,” were at my suggestion. I was particularly struck with Artemio’s response to “Romero.”

They were in Joe’s apartment. Artemio, as was usual when they watched movies, was snuggled up against him, and naturally they munched on the popcorn Joe kept around for his young guests. After the scene where Romero was shot while performing Mass, Artemio stopped eating and became silent. Joe looked down at him. The child’s eyes were filling with tears. As the video finished, Joe tried to give Artemio a hug to comfort him, but Artemio pulled away, and stood up.

“When I get bigger, I’m going to join the fighters in the hills,” he said.

“I think there’s a better way,” Joe said.

“They’re pigs, Joe. They’ll do anything just so they can live in big houses. The other people have to live in shacks, or in no houses. Those pigs don’t care.”

“But maybe there’s a way to change the situation without killing people. There’s a movie about Gandhi —”

“You saw what they did,” Artemio said, “All they understand is guns. What do you want poor people to do — just sit around and be killed?”

“I understand. But killing in return just makes it worse.”

Artemio shook his head. “What can a person do without guns?” he asked.

“One thing *you* can do is work on your National History Day Project so you can show people what the problems are. You can show kids at your school what really happens under some of those dictators we support.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“The United States.”

“Don’t say ‘we.’ I’m not for those dictators.”

“I’m not either, but I’m still a citizen of this country. So I feel responsible.”

There was a knock at the door. It was the man who was delivering their pizza.

“What does beer taste like?” Artemio asked as they ate. He was looking at the Budweiser sitting on the table in front of Joe.

“You want to try a little bit?”

Artemio did, so Joe poured him a couple of inches of beer in a glass. Artemio sipped it cautiously. “Yuck! You actually like this stuff?”

“I do. But I think it’s an acquired taste. Is this the first time you ever tried it?”

“First time for beer. Mom lets me taste some wine sometimes.”

“Do you like that?”

“It’s not as bad as this stuff. Once I tasted some gin.”

1 “What was that like?”

“Like eating pine needles.”

“Was it good?”

“Pine needles smell good, but who wants to eat them? Plus, it burned. I can’t believe anybody really likes that stuff. I think Michael just pretends.”

“It was with Michael that you found the gin to drink?”

“His friend gave him some.”

“His friend?”

Artemio looked down. “Norman. Don’t say anything.”

“About Norman?”

“I went there once with Michael. Mom doesn’t know. She thinks I was just at Michael’s house.

“What did you do at Norman’s?”

“We went down to the creek and skinny-dipped. Norman took pictures of us. I like to go skinny-dipping. The pictures don’t bother me as he doesn’t show them to anyone who knows me. He said he wouldn’t.”

“Did anything happen there that you *did* mind?”

“Not really.”

“Maybe a little bit of something?”

Artemio shrugged. “Michael wanted me to do some things I didn’t like.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t like talking about it, Joe. Let’s just forget it.”

“What did Michael want you to do?”

“Why do I have to talk about it?”

“I won’t do anything to get you into trouble.”

Artemio took an enormous bite of pizza.

Joe watched him chew for a while, and then said, “It really is important for me to know.”

“My mouf is full.”

Joe waited patiently.

When he finally did finish, Artemio said, “Let’s talk about something else, okay, Joe?”

But Joe persisted. “What did Michael want you to do?”

Artemio looked down and was silent for several seconds. “He wanted to stick his thing in my butt,” he said finally, without raising his eyes.

“And then what happened?”

“I told him no — it was gross.”

“Did he accept that?”

“He teased me, and kept talking about it. He had a hard on.”

“What did Norman do?”

“He told Michael to knock it off or I wouldn’t want to come back.”

“So nothing more happened?”

“No .We got dressed and Norman brought us back to town.”

“And that was the only time you went there?”

“That was it, Joe. Listen, you aren’t going to tell Mom, are you? She’d kill me if she knew.”

“I don’t want to get you into trouble, Artemio. But I can’t promise. I need to think it through.”

“Nobody needs to know.”

“The thing is, Artemio, I think some very bad stuff might be happening out there at Norman’s. I don’t just mean some guys doing some sex stuff with each other. I think there’s something more serious going on — something that could be dangerous. I’m worried about Michael; and I certainly don’t want you going out there again.”

“I’m not. So it’s settled. You don’t need to tell anybody.”

“Do you still hang out with Michael?”

“He’s my friend. We go places on our bikes together. Mostly he’s a lot of fun to be around.”

“But he’s also friends with Norman

1 “I don’t have to go see Norman with him.”

“I’m not sure hanging out with him is a good idea.”

“He’s my friend, Joe. I can’t just throw away my friends.

“I respect your feeling, but —”

“What ever you do, Joe, don’t tell Michael I said anything to you. If anything gets out it could really be bad for him.”

They were interrupted again by a knock.

Upon seeing Michael when he opened the door a crack, Joe paused. He was motivated by an impulse to hide the fact that Artemio was there. He realized quickly there was no smooth way to accomplish this. Michael was already peering around him.

“Artemio’s here,” he said.

“Yes, come on in. Would you like a piece of pizza?”

“No.” He slipped past Joe into the room. “I just came by to see what you were doing.”

“I invited Artemio by to see a movie that I thought might help him with his National History Day project.”

“Why didn’t you invite me?”

“I didn’t think you would be interested in the movie.”

Michael hung around the apartment for about fifteen minutes, during which nobody seemed to be able to get much of a conversation going. Then he said he had to be going. Neither Artemio nor Joe protested.

1 “Did you have beer and pizza for supper?” Michael asked Artemio, as he stood up and prepared to go.

“I had Pepsi with my pizza,” Artemio said.

“That doesn’t look like Pepsi to me.” Michael pointed to the glass with an inch or so of beer still in it sitting in front of Artemio.

“I let him try a little bit to see what it was like,” Joe explained. “I don’t really let kids drink here.”

“Well, next time you might let me know if you’re having a party.” Michael let the door slam as he left.

CHAPTER V

After the Bread and Puppet Theater, all Joe could talk about was Artemio's National History Day project. Early in August I dropped by to visit Rachel. The books, folders, and papers associated with the project cluttered the top of a card table in the already somewhat cramped living room of their trailer. Rachel gave me Artemio's introduction to read:

They killed my father. So of course I want to get even. Anybody would. Lots of times I think about going to join the fighters in the hills down there. But my mother says Dad didn't really believe in killing. So that made it hard for me to know what I should do. But I did figure out two things to do. One thing is I can show what happens in the country I came from. You might not like this because the bad things are being done with U.S. tax money. But you ought to know. That's why I have pictures. To show how it really is.

The American Government helped all the dictators in Central America and South America. And it paid for the guns the dictators used to kill people. A lot of people they killed weren't even soldiers. They were just teachers, and ordinary guys, like my father. Americans made sure that rich people in my country got everything. They never let things get better for poor people.

Sometimes the Church wasn't any better. Sometimes it was, though, like when Romero stood up to all the greedy people. Those nuns did too. So one thing I can do is show how all this is true. You may not like the pictures, but they really happened.

The other thing I can do is tell about some people who showed how maybe we can change things. I mean without killing people. It's called "nonviolent action." Sometimes it seems to work. Sometimes not. But I guess that's the way it is with war too. Anyhow, I want to begin telling about Gandhi.

I put the paper back down on the table and looked at Rachel. “Blessed are the pure,” I said. “Can I see the pictures he talks about?”

Rachel handed me a manila folder. “Come on into the kitchen and sit down. The coffee’s almost ready.”

After thumbing through the pictures in silence, I put them all neatly back into the folder, and closed it. “There’s some real grisly stuff there. Where did he get these pictures?”

“All kinds of places. He’s written to Amnesty International, to the United Nations, to the embassies of different countries, to authors of books — I’ve never seen him work like this.”

“He’s a man with a cause,” I said.

Rachel nodded. “He’s a man possessed — or at least a boy possessed. He wrote up a letter and put it on our computer — a very comprehensive letter telling all about himself and his project, and asking for the different things he wanted, including the pictures. People are beginning to respond.”

“Remarkable.”

“It is remarkable. Joe has worked closely with him, as I’m sure you know — has given him ideas and helped him organize things. Also he sits down with him and they read whole chapters from books together — books that are really over Artemio’s head. Joe explains the hard parts. But he doesn’t do any of the actual work on the project for Temio.”

“What’s the project going to look like?” I asked.

“His idea is to use an overhead projector to show pictures of poverty and of the things that have been done to people who protested against their governments. He’ll introduce his presentation with his own statement. Then he’ll present a lot of quotes that go with different pictures. Finally he’ll wrap it up with another statement of his own.”

I was impressed. “I see. What kind of quotes?”

Rachel poured me a cup of freshly brewed coffee, wiped her hands, and pulled a piece of paper out of a folder sitting on the kitchen table. “Here’s an example from a book by Noam Chomsky. He’s quoting a lay minister in a Christian community in El Salvador.”

She read: *“You Gringos are always worried about violence done with machine guns and machetes. But there is another kind of violence that you must be aware of, too. I used to work on the hacienda. My job was to take care of the dueno’s dogs. I gave them meat and bowls of milk, food that I couldn’t give my own*

family. When the dogs were sick, I took them to the veterinarian in Suchitoto or San Salvador. When my children were sick, the dueno gave me his sympathy, but no medicine, as they died.

To watch your children die of sickness and hunger while you can do nothing is a violence to the spirit. We have suffered that silently for too many years. Why aren't you gringos concerned about that kind of violence?

"That's powerful," I said. "It seems Artemio is really struggling with this issue of nonviolence."

"I am too," Rachel said.

"I guess we all are. Artemio asked me about Liberation Theology. He wanted to know what their leaders thought about violence. It kind of put me on the spot. I've never had a kid ask me about liberation theology before."

Rachel smiled. "I'm guilty. I told him there was such a thing, and suggested he ask you about it."

"I suspected as much. I had some things around by Dorothy Day, which I gave to him. I'll try to find him some other things to read so he gets a variety of points of view."

"He'd like that."

"How is the school going to receive all this?"

"His social studies teacher will hate it. She'll think it's not patriotic. It'll make some of the other teachers uneasy, also. Joe and I plan to attend a Pupil Evaluation Team on Temio as soon as school starts up in the fall. We plan to get this project included in the official plan for Temio, and get Joe assigned as the advisor. Even the principle couldn't stop it then."

"What happened to the idea of making a miniature Bread and Puppet Theater?"

"Temio still wants to do that, but he realized he couldn't get all the information he wanted, do all the reading he wanted to do, *and* make the puppets and the play in time for this year's National History Day."

"If he had something with puppets ready by spring, we could give it over at the church. It could be in the form of a morality play. That would bring some ancient and modern things together in an interesting manner."

"I'm sure Temio would be happy to talk with you about it."

I gulped the last of my coffee. "I'm late for a meeting. Are we still on for Saturday?"

"Skinny-dipping at Long Pond!"

"Is Joe coming?"

"He's planning on it. There could be a problem, though. This is the weekend for his daughter to visit him. He says he's going to tell her about it and see what she wants."

"Interesting. Well, I hope she decides to come."

"Could that be a problem for you?"

I stood up to go. "Well, the more who know, the more likely it is that it will get out. That could be difficult for me. But maybe it just has to happen sometime. In any case, I would hope Joe would feel free to bring his daughter."

I could just barely see Samantha through the trees. She had withdrawn to herself, I think in order to get used to being naked before joining the group. She stood with her feet wide apart and her arms outstretched as she took in the warmth of the summer sun on her body. A light breeze caressed her. She was like something that was growing there among the trees, ferns and flowers. The bright sky smiled down on her, like a friend. I fancied that it was giving her permission to be naked.

Her father was the only adult she had ever seen without clothes on. He had always been rather casual about such things around the house, but her mother had disapproved. Her mother didn't let herself be seen, and didn't encourage Samantha to be casual about nakedness.

Artemio was two years older, and was a boy. Still, he was the only other child on the ledges. The few other groups with whom we shared the nude swimming area on Long Pond were all adults. So there was some pressure on her to try to be friends with Artemio, at least for this trip. Gingerly, so as not to hurt her feet on the sharp rocks, she picked her way down the slope to the main ledges where her father, Rachel and I were arranged on a blanket, eating cheese and bread, and drinking wine. Rachel offered her some cheese and bread, and a soda from the cooler.

"Thanks. Later. Have you seen Temio?"

"He's in swimming," Joe said. "If you go over closer to the ledge and look down you should be able to see him."

The drop from the ledge to the lake was about eight feet. It looked like miles to Samantha. With the aid of a swim mask and a snorkel, Artemio was hunting for fish and turtles in

the water directly below her. She had to shout to him several times before he pulled off his mask and looked up.

“Hi, Samantha. Come on in,” he shouted.

“How?”

“Jump.”

“I’ll land on a rock.”

“No you won’t. I’ve looked. There are no underwater boulders.”

“I’ll climb down at the side over there,” she said.

“No,” he said. “That’s no fun. Stay there.”

Artemio climbed up the steep path at the edge of the rock formations, and joined her on the ledge.

“See, what you do is jump out a ways,” Artemio said. “All you have to do is get clear of the cliff. It goes almost straight down. Watch.”

Without hesitation Artemio jumped. Then, treading water, he called up to her. “Now you.”

“What if I don’t jump far enough to miss the cliff?” she asked.

“A baby could do it. Just jump. You can’t hurt yourself.”

Samantha looked behind her. The adults were watching. “You can do it,” Joe said.

She swung her arms and leaped as far out into space as she was able. Her landing was just short of a belly flop, but she wasn’t hurt.

Temio clapped his hands. “It’s fun isn’t it?”

“I did it!” she shouted.

“I knew you could. Let’s go again.” He led the way back up to the ledge.

Successive jumps became easier. The fourth time around Artemio determined they should jump together. He took her hand and, after counting to three, they leaped.

“What they lack in grace they make up for in enthusiasm,” I said.

“They’re beautiful,” Rachel said.

Joe turned to Rachel. “Temio told me something I think you should know about.”

“Yes?” I could hear a tinge of anxiety in Rachel’s voice.

“He told me not to tell. . .”

“Did you promise not to?”

“No. I told him I didn’t know who I needed to tell.”

“What was it?”

“He went to visit Norman with Michael, a couple of weeks ago.”

She stopped chewing on the piece of bread in her mouth, and then seemed to have some trouble swallowing it. “I asked him not to do that.”

“That’s what he said.”

“So did something happen there?”

I poured her a little more wine. “Not very much as far as I can tell. The three of them went skinny-dipping down in the creek that runs behind the property Norman lives on. Norman took some pictures of them. That was about all that happened.”

“Could be worse,” Rachel said. She took a gulp of wine. “But the pictures make me nervous. And Norman makes me very uneasy.”

“For good reason, I think,” Joe said. “I believe he has a connection with people from out of state, and there may be some child prostitution connected with this.”

“Do you have any evidence?”

“He as much as offered to find a child for me to have sex with.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “You’ve met him then?”

“I went by to talk with him last week.”

“And?”

“My purpose was to try to get him to leave Michael and Temio alone. Before I got into that issue I bought some pictures from him. I wanted something to hold over his head — something that could be incriminating.”

“What were the pictures?”

“They were pictures of some naked kids — nothing pornographic, really. Just kids skinny-dipping and soaking up the sun.”

“But he did sell them to you. Why does he have pictures around like that for sale?”

“Selling pictures of naked kids having fun isn’t against the law,” I said. “It’s not the same as selling kids into prostitution, or using them for pornography.”

“If it’s just a matter of naked kids I guess that’s right,” Rachel said. “But there are guys that get off on that sort of thing.”

“As opposed to most of us for whom seeing a naked child is a pure and transcendent vision of Absolute Beauty?”

The edge of sarcasm in my comment did not go unnoticed by Rachel. “Well, maybe there is some middle ground in between.” She frowned.

“Like, for example, most of life,” I said.

“Fair enough. But there is some kind of distinction between love and beauty and just sex. Some things really are perverted and pornographic.”

“Of course. But the compartments of the soul aren’t watertight. In real life things slosh around — they metamorphize.”

Rachel reflected for a moment. “I understand what you’re saying, Father Glyphis. In a way I agree with you. I’ve read Mary Renault and Andre Gide. I know relationships between men and boys are sometimes. . . complicated. But. . .”

“But we’re talking about your son.”

“That’s right. We’re not just talking theory. Norman has some pictures of my son naked. I’m a naturist so just the idea of people seeing Temio naked isn’t any big problem. But the idea that Norman might sell his pictures to some dirty old men who drool, and worse, all over them, does upset me.”

“I think Norman is interested in more than just getting some pictures to sell,” Joe said. “That’s why I felt I had to tell you this, even though Temio asked me not to.”

“I agree Artemio should stay away from Norman,” I said. “I was just trying to bring a little balance to our thinking.”

As we watched, Artemio and Samantha scaled the steep path from the lake, and climbed onto the ledge. Both children waved happily on their way by as they went to the jumping-off point. They held hands, counted to three, and jumped. Their sprawling bodies silhouetted briefly against the blue water, were perfect expressions of abandonment and bliss.

The children hit the water in a jumble of arms and legs, sank to a respectable depth, and then swam to the surface. “I think I saw something down there,” Samantha said.

“On the bottom?”

“Yeah.”

“What did it look like?”

“It was a big round thing, but it wasn’t just a rock. It was moving.”

“Maybe it was Old Ironjaws.”

“Who?”

“Just a minute. I’ll go see.”

Artemio surface-dived into the water. He was under for about thirty seconds. To Samantha it seemed like minutes. Finally he burst through the surface of the water just a few yards away and gasped for air. “I think I got a glimpse of him. He’s heading for deeper water.”

“Was it Old Ironjaws?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t see him well enough.”

“Who is Old Ironjaws?”

“An enormous snapping turtle who hangs around here.”

“You’ve seen him before?”

“I only saw him once before, up close. He’s this big around.” Artemio managed to hold his arms out of the water long enough to indicate the turtle’s gigantic size. “He was in real shallow water. . . over there.” He indicated the area just below the end of the path.

“Will he bite?”

“Any snapping turtle will bite if you step on him or something like that. But if he has a chance to get away, he will.”

“I think I’m hungry. Lets go get something to eat.”

“A turtle that size could take your whole foot off in one bite,” Artemio said.

Samantha kept glancing over her shoulder as they swam back.

The children were both shivering as they ran to the blanket where we adults were sitting. Soon they were wrapped in big beach towels and happily digging into potato salad and crunching on carrot sticks.

Samantha peered over the covers of her bed and watched her mother unpack her overnight bag. Suddenly she remembered the nudist magazines her father had given her. “You don’t need to unpack my bag for me, Mom,” she said. “I can get it in the morning.”

“I don’t mind. What did you do with you father this weekend?”

“Oh, we just talked and watched TV — stuff like that. Really, Mom, I can unpack my own stuff.”

“My god, what is this?” Karen pulled three copies of “Naturist Life International” out of Samantha’s duffel bag.

“It’s not a bad magazine,” Samantha said. “Those people are even Christians.”

Karen flipped through the magazines slowly, without comment.

“It’s about naturism.”

“I can see that.”

“It’s not bad.”

Karen frowned. “Your father gave you these?” She waved the magazines in the air.

Samantha nodded. “So I could understand naturism. It’s really not bad like you think. . .”

“Please stop telling me what I think.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“Why did he want you to know about naturism?”

“Because . . . I don’t know. He just did.”

Karen scrutinized her daughter’s face. “Does he ever take you to places like this?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m your mother. I need to know.”

“There’s nothing to know.”

“Does your dad sometimes take you to places like this?”

There was a long pause. Karen stared at her daughter, her eyes unblinking and severe.

“Sometimes we go to places where people swim like that,” Samantha finally said.

“Like what?”

“You know. Like without. . . without swim suits on.”

Karen threw the magazines on the floor. “For God sake! How often?”

“Only once, really.”

“When?”

“We went there this afternoon.”

“You said sometimes. That doesn’t sound like just once.”

“Maybe we’ll go somewhere like that again, if I like it.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“It’s not like you think, Mom.”

“You don’t know what I think. And you don’t know what kind of people might be hanging around places.”

“They seemed nice.”

“Was it just your father and you who went?”

Samantha turned over onto her side, with her back to her mother. “I’m tired, Mama. Can I go to sleep now?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, ‘you can’t’?”

“I’m not supposed to say.”

“Who says?”

“Daddy.”

“Do you remember what they taught you in the class in school about not-all-right touching.”

“Nobody touched me in a bad way, Mama. I’m trying to tell you it wasn’t that way.”

“I certainly hope not. But do you remember what they said about secrets?”

“They said sometimes you had to tell secrets.”

“Try to understand. If everything was okay, then why did your daddy tell you to keep it all secret?”

Samantha was silent.

Her mother’s voice became more demanding. “Why did he do that?”

“I don’t know, Mama. I just don’t want to fight.”

“You need to tell me who else was there. Then you can go to sleep.”

Samantha saw her mother wasn’t going to give up. There was no way around it. She explained about the afternoon in some detail, obediently answering all her mother’s questions. When she finished her mother shook her head in disbelief. “A priest acting like that. I guess I’ve heard everything now.”

“He was nice, Mama.”

“I don’t want you around him.”

Samantha turned over onto her stomach and hid her face in the pillow. Her mother leaned over her and gently rubbed her back. "I'm sorry. But it's important that you not keep secrets. It must have been really scary."

Samantha didn't bother to argue.

"It will all work out okay," her mother said.

Samantha knew it wouldn't.

The following day Karen Michaud called the Child Protective Division of the Department of Human services, and reported her concerns and suspicions regarding the information she had received from her daughter the previous night. Marion Bierce listened sympathetically. "It may be a few days before we'll be ready to take action," she told Karen. "But I assure you we'll be looking into this matter further. I'll be in touch."

After hanging up, Marion turned and spoke to a colleague who happened to be in the office with her. "More stuff coming to us from Anton. Seems there's a priest named Father Glyphis up there who's into skinny-dipping with children. And it appears a science teacher by the name of Joe Michaud is somehow involved. This was his wife on the phone."

"Didn't you get a call earlier today from Anton?" her colleague asked.

"Yes. Artemio's mother, Rachel Martinez called. She thinks Norman McLain is trying to get her son and one of our foster kids, Michael Quint, into some sort of child pornography or prostitution thing. Joseph Michaud's name came up in that situation too."

"So it's all connected."

"Seems to be."

"You think that Michaud guy is a perp?"

"Rachel swears he's okay, but I'm not so sure."

"I'll bet the priest is a perp, too."

"A lot of them are."

CHAPTER VI

When I saw Marion Bierce sitting with Mat Sampson, one of the foster children in our town, I found a seat at a nearby table. I hoped I would be able to eavesdrop. The occasion was the annual scout awards dinner, which was held in the basement of the Anton Congregational church.

Ralph Simington came to the microphone and waited. When it was quiet he began. "First, on behalf of the Anton scouting program I wish to thank the Chamber of Commerce for making this next award possible. This year's Friend of Children award goes to a man who has served for years in our scouting program without ever seeking recognition for his efforts."

I could see Joe sitting with Artemio and Rachel across the room. He knew he was to be the recipient of this award. He glanced around the crowded basement of the congregational church. Some people were still eating their desserts. He had pushed his own plate aside largely untouched. He kept shifting in his chair as Mr. Simington continued to praise his virtues.

"He has refused offers of a position of more leadership in the scouting program, preferring to humbly and dutifully carry out the most important task in the organization — the direct leadership and guidance of the boys to further their physical, emotional, moral and spiritual development. Joe Michaud, come up to the table."

Joe stood and smiled. It was a social smile. His natural shyness was reinforced by his deep distrust of public acclaim. One minute, as he had once explained to me, people were throwing palms in your path; the next they were crucifying you. Nevertheless, he dutifully began to negotiate a path through the tables to the microphone.

Marion Bierce watched the proceedings with interest.

"That's him," Mat whispered.

"Him?"

"The one you been asking me about. He's the most fun leader we have, just like I told you."

“Hush.” Marion put her finger to her lips. “Our conversation was just between us.”

“Okay.” He looked a little deflated at the reprimand.

Marion noticed and patted his shoulder. “Are you expecting to receive any awards?”

“My second class badge. I told you that.”

“Yes .Of course.” She patted him again.”

My speculation was confirmed. Her feigned concern for Mat was a ruse.

The children cheered and stomped their feet when Joe received his award. Many stood to express their enthusiasm. Eventually the adults followed suit and Joe was given a standing ovation.

It was now Joe’s responsibility to present the first of the children’s awards. He tore open the sealed envelope while the dining room settled into an approximation of order.

“This year’s most improved camper has been determined to be. . . Artemio Martinez,” he said.

When Artemio arrived at the table, Joe engulfed him in a hug. “You deserve this.”

Artemio smiled. “You too.”

Joe shrugged, and turned to the audience to deliver the impromptu comments expected on such an occasion.

“Artemio and I both thank you for the recognition you’ve shown us. Artemio is a good choice. He made gains in many areas in our camping program. But you may not be aware of his most important achievement. This summer he’s been getting a head-start on his National History Day project. His project is a fine statement of what it means to be an American of Hispanic origin. I sincerely hope all of you drop by the Junior High school to see his work when the History Day projects are put on display.”

Joe was well aware, of course, that most of the members of the Chamber of Commerce, who sponsored Artemio’s award, would be lukewarm at best regarding his National History Day project.

While people were milling around after the conclusion of the awards program, Rachel was approached by Marion Bierce. “You must be Rachel Martinez,” she said.

“Yes.”

“I’m Marion Bierce.”

Rachel smiled tentatively while fishing through her mind's files for a folder with the name or the face of this woman in it.

"We talked on the phone," Marion said.

"Ah, yes. From Protective Services."

"Yes. I was pleased to see your son receive his prize."

"Thank you. He really has made tremendous progress this summer. He's had. . . a few problems, you know."

"I'm glad he's doing better. I wanted to assure you we really are looking at the information you shared with us. It may be a little while yet before we're ready to do anything with it. In the meantime I think you should be cautioned about letting Artemio have any contact with Norman."

"I've already made that decision."

"Good. And if Artemio tells you anything more, call me."

"I'll do that."

"What do you know about the man who won the Friend of Children Award, by the way? I noticed he left the church with Artemio and another boy."

"That's Joe Michaud. He's taken a special interest in Artemio. Nobody except Ralph knew who was going to get the most improved camper prize until it was presented. But it couldn't have been more appropriate."

"I'm sure," Marion said. "Yet it must be difficult for you to know how much contact to permit. Even people who are highly respected in a community sometimes turn out to be other than what they seem."

Rachel frowned. "I don't worry about Joe. He's the main reason Artemio is doing so much better."

"Of course," Marion smiled. "I only meant to suggest that, in general, you can't be too careful."

"How much was your prize?" Michael asked.

"Fifty dollars."

"Cool. What you going to do with it?"

"Put it in a bank, I guess. It was a United States Savings Bond."

The TV at Paul's Pizza was blaring.

"A what?"

"A United States Savings Bond." Artemio was almost shouting.

"Is that like real money?"

"I don't know. I think you have to put it in the bank for a bunch of years. It's like for college or something."

"Think of all the pizza you could get for that," Michael said.

Joe wanted to shift attention away from Artemio and his award. Michael had not shown improvement. His reputation for being a troublemaker was daily becoming more deeply etched in the minds of both his peers and those responsible for his education and development. With the fall semester having begun only a week before, he had already received a detention.

Joe thought back to one of the times he had supervised the detention room the previous year. Michael had been one of six boys who wrote their sentences or stared out the window, depending on the penance assigned them by their individual teachers. It occurred not to one of the boys to make productive use of the time by seriously addressing himself to a homework assignment. Some, under miscellaneous threats held over them by parents when they got home, would make a cursory effort at doing their work — just enough to evade another day of detention. Others would arrive in school the next day, once again unprepared, and would find themselves back in trouble. Mostly it was boys. There was something about school that didn't agree with a good proportion of the boys. Maybe it wasn't just school. Maybe it was something about civilized life that didn't suit males. Very seldom were there girls in this junior high school precursor to prison. Of course it was possible the girls were equally unhappy, but showed it in different ways.

"I heard you might be interested in scouting," Joe said.

"What's that, Joe?" Michael shouted above the din.

"I said I heard you were thinking about becoming a scout."

"Oh, I don't know."

"It would be a good idea."

Michael shrugged. "Can we play the videos?"

"Sure," Joe said. "I'll treat you."

As he watched the two boys immerse themselves in the games, Joe thought about their different situations in life. Just as surely as one child receives recognition for conforming to those behaviors and values deemed important by a community, he mused, another child receives clear and tangible signs he or she's not held in high regard. Foster children, who typically have no roots in the community in which they find themselves, and who bring with them the problems they have inherited from far away places, are particularly susceptible to finding themselves faced with a community's unwelcome mat.

"Why don't we go by your place," Michael suggested, as they climbed into Joe's car. "It's still not too late to get a movie."

"Not tonight," Joe said. "I've got some things I need to do." The truth was he had been thinking about watching a video himself that evening, and would have been happy to have the children with him. But he was having growing concerns about how his relationship with these boys might be viewed in the eyes of the community.

After being delivered to his house, Michael stood in his front yard and watched Joe drive off with Artemio. He knew that Joe could just as easily have gone by Artemio's house and dropped him off first. Knowing how jealousy works in the human soul, it would be my guess that he suspected that Joe was going to take Artemio to his apartment so just the two of them could watch a movie together. The image of them laughing, eating popcorn, and goofing off together at Joe's apartment would have been a torment to him. He turned and walked listlessly toward his house. The flickering lights coming from Martha Curry's room told him his foster mother was in bed, watching TV. The rest of the house was dark.

"I'm worried about Michael," Artemio said as they drove off. "He spends too much time at Norman's"

"Why do you think that is?" Joe asked.

"Well, Norman gives him drugs, for one thing."

"What drugs?"

"Alcohol and marijuana."

"Are you sure?"

"That's what Michael tells me. I think he's going to start dealing."

Joe frowned. "It may be hard to keep him out of that sort of thing."

“You aren’t going to tell Mom about this, too, are you?”

“What do you mean, `too’?”

“You told Mom about me going to see Norman, didn’t you?”

Joe looked over at Artemio and tried to assess from his expression how much difficulty this was likely to create. “Yes, I did.”

“That got me into a lot of trouble.”

“Sorry. What did your mom do?”

“She hollered at me — said she couldn’t trust me if I didn’t go where I said I was going; and told me I shouldn’t ever go see Norman— stuff like that.”

“Your mom never seemed like the hollering type.”

“I don’t mean she hollered real loud. She never does that. But she spoke real. . . serious. . . you know, like she was mad.”

“I guess it’s pretty miserable, having your mom mad at you.”

“Yeah. Mostly she’s not.”

“It sounds like she was worried about you.”

“That’s what she said.”

“So you might have been a little mad at me for getting you into trouble.”

There was a long pause. Finally Artemio said, “Maybe.”

“I’m sorry. But I felt like I had to tell her, because I was worried.”

The long silence that followed told Joe that Artemio didn’t entirely accept this explanation.

“What worries me,” Joe said, “is this might make it hard for you to trust me, to tell me what’s on your mind.”

“It might.” Artemio looked out his window so Joe couldn’t see his face.

When they approached the dirt road that led to the public access to Neptune Lake, Joe said, “Why don’t we stop for a minute.” He accepted Artemio’s shrug as a sign of agreement.

The moon, about three quarters full, was bright on the lake, and the sky glittered with stars. Standing behind him Joe put his arms around Artemio and squeezed him gently. Artemio neither resisted nor responded to this gesture of affection.

“Stars are pretty, eh?” Joe said.

“Hmmm.”

“Do you know the constellations?”

“Some of them.”

“That’s the big dipper.” Joe pointed it out, and then indicated how it was possible to find the north star by tracing a line from the two stars that formed the outer lip of the dipper. Then he pointed out some of the other constellations. Artemio took in this information without comment.

“I’m sorry,” Joe said, finally.

“About what?”

“About telling your mom.”

Artemio made no answer.

“I felt like I had too.”

Artemio still did not answer.

“I’ll tell you what,” Joe said. “From now on I’ll only tell anybody else something you tell me in private if I feel there’s some danger to you.”

“Like what danger? Like somebody might give me some drugs?”

“No. I mean like somebody might be seriously hurt or killed.”

“Only for that?”

“Only for that.”

Artemio thought this over, and then turned around and put his arms around Joe. “Okay .But you’ve got to promise. From now on it’s only if somebody is going to get killed.”

“Or seriously hurt.”

“Okay. But that’s got to really mean serious, not just some little thing.”

“Agreed.”

“I’m still sort of mad,” Artemio said, not letting go.

They didn’t talk again until they were driving back to Artemio’s house.

“Michael’s birthday is coming up,” Artemio said.

“Oh? Which one?”

“He’s going to be thirteen.”

“A teenager, eh?”

“Yeah.”

Joe could tell he had something on his mind. He probed. “I guess the thirteenth birthday is a pretty important one.”

“I hear they do weird things on people’s birthdays out at Norman’s,” Artemio said.
“Especially on the thirteenth one.”

“What kind of weird things?”

“I don’t know. Maybe killing chickens or eating snakes.”

“Really weird stuff, huh?”

“I think so.”

“What has Michael told you?”

“He told me Norman worships the devil, but he never told me exactly how.

“So you don’t really have a very clear picture what they do?”

“No, but I don’t think it’s good.”

“You would rather Michael didn’t spend his birthday with them.”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t we have a big party for Michael ourselves on his birthday? That way he won’t be out there killing chickens, or eating snakes, or whatever they do”

“Good idea.” Artemio was enthusiastic. “I’ll invite some guys.”

“We can have it at my place,” Joe said. “I’m sure I can rustle up something better than snakes and chicken heads to eat.”

CHAPTER VII

Holding the revolver tightly in both hands, Michael took careful aim at the cardboard cutout of a human being, and fired. The bullet hit the figure high on the right shoulder.

“Good shot,” Norman said. “You winged him that time.”

“Not bad for the first time I’ve ever been shooting,” Michael said. “Next time maybe I’ll get him in the heart.” He handed Norman the gun.

The cardboard figure was propped against an old packing crate toward the back of the sand pit. Small, irregular splashes of color in the trees around them announced the advent of fall. Although the sun was bright, it didn’t entirely dissipate the coolness in the air.

Norman reloaded in preparation for taking his turn. After pushing the cylinder back into place, he took aim at Michael’s chest. “Do you think much about death?”

Michael extended his arms protectively in front of him as though hoping his open palms would stop a bullet. “Don’t point that thing at me.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not safe.”

“Safe?” Norman turned and shot at the cardboard figure. “There’s no such thing as safe.” The bullet tore through the circle designating the heart area. Then he turned back to Michael, and pointed the gun at his head. It was done casually as though he were simply gesturing with his finger to make a point.

“I don’t plan to kill you, Michael. Why should I? We have fun together. But our brains are delicately wired. Between all our nerve endings there are little gaps called synapses. When a tiny spark of electricity jumps across one of those synapses, it completes a circuit and makes us do something.”

“Don’t do this, Norman. It could go off.”

“Only if the synapse in my brain goes off.” Norman turned the gun toward his own head. “We are never more than a synapse away from death.”

“Norman, stop it.”

“I’m not going to kill myself.” He smiled, as though he were just coming the punch line of a great joke. “At least I probably won’t.”

“Let’s put the gun away and go swimming, Norman.”

“Sure. Just let me finish this round.” In quick succession, Norman shot four times at the target. Then he cocked the hammer, and spun the cylinder. Aiming the gun at Michael’s head, he pulled the trigger. The gun clicked harmlessly.

“Don’t do that!” Michael screamed. You could have killed me.”

Norman smiled. After spinning the cylinder again he handed the gun to Michael.

“Here .Now you do me.”

Michael took the gun in his hand, and looked at Norman. “No.”

“I want you to,” Norman said. “Satan will protect me.”

Michael pulled the cylinder out and let the remaining bullet fall to the ground. “No, I can’t do it.”

“You’re a wuss.”

“I don’t care.”

“It’s a rush,” Norman said.

“Not to me.”

“You never tried it.”

“I don’t want to, either. Let’s go, Norman. I don’t like it here.”

“Okay.”

Michael looked out the side window for several minutes while they bumped down the dirt road toward the swimming hole. Then he turned to Norman. “Why did you do that?” His voice was shaking.

1 “Do what?”

“Do Russian roulette with me.”

“To teach you something.”

“What?”

“What it’s like on the edge of death.”

Norman pulled to a stop at the swimming hole. Michael turned to face him. He was pale. "There was still a bullet in the gun. You knew that," he said. "Weren't you afraid you would die if I did it to you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Satan would protect me."

"Why?"

"Because he loves me."

"You think so?"

"Sure. Satan accepts me just as I am."

"In church they said God loves us."

"That's just a lie."

"How do you know?"

"Look. Who is it that casts you out for any little thing you do? Not Satan. God does that. You know who God is like? God is like our real parents. You're a foster kid, Michael, just like me. Why? Because our real parents didn't want us, that's why."

"That's not the reason," Michael said. "My social worker told me — "

"Social workers are ass holes. They told you they were going to put you into homes where you would be loved. Right? Well, does your foster mom love you?"

Michael shook his head. "No, she doesn't. But that doesn't mean my real mom and dad..."

"You think your real mom and dad loved you?"

Michael was silent for some time. "I don't know," he said finally.

They arrived at the broken bridge and Norman parked the truck. "If your parents loved you, then why aren't you with them now?" he asked.

Michael repeated the explanation given to him by his counselor, Ann Pinkham. "Because they weren't able to care for me."

"Bullshit. They didn't want you, that's why."

Michael glared at him. "Mom will ask for me some day."

"Not likely."

"You don't even know my parents."

“Don’t have to know them. You know people by what they do. Your parents threw you away.”

Michael could find no way to answer this. He crossed his arms in front of him and looked out the side window again.

“It’s the same with God,” Norman said. “First time you break one of His commandments and, bam! There you are, thrown into hell.”

“The church says God won’t send us to hell if we believe in Jesus,” Michael said.

Norman looked over at him with raised eyebrows, mocking him gently. “But think about that. That says God throws us away just for believing wrong things, like a teacher who gives you a zero for giving one wrong answer on an exam. One wrong answer and down you go. You flunk forever.”

Michael nodded.

“The problem is with God throwing you away at all,” Norman said.

“Yes, that’s the problem,” Michael said. “Why does He throw us away?”

“’Cause He doesn’t really love us,” Norman said.

Michael repeated the key phrase and held it up for examination as one might hold an interesting stone up to the light in order to study its colors and contours more carefully.

“He ... doesn’t love us. He doesn’t love us.”

“Same as your parents and your foster parents after them. How many foster homes you been in?”

“Nine.”

“And they all said they loved you, didn’t they?”

“Mostly they told me that.”

“And they all threw you away the first time you stole something or gave them a little back talk, right?”

“Let’s talk about something else, Norman, okay?”

“Okay. But just one more thing.”

“What?”

“Satan won’t throw you away. You can do whatever you want, be whoever you are, like whatever you like, and Satan won’t throw you away.”

They got out of the truck and stripped off their clothes. Michael found that it calmed his mind to add more rocks to the crude little dam that enlarged and deepened the pool. When he was satisfied with the improvements his labor produced, he took a dip in the pool to cool off.

When he tired of swimming, Michael climbed onto the bridge, and sat down on the main beam with his feet hanging over the edge. The bridge cleared the stream by less than three feet. Norman paddled around for a few minutes in the slightly enlarged pool, and then joined Michael at the bridge. Pushing his way between Michael's knees, he put his arms around him, and pulled him closer. He kissed Michael on his stomach. "Do you think God made peckers?" he asked.

Michael giggled at the absurdity of the question. "I guess so. If he made everything else, I guess he must have made our peckers too."

"Do you think the preachers are right that we shouldn't play with them?"

"Father Glyphis says it's no sin to play with ourselves if we do it in private."

"You know father Glyphis?"

"Yeah."

"Did he ever try to get you to do stuff with him?"

"Like sex stuff?"

"Yeah."

"He's not like that."

"Once I almost thought he was different from the others," Norman said.

"Did you know him too?"

"Maybe. But we were talking about God and peckers."

He looked down at Michael's penis. "So if He made peckers, how come He's going to turn around and be all pissed at us just because we do with our peckers what He made them able to do?"

"I don't know."

"Satan wants us to do whatever feels good to us," Norman said, leaning down to kiss Michael's penis.

Warmly dressed and comfortably ensconced in an easy chair, Michael watched Norman make the salad that was to accompany the prime steaks sizzling on the stove. He felt very mature sipping the scotch and soda Norman had prepared for him.

“You can set the table,” Norman said. “We’re almost ready.”

Michael felt a little lightheaded from his drink, but managed to put plates, glasses and silverware on the table without dropping anything. When they sat down to eat, Norman poured them both some wine.

“Is your friend, Joe, still trying to get information on us?” he asked.

“He’s more Temio’s friend than mine.”

Norman studied the younger boy’s face. “I see. You and Joe not getting along so well?”

Michael shrugged and drank some of the wine. “I just think he likes Temio better.” He was feeling dizzy from the alcohol or he probably would have concealed his hurt feelings more carefully.

“Getting thrown away again, are you?”

“I don’t care what Joe does.”

“What do you think he does with Temio?”

“How should I know? I don’t follow them around.”

“Friends talk. Maybe Temio said something to you.”

Michael shrugged. “Maybe a little something.”

“What ‘little something’?”

“Nothing much.”

“You feel loyal to Joe?” Norman filled Michael’s wine glass.

“He’s been okay with me, mostly,” Michael said.

Norman reflected as he chewed a piece of steak. Then he said, “You know who the real hero of the Bible is?”

“God?”

“No. It’s Judas. Judas wanted Jesus to use his power to throw the Romans out. But Jesus was a wimp. When Judas saw that, he betrayed him.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Judas understood that if your friends aren’t with you anymore, it’s only right to betray them. He had the guts to do that.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“In your situation, Judas would have known what to do.”

“My situation?”

“With Joe.”

“You’re saying that’s how it is with Joe and me. . . he’s not. . . really with me.”

“What does it seem like to you?”

“Joe’s been nice to me.”

“You’ve got to understand about respectable people, Michael. When respectable people want to run our lives for us, they talk nice. Then they preach at us. Talk about loyalty, and responsibility, and all that shit. That’s their way of trying to keep us away from what makes us happy. Sex makes us happy. Food and drugs make us happy. Power and money make us happy. Why should we feel bad about going after those things that make us happy? You could be happy, but you’ve still got a big hang-up that’s in your way.”

“What’s that?”

“Loyalty — misplaced loyalty to a man who loves your friend better than he loves you, but who won’t be honest about it — who won’t just tell you to go screw yourself.”

Michael was beginning to slur his words. “I think Joe and Temio do things together,” he said.

“What kinds of things?”

“The kinds of things you do with me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Something happened the night we were out camping. I already told you how he gave us those massages while we were naked.”

“Right .Anything else?”

“Temio told me Joe played with his pecker. I’ll bet they do stuff all the time.”

Norman filled his glass again. “I’ll bet they do, and I’ll bet your counselor would love to know about it. She sees Temio too, right?”

Ann Pinkham had been careful to record in some detail Michael’s description of the camping trip. “Was there any other time when you had reason to suspect something not okay might be happening between Joe and Artemio?” she asked.

“One time I came by Joe’s apartment and found him giving Temio something to drink.”

“Something alcoholic?”

“Beer. I came by when they didn’t expect me. There was just a little beer left in Temio’s glass. Most of it had been drunk. They acted like they didn’t want me there. I think they were going to do stuff together and were afraid I would tell.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Why would he be giving him beer? Joe knows that’s not right. I think they do stuff lots of times.”

“But there wasn’t any other time you actually saw something?”

“Just the way Joe looks at him.”

“What about with you?”

“Just the massage while I was naked.”

“That didn’t lead to his. . . touching you on your privates, or trying to do something sexual to you?”

“I told you I wouldn’t let Joe do anything like that to me. I think it’s gross.”

“Some people think that older boy you hang out with sometimes does things that aren’t okay.”

“Who, Norman? He’s just my friend. He’s kind of crazy but he would never do anything like that.”

“I would still feel better if you didn’t hang out with him. He’s twenty. You’re only twelve.”

“I’m almost thirteen.”

“Still.”

“We’re just friends, Ms. Pinkham, that’s all. Joe is the one you need to be looking at.”

“Well, in any case, I need to tell you I’m going to have to report this.”

“I think you ought to.”

“It may be difficult for you.”

“How?”

“People will be asking you questions — asking you to repeat what you told me. And you may have to testify in court at some point.”

“Okay.” Michael looked down. “I can do that if I have to.”

“Are you afraid Joe will do anything to you if he finds out you told?”

“I’ll just keep away from him.”

“Has he ever done anything that made you think he might hurt you?”

“He made me feel like. . . like he didn’t want me to say anything about the way he massaged us.”

“How did he do that?”

“Stuff he said.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t remember exactly.”

“Did he say things that made you afraid.”

Michael paused a long time, as though he were struggling with whether he wanted to say something. Then he said, “He does make me a little afraid sometimes.”

Ann Pinkham put her hand gently on his shoulder. “I understand. It’s not unmanly to be afraid. If you think of actual things he has said, please let me know.”

“I will,” Michael said.

“I was in love with Norman.” It was my turn to confess. I stacked my plate with pancakes and began spreading them liberally with butter. I’m a morning person, so sometimes I arrange to eat breakfast with my friends. I’m not too bad a cook, either, if you like greasy and fattening things. This particular morning I had made arrangements to fix breakfast at Joe’s house.

“You were in love with him?” There was that phase again. Joe placed it in his own mouth, and tested it for its flavor as though it were a part of his breakfast. He poured some maple syrup on his pancakes.

“Yes. In love.”

“The same as what I feel for Temio.”

“Yes.”

“It’s an odd feeling.”

“It is,” I said.

“It’s a . . . a kind of. . . longing,” he said.

“Yes. A longing. It’s a longing for union with the child so that, through each other, you and the child touch God.”

Joe looked at him skeptically. “Most people would have a more cynical view of the matter.”

I nodded. "I used to throw mud on those feelings myself."

"There's something sexual about it," Joe said.

"Ah, here we are at that 'sexual thing' again," I said. "Of course there's something 'sexual' about it. The energies of Eros have a similar quality about them whether it has to do with breast-feeding, a man loving a woman, or a mystic's union with God.

"It still doesn't seem right that a man should have those feelings for a boy."

"That's what you've been taught. But it's only when we lose track of the aim of Eros that things get fouled up."

"You speak of Eros as though it were purposeful," Joe said, "almost . . . intelligent."

"I think it is."

"So what's its purpose — I mean when it's between a man and a boy?"

"The emotional, mental and spiritual growth of the boy."

Joe reflected on this. "So Eros attracts a man to a boy in much the same way as it attracts a mother to a newborn baby — in order that the child's needs will be met."

"Absolutely .It's no accident you find Artemio beautiful. The universe made him that way in order to catch your attention — in order to make you want to take on the task of caring for him, and nurturing him."

"In my dream the boy said, 'We can help you.' He didn't ask for my help. It was my need that was focused on. That seems to contradict what you're saying."

"The man's spiritual growth is facilitated also, at least to the extent he can put the boy's needs first. Eros begins then to raise and purify itself."

"And if the man can't put the child's needs first?"

I shrugged. "The devils are fallen angels."

Joe poured us both some more coffee. "You were talking about Norman. What happened between you and him?"

"You want the juicy details?" I raised my eyebrows and grinned wickedly.

Joe laughed. "Every last one."

"I'm afraid it will be a disappointment. Our relationship was quite chaste really. Nothing very lurid happened outside the dark recesses of my own heart."

"Seriously," Joe said, "what I was curious about is, if you loved him, why you don't see him anymore."

“I became afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes. You see, when I first met Norman, I didn’t have all these theories I’ve told you about. I had read Plato’s dialogues, so I was familiar with the ideas in an abstract sort of way. I was also aware of the frequency with which one finds erotic metaphors in mystical and biblical writings. But I felt that erotic feelings were just something you had to hold in check so they didn’t get in the way of the spiritual life.” He paused. “Should I cook up any more pancakes?”

“Not for me. I’m not used to eating so much breakfast.”

“I guess I’ll have enough when I finish these.” I already had a fresh stack on my plate. I smiled at Joe. “As you see, I don’t believe in asceticism for its own sake.”

Joe laughed. “I see that,” he said. “But you were telling about Norman.”

“Yes. I first knew him when he was eight. He was placed in the foster home of a woman who came to church here. He didn’t stay in that home long. He went through several homes, but except for one, they were in this area. So I was able to keep up contact with him. Norman actually took an interest in religion. He asked to come to church. As I think back on it, this was probably at least in part to see me.”

“You and he were close?”

“We were. Outside the normal round of priestly duties, I spent extra time with him. But Norman was like a lot of foster kids I’ve known. He had an intense and unmet need for belonging, affection, and acceptance. And he did everything imaginable to prevent those things ever becoming realities in his life.”

“So he acted in ways that made him hard to accept even back then?”

I laughed. “I used to look forward to his coming to confession. It always brightened up my day.”

“He had interesting sins to confess?”

“They were better than most. When one is a priest one becomes a connoisseur.”

“What was it that attracted you to him so much?”

“Norman was a very bright child — one of the brightest I have ever known. He could grasp significant theological concepts at the age of ten or twelve. The question of theodicy obsessed him.”

“Theodicy?”

“The question of why injustice and horrible things happen in the world if the Ground and Creative Source of all existence is good and trustworthy.”

“I hope that’s not the way he put it at ten years of age.”

“No, he used ten-year-old language, and examples from his own life. But that was clearly his concern.”

“What examples?”

“Why do some kids have parents who care for them and others don’t before either of them could have done anything bad?”

“How did you answer him?”

“The same way most religious teachers do.”

“How’s that?”

“I hemmed and hawed a lot and then went on to the next topic.” I laughed at myself.

“Good answer.”

“Later on I suggested the idea of reincarnation might provide one way of dealing with it.”

“That doesn’t sound very Catholic. Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“I don’t know. It’s a possibility.”

“It sounds like you and Norman were great for each other. What happened?”

“When Norman was twelve I made arrangements to take him with me when I went on a trip to Boston. I knew I was taking a chance in doing so, but I wanted to show him the aquarium, the museum, and some of the other points of interest.”

“How did it go?”

“It was glorious. It was a great time both for me and for him. We stayed overnight in a motel. It had a wonderful, roomy shower. We shared it and I washed his hair.”

“Did anything else happen?”

“Washing his hair was the most intimate thing I ever did with Norman. But you must understand it was a powerful experience for me, and I think for him too. It was one of those pivotal experiences we have maybe a dozen times in our lives. It wasn’t until then that I allowed myself to become fully aware of how strong my feelings for Norman were, and how erotic. I didn’t understand these feelings, accept them, or know how to integrate them into the rest of my life.

“I didn’t fully experience the fear until I wasn’t with him anymore. Then I received word from his foster mother that she had been criticized by the Department of Human Services for letting Norman go with me. Also, my immediate superior warned me that even if I was fully appropriate on such an excursion, it could ‘look bad’ in the eyes of the community and cause ‘scandal.’”

“So what did you do?”

“What could I do? The fear from within and the warnings from without were pushing me in the same direction. I withdrew from Norman. I began treating him formally, like he was just another parishioner in the church. I avoided ever being alone with him.”

“And what did he do?”

“He stopped coming to the church.”

“That’s sad.”

“It’s worse than sad. I think I could have made a difference in Norman’s life if I hadn’t chickened out.”

“Now who’s being hard on himself?”

I shrugged. “Giving in to the demands of respectability and ‘appearance’ may have been the most sinful thing I ever did. It made me abandon someone I could have helped.”

Joe thought about how he had been holding Michael at an arm’s length. “One stands to lose so much in this kind of situation,” he said. “Reputation. Friends. Profession. Family. One could lose all that without anything being proven. One could even face a prison term.”

“You’re right. But should the situation present itself again, I would risk all that rather than abandon the child.”

“If it came to that,” Joe said, “it could lead to a martyrdom that would hardly be recognized by the church.”

“That’s true,” I said. “But I’m more concerned about you right now.”

“Why is that?”

“I think there’s a worker from Protective Services by the name of Marion Bierce who has an interest in you.” I told him all that I had seen and overheard at the awards dinner.

“I see,” he said when I finished. He reflected silently on these new facts for some time. “Should I cut myself off from Artemio, and from Michael?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s your call. You know the risks as well as I do.”

“I don’t think Temio would say anything.”

“Probably he wouldn’t,” I said.

“You pulled away from Norman.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you ever talk with him about it?”

I pushed myself away from the table. “How could I? It had never been acknowledged by either of us that we were in love. So how could we discuss the fact that something terribly important in our lives was happening?”

CHAPTER VIII

Two days after his “disclosure” to Ann Pinkham, Marion Bierce was at Artemio’s school with a police officer.

It was Friday. Artemio had just returned from lunch when the principal called him on the intercom and instructed him to come to the office. The principal introduced him to Marion and the officer, whose name was David Talon. They were to use the teachers lounge for the interview. The principal said he would see that they weren’t bothered.

Artemio fidgeted as he sat on the couch. He glanced furtively around the room, and tried to grasp the meaning of his being here with these two very serious adults. The police officer was wearing a sport coat and a tie rather than a uniform, but his presence was, nevertheless, intimidating.

“We’re interested in Joseph Michaud,” Marion said. “Would you mind sharing with us what you know about him?”

“I’m missing gym,” Artemio said.

“This is important or we wouldn’t have taken you out of class,” Marion said. “Do you know a Mister Michaud?”

The two adults positioned themselves on their straight chairs, a little closer to him than was comfortable. Artemio felt trapped. “He’s my friend. He’s a teacher here at the school.”

“Has anything ever happened between you and him that was a problem?” Marion asked.

“No.”

“Do you have contact with him outside of school?”

“I teach him Spanish, and sometimes he takes me places. That’s all.”

“What kinds of places does he take you?”

“The movies, camping, out to get an ice cream — stuff like that.”

“He sounds very nice.”

“He is.”

“Sometimes even nice people do things that upset us.” When her innuendo received no response, Marion resumed with a more direct approach. “Did he ever do anything with you that didn’t seem. . . okay?”

“No. He’s always nice to me.”

Sergeant Talon leaned forward in his chair. “Sometimes kids are afraid if they tell about things an adult does they’ll be in as much trouble as the adult. Sometimes kids are even afraid they will be sent to prison.”

“That’s stupid.”

Sergeant Talon nodded in approval. “It is. It’s important to know that when an adult and a child. . . do anything that’s not okay, we always hold the adult responsible. It’s not the child’s fault.”

Artemio shrugged.

“Do you have anything you want to tell us?” Sergeant Talon asked.

Artemio shook his head.

Marion looked at the police officer. “In fairness to Artemio, I think we should let him know that Michael has already told us what happened on the camping trip.”

Artemio looked from one to the other. “What did he tell you?”

“We would like to hear it from you,” Sergeant Talon said.

“If Michael told you, you already know.”

“I want you to understand we aren’t against Mr. Michaud.” The tone of Marion’s voice was placating. “We are just wanting to find a way to help him with his problem.”

“What problem?”

“That’s what we’re hoping you will tell us about.”

Artemio realized he was sitting in the very place where he had peed in order to express his rage at the social studies teacher. The fantasy of standing up and peeing on these two adults who were pressuring him for information flashed into his mind. “I don’t have anything to tell you,” he said.

There was a period of silence. Then Sergeant Talon said, “We already have the facts from Michael. It looks pretty bad from what he told us. We thought since Joe is your friend you might be able to help us to see it in a better light.”

“What did Michael tell you?”

“Everything that happened on the camping trip,” Sergeant Talon said.

“He told you we went skinny-dipping?”

“Did you go skinny-dipping?” Marion asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“And that was all?” Sergeant Talon asked.

“That was all.”

“What about what happened in the tent?” Sergeant Talon said.

“Nothing happened in the tent.”

“That’s not what Michael told us.”

“Joe gave us back scratches, that’s all.”

“Were you wearing clothes when he did this?” Marion asked.

“Just our pants.”

“Did you at any point take your pants off, or let Joe take them off?”

Artemio felt confused, and for a long time said nothing. “Why do you want to know?” he asked finally.

“So we can be better able to help Joe with his problem,” Marion said. “And also we want to help you. Having secrets all bottled up inside you can really be scary.”

“I don’t have secrets.”

“Then you don’t mind letting us know whether you took your pants off.”

“Michael told you this?”

Both the adults nodded.

“All right. We took our pants off. But that’s still not wrong.”

Marion smiled condescendingly. “We’re not debating what’s right and wrong. We’re just trying to find out what happened. Did you take your underpants off too?”

Artemio nodded faintly.

“Both you and Michael did that?”

He nodded again.

“And when he gave you back scratches, can you tell us where?”

“On our backs. Where else?”

“Yes, of course. But what I’m asking, as I’m sure you know, is whether he massaged you anywhere else.”

“He just gave us back scratches, like I told you.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to talk about our bodies in a clear way, or to name their parts,” Marion said. “I have some dolls here that might help us.”

She pulled two cloth dolls out of a bag she had with her. A man and a boy doll were dressed in more or less realistic but loose-fitting clothes. She showed Artemio how they could be undressed. Under their pants they both wore jockey shorts, which could also be removed. The dolls were replete with genitals and orifices that were, in a rough sort of way, anatomically correct. The adult male doll even had pubic hair.

“Weird,” Artemio said. “That’s weird looking.”

“They look a little strange at first,” Marion said. “But I think they may help us. Could you take the boy doll here?”

Artemio complied.

“Now can you show us where Joe massaged you?”

Artemio indicated the back.

“And what about down lower?”

“He did the backs of our legs too.”

“And what about this area?” Marion reached over to touch the doll Artemio held, and indicated the buttocks.

“A little.”

“Okay, and now lets turn the doll over. Show me where he massaged you on this side.”

“Just around here.” Artemio indicated the chest.

“And what about this area?” Marion pointed to the genitals.

Artemio shook his head.

Marion held her cupped hand to her ear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear the answer?”

Artemio looked away, and hesitated. “No,” he said finally.

“No?”

“No, he didn’t touch me there.”

“Michael said he did touch you there.”

“Michael couldn’t see anything. He wasn’t even there.”

“Wasn’t there. . . when?” Marion asked.

“When.. . well. . . I don’t know when. He wasn’t there when I was alone with Joe.”

“You just told me Michael was in the tent with you and Joe when the massaging took place. Was there another time when Michael was not there?”

Artemio looked up at the ceiling and squirmed.

“Can you tell us about the time when Michael wasn’t there?” Marion’s voice was cajoling, almost tender.

“Michael and I went out to sleep under the stars. After Michael went to sleep it felt creepy out there; and mosquitoes kept getting me. So I went back to the tent with Joe.”

“What were you wearing when you went back to the tent?”

“My T-shirt and underpants.”

“And what happened there?”

“Nothing.”

“Was Joe asleep?”

“No.”

“Did you talk?”

“Some.”

“Did Joe massage you more.”

“We just talked. Then Michael came to the tent. He thought we were doing something, and called us fags. But he didn’t see anything.”

“Was there anything to see, Artemio?”

“I told you we just talked.” Artemio cocked his head to one side and glared at her.

“Michael told us you told him Joe played with your penis. That’s this part here.” Marion indicated the penis on the doll.

“I know what my penis is.”

“Of course you do. Did Mr. Michaud do what Michael said?”

“No.”

“Why would Michael lie about it?”

“How should I know?”

“I’m sorry, Artemio.” Marion smiled. “I know this is hard for you. But we need to get to the facts so we can help people. These secrets are too much for you to handle by yourself.”

“I told you the facts. Can I go now?”

“We’re almost done. Can you tell me what you did after Michael came to your tent?”

“We went swimming.”

“What did you wear when you went swimming?”

“Nothing.”

“And Joe, what did he wear?”

“Nothing.”

“He was naked?”

“Yes, but that’s no crime. It doesn’t mean he did anything.”

“I’m not saying it does, Artemio. I’m just trying to get a clear picture of what happened.

Was Joe naked when he was in the tent with you?”

“No.”

“What was he wearing?”

“Shorts and a shirt.”

“Okay, Artemio. Just one more thing for today. Has Joe ever given you anything to drink?”

“Like sodas? All the time.”

“Anything alcoholic, like beer or wine?”

“No.”

“Michael said he saw you with some beer in front of you when you were eating at Joe’s apartment.”

Artemio looked puzzled. Then he remembered. “Oh, that. One time Joe let me try a little beer because I wanted to see what it tasted like.”

“That was all?”

“That was it. I didn’t even like it.”

“It seems Joe is very ready to help you out whenever you’re curious about anything.”

Artemio initially heard in Marion’s comment an affirmation of his friend, and responded with pride. “Yes, he is. He helps me with anything I’m curious about.” When he noticed Sergeant Talon and Marion nodding to each other in a knowing, conspiratorial manner, the deeper implication of Marion’s comment dawned on him. “Not that way,” he corrected himself.

“Not what way, Artemio?”

Artemio glared at her, and didn’t answer.

“That’s all for now,” Marion said. “Thank you for sharing what you did with us. I feel you may not be ready yet to tell us everything. Try to understand we’re only wanting to help you. . . and Joe.”

“We can protect you from Joe if you’re afraid of what he will do if you tell us things,” Sergeant Talon said.

“I’m not afraid of Joe,” Artemio said. “He’s not my enemy.”

Before Artemio arrived home that afternoon, Marion visited Rachel in her trailer. She explained that she had interviewed Artemio earlier in the day, and that this was only one part of a larger investigation. “We are very concerned about Artemio’s welfare,” she said.

“What do you actually know?” Rachel peered at her across the kitchen table.

“A general picture involving a number of local people has been emerging for some time,” Marion said. “I think it’s important to frame the facts that are coming out regarding your son and some of his acquaintances in the context of what we suspect. . . “

“I’m not interested in suspicions and generalities right now,” Rachel said. “I want what you actually know about anything that happened to my son.”

“You don’t need to be defensive, Ms. Martinez. I’m only here to be helpful.”

“I’m sorry if I seem impatient, but this is my son we’re talking about. It would help if you could get right to the point. What do you actually know about Norman and Artemio?”

“Right now we’re more concerned about Joe Michaud and Artemio.

“Joe and Artemio?”

“Yes. For starters, we know he and Michael have been skinny-dipping with Mr. Michaud.”

“I hope all this fuss isn’t about that.”

“Please be patient. We also know Mister Michaud massaged both Artemio and Michael while they were completely naked, and this included the buttocks. It also appears Mister Michaud fondled Artemio’s penis.”

“Did Temio tell you that?”

“No.”

“Did Joe?”

Marion shook her head.

“Then it was Michael.”

Marion nodded.

“Did he actually see this?” Rachel asked.

“No, but he says that’s what Artemio told him.”

Rachel poured both herself and Marion some more coffee while she absorbed this information. “And what about Norman? Have you been able to find out anything about him?”

“We know Norman deals in drugs. We also have reason to suspect he may be involved in child pornography or even prostitution.”

“What do you know about him and Temio?”

“We know that Artemio has been out at Norman’s cabin.”

“Once,” Rachel said. “And he didn’t have permission to go even that time.”

“Does Artemio, then, come and go pretty much as he pleases?”

“Why would you ask a thing like that?” Rachel said.

“You indicated, if I understood you rightly, that Artemio found his way to Norman’s without your permission. How did that come about?”

“I thought he was at Michael’s. I give good supervision to my son, if that’s what you’re getting at. Sometimes any boy might slip out from a parent’s control. But if you’re wondering about lack of supervision maybe you ought to look into your foster home, the one Michael is in. It was your foster mother who was supposed to be supervising them when they went out to Norman’s.” As soon as she said this, Rachel regretted it. It felt like the sort of cheap shot she tried to avoid taking at people. But she was getting panicky about the drift of the conversation.

Marion smiled. “I’m not at liberty to discuss Department of Human Services foster homes. You said you didn’t let Artemio go to Norman’s. Had you heard anything that raised questions in your mind about Norman? Perhaps Artemio told you something about him.”

“Actually it was Joe who warned me about him.”

“Interesting. What did Joe say?”

“Nothing much different from what you said. He just suspected things went on out there.”

“Things?”

“You know, like sex and drugs. I don’t think he knew anything specific. He did say there were rumors that Norman might be involved in some sort of cult.”

“So you were concerned about protecting your son from Norman, and correctly so.”

“Even before Joe said anything about the boy, I had my suspicions. That’s why I had told Temio he couldn’t go there. I wondered why this nineteen-year-old man wanted to hang around younger boys. What was in it for him?”

“And did you never ask yourself why a thirty-two year old man might want to be hanging around your son?”

“Temio was giving Joe Spanish lessons.” Rachel’s tone was icy.

Again Marion smiled. “There seems to be more to their relationship than learning Spanish.”

“It wasn’t that way.”

“How was it?”

“Joe cares. He’s interested in Temio as a person. Temio is thriving under Joe’s attention. He came out of his depression and started doing better at school and everywhere.”

“That may have had something to do with Artemio’s work with his therapist,” Marion said.

“Ann is nice, and I’m sure she helped. But it was Temio’s relationship with Joe that made the big difference.”

“How do you know that?”

“Call it a mother’s intuition.”

“Okay. I’m not sure you’re right, but for the sake of argument, let’s grant for a minute it may have been Joe’s relationship that made a difference to Artemio. But also let’s suppose that Joe’s interest in the boy isn’t completely, shall we say, pure. Suppose Joe is a pedophile who’s sexually attracted to Artemio, and that’s what’s really motivating him?”

“I don’t think Joe’s main interest was in taking advantage of Temio sexually,” Rachel said.

“Well, suppose, again for the sake of argument, that he really might have some caring feelings for Artemio, but that the sexual problem is also there, and he isn’t able to control it very well when opportunity presents itself. Do you see what I’m driving at?”

“I think what you’re asking is something like this: suppose sometimes Joe’s love for Temio did express itself in a sexual way, but that Temio seemed to derive help from the relationship? Is a relationship like that a good thing or a bad thing for a boy?”

“That would be a way of putting it,” Marion said.

Rachel shook her head. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"It's confusing to me. I really don't know what to think."

"That's sad."

"Sad?"

"Your answer raises questions in my mind about your ability to protect your son."

"Who's being investigated here? I love my son more than anything."

"I'm not questioning your love for your son, but. . ."

"But what?"

"I have to wonder about your judgment. You seem to be thinking it might be okay to let pedophiles have access to your son if it appears to make him happier. That shows a serious problem in judgment."

"You make it sound like I've hired my son out as a child prostitute."

"I think your intentions are good, Rachel. But I have other information that also raises questions in my mind."

"Yes?"

Marion peered down into her coffee mug for a moment as if hoping to find there some clarification regarding the best way of broaching a difficult topic. "Did you ever go with Joseph, his daughter and Artemio to a place where there was nude swimming?"

"You really do your homework, don't you? Where did you pick up that bit of dirt?"

"It's my job to be informed, Rachel. You did go to such a place didn't you?"

"Suppose I did?"

"Once again, it raises the issue of judgment."

"Why, in your opinion, is it poor judgment to allow my son the innocent pleasure of skinny-dipping?"

"This was in mixed company, and with a man who may have been molesting your son."

"Molesting my son," Rachel repeated. "There's something about the way you use words that makes everything seem different than it really is."

"Call it whatever you want. My point is that to allow your son to go to a nude beach under those circumstances showed very questionable judgment."

“I don’t think it’s poor judgment for parents to bring up their children so their natural curiosity is satisfied. I think that helps them to channel their sexual feelings in healthy ways.”

“An interesting philosophy, Rachel. But my experience has taught me that sexuality is a tough beast to tame. My whole job gives testimony to the fact that a lot of men have tremendous problems controlling their impulses. Every day I see the destruction and suffering caused by that lack of control. So you will forgive me if I consider your views about the innocence of nakedness a little naive. Perhaps people need the aid of clothes in order to keep their impulses within civilized limits.”

“You’re entitled to whatever philosophy you want,” Rachel said. “But it’s not your prerogative to cram it down my throat.”

“But it is my concern if your philosophy leads you to place your son in situations that are dangerous to his well-being.”

Rachel stood and turned to the kitchen window. “Unless you’re ready to make an official allegation that I am failing to protect my son, I think this conversation is finished.”

Marion rose. “I understand you’re upset with me. But keep in mind that if you know anything about Joseph Michaud and you keep it from me, it will not reflect in a positive manner on your ability to protect your son.”

It’s a sad day when the sheep protect the wolves that are prowling within their midst, Marion thought as she pulled out of Rachel’s driveway. It was three-ten. She was on her way to Joseph Michaud’s apartment. But first she had to pick up the police officer who would accompany her.

Joe was drinking a beer and trying to relax from his week of teaching. He glanced at the clock. It was four thirty. There was still time to get a video for the evening. He was wondering whether he should invite Artemio to watch one with him when the telephone rang. It was Rachel. “I think you ought to know that a woman from Child Protective Services was here this afternoon, asking questions.”

“About what?”

“About you and Temio.”

Joe felt the blood drain from his limbs and his stomach tighten into a knot. He could think of nothing to say. For some time neither spoke.

“Jesus,” Joe said. “What did she say?”

“She thinks you’ve been sexually molesting him.”

“I hope you don’t think I’ve . . . hurt Temio. . .” he said.

“I trust you, Joe. At least I trust your intentions.” She was silent a moment, and then added, “I don’t know what you have or haven’t done.”

Joe heard the question implied in Rachel’s statement.

His silence was almost a confession.

“I would never hurt Temio,” he said finally.

“They’ll be coming by to see you, I’m almost sure.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“The worker from Protective Services is Marion Bierce. She’s smart.”

“Does Temio hate me?”

“Temio loves you.”

“What does he say about it?”

“I haven’t had a chance to talk with him yet. He’s with his therapist this afternoon.”

“You must think I’m a creep, Rachel. . . “

There was a knock at his door.

“No, I don’t think that.”

“Someone is knocking.”

“Don’t tell them I called and warned you. Marion is out to get ammunition to suggest I’m not protecting my son.”

The knocking at the door became more insistent.

“I won’t say anything. I guess I’m going to have to answer the door.”

“We’ll talk when we get a chance.”

The conversation wasn’t complete, but neither knew what to say. The knocking came again.

“Can you let Father Glyphis know what’s happening?” Joe asked.

“Okay.”

Joe hung up and went to the door. It was as Rachel had warned him. When he said he didn't have time to talk, Sergeant Talon presented him with a search warrant.

"We also have some questions we want to ask you," Marion said.

"What about?"

"You and some boys."

"I think I want a chance to talk with my lawyer."

"Whatever," Sergeant Talon said. "Why don't you sit down at the table while I look around."

Marion sat at the table with Joe. "Do you drink a lot?" she asked, staring at the half empty beer can sitting in front of him. He looked up at Marion, and took a sip of beer just to defy her. But he didn't allow himself to be goaded into arguing.

There weren't a lot of places to search in the small and sparsely furnished apartment. The officer set aside a couple of personal videos to examine back at the station. Then he found the pictures Joe had purchased from Norman. He threw them face up on the table in front of Marion. "Nice-looking kids," he said.

For a moment nobody spoke.

"Do you know these children?" Marion asked.

Joe gave in to the impulse to defend himself. "I didn't take those pictures. I don't even know those kids."

"Where did you get them?" Marion asked.

Joe realized that talking was like struggling in quick sand, and resolved not to allow himself to be drawn in further.

"Why do you have them?" Sergeant Talon asked.

Joe said nothing.

"What use does a grown man like you have for a bunch of pictures of naked kids?" Sergeant Talon asked.

Joe rubbed his face with the palms of his hands, and shook his head. "I need time to think."

Sergeant Talon sneered. "It doesn't take time to make up the truth."

Joe only shook his head again.

“All right. Don’t answer. It’s pretty obvious, anyhow. I don’t think even a lawyer can make it look like something other than what it is.”

“It might go easier for you if you cooperate with us, Joe,” Marion said. “You may know things about others who are deeper into this sort of thing than you are. They’re the ones we most want to know about.”

Joe stared at her without speaking.

“I need to take you down to the police station,” Sergeant Talon said.

“I think you should be aware that Marion Bierce has talked with both Michael and with Joe about what happened on that camping trip,” Ann Pinkham said. Artemio sat across from her in her office. He stared at the door and avoided eye contact with her. “She tells me they told her everything.”

“Both of them did?”

Ms. Pinkham nodded.

“Is Joe going to prison?”

“It’s too early to say what will happen to Joe. You’re worried about him?”

“He’s my friend.”

“So you’d like to help him?”

“Of course.”

“Maybe if you could tell me what happened in your own words it would help us to understand it better. People are pretty mad at Joe now.

“I’m not.”

“I understand that. Could you tell me just what happened?”

“You already know.”

“But the people who told me made it sound real bad. Maybe you could help us to see it in a better light.”

“He just let me see what his thing was like.”

“Why did he do that?”

“I asked him to.”

“Why?”

“I just wanted to see — you know — if it was the same.”

“The same?”

“As mine.” His voice betrayed his irritation. He didn’t like talking about this. Talking with a woman about it was especially difficult

“It’s important not to keep this to yourself,” Ann said. “What happened then?”

“They already told you.”

“You touched him?” Ann was guessing.

Artemio nodded.

“On his `thing’?”

He nodded again.

“Why did you do that?”

“To see what it felt like.”

“And then?”

“And then nothing. That was all.”

“Did he touch your penis?”

“A little bit — but just while his was giving me a back rub.”

“A back rub?”

“Well, you know — a massage. That’s what you call it.”

“Yes, a massage. So he massaged your penis along with the rest of you?”

“I told him it was okay. He just massaged me all over. It felt good.”

“You told him it was okay?”

Artemio nodded.

“Does that make you feel it’s your fault?”

“Fault?”

“Yes. Does that make you feel you’re to blame?”

Artemio looked around the room. It was a friendly room. It was full of plants, toys and interesting things. There were children’s pictures on the walls — pictures done by her clients. One of his own was there. Ms. Pinkham had told him she liked his pictures — that they were very expressive. Joe had shown him pictures by a Mexican painter named Diego Rivera. He had told him his father and Diego would have liked each other — that they would have thought about many things in the same way. Artemio hoped one day to paint as well as Rivera. His mind came back to the room. “What did you ask?”

“You told me you gave Joe permission to do those things. I asked whether that made you feel it was your fault.”

“I guess so. I asked him for the massage. I asked him to show me his thing.”

“It’s never the child’s fault.”

“Maybe it’s not anybody’s fault.” Artemio’s eyes pleaded with her. “Maybe it just happened.”

“When things like this happen, it’s because someone lets them happen. And the person who is responsible is the adult. This is important.”

“I don’t want Joe to go to prison,” Artemio said. “I don’t want him to lose his job.”

“We’re not trying to punish Joe. But even if those things do happen, that’s not your fault either. He made his own choices.”

“It’s got to be partly my fault. You told me I have choices. Remember the choices game? I have choices just like Joe does.”

“That’s different, Artemio. In some things you have choices. But when a grownup takes advantage of a child, it’s the grownup’s fault, not the child’s.”

Artemio noticed that her neck was getting red. He liked Ms. Pinkham, and didn’t want to upset her. But he couldn’t continue to trust her. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Ms. Pinkham took a long deep breath. She hoped her intuition would tell her where to take it from here. She glanced up at the wall and saw Artemio’s picture. A round and intense blackness covered most of the page. Sitting on top of it was a child. He was crying. It was entitled, “The Black Hole.” “Do you remember your picture?” She gestured in its direction.

Artemio only shrugged.

“That shows the emptiness and pain you feel about losing your father.”

“I know that.”

“You want very much to have a father, or a person who can be like a father to you.”

“We already talked about that,” Artemio said.

“I’m bringing it up for a reason. When you want something that badly you’re vulnerable. . . at risk. . . .” She paused, trying to find the right words. “When you want something that much it’s easy for someone to take advantage of you — to offer you something that looks like what you want but really isn’t.”

“I know what I want, Ms. Pinkham. Joe is what I want. He loves me.”

“Medicine and poison are very similar sometimes, Artemio. Too much medicine can become poison.” She knew Artemio was good at metaphors, and had some hope he might understand what she was trying to convey. But he wasn’t listening. Instead he pivoted in his seat and left her facing his back.

“What is it, Artemio? She came across the room and tried to place herself where she could see his face. He pivoted back away from her. She knelt beside him and gently took his face in her hands and turned it toward her. “Artemio, tell me why you’re doing this.”

His lower lip was quivering, but he held back his tears. “Why do they always take my fathers away?” he asked.

“But Joe wasn’t a good father. He offered you what you most wanted and then betrayed you.”

“Joe didn’t betray me. It was the Gringos who betrayed me.”

“So now I seem like the Gringos to you? I am one of those who takes your fathers away?”

“ ¡Cómo no! Tu eres un Gringo, cómo los otros.”

“Speak English, Artemio. Don't push me out of your world.”

Artemio looked steadily at her now. His anger had helped him get past the point where he would cry. Above all else he didn’t want her to see his tears. “I want to take my picture home.”

“I’d like to be able to keep it here. It helps me feel close to you between our sessions.”

“You said it was my choice — that I could take my art things home if I wanted.”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s your choice.”

After the session Ann Pinkham wrote a note in the record that concluded with the following summary:

Client admits to being sexually molested, but blames himself. He wants to protect the perpetrator. It appears he truly loves the man.

CHAPTER IX

At about six p.m. Joe left a short message on my answering machine. "I'm in jail. Please get in contact." Unfortunately I was out of town most of that day, and didn't get either Rachel's message or this one until later in the evening. If I had heard earlier, I might have gotten to him in time to prevent what happened.

After calling me, Joe was taken to his cell. The twelve by sixteen-foot cell was furnished with two metal bunks on opposite walls. Between the bunks a white, porcelain, seatless commode squatted unceremoniously. High on the wall above one of the bunks a rectangle of wire mesh protected a small window. That was all. There weren't even mattresses on the bunks. Nobody occupied the other two cells in the jail.

Time passed. How much was difficult to say. The guard had taken Joe's watch with his other "valuables," so he could only guess. He surmised he had probably been there about three hours when he heard the commotion of a large number of people entering from the outside door. He felt hope at the prospect of anything that might relieve the boredom. He tried to piece the scene together from the louder bits of conversation and the other noises he could pick up.

"Go easy, man, those goddamn things are pinching me."

Sounds of a struggle followed.

"Don't fight us, Larry."

He could tell, as he listened to several officers giving instructions, that they had two prisoners. He followed their progress to the intake room, and listened as they walked the prisoners through the process.

Finally Joe could hear the procession of prisoners and law enforcement officers as it moved down the hall in his direction. George Fuller, the jail's solitary guard, stopped at Joe's cell and unlocked it. The first prisoner came into view. Tall and muscular, he was dressed in a flannel shirt, and wore jeans hitched up with blue suspenders. His neck and face were flushed, and he reeked of alcohol.

A big man in a sheriff's uniform looked through the bars at Joe. "You want him in there, George?" he asked. "That cell's already got somebody in it."

"I'm getting ready to clean the other cells," George answered.

"Suit yourself." The sheriff pushed the man in the suspenders through the door. "If you're done fighting, Larry, I can take those cuffs off now."

Larry turned to allow the sheriff access to the cuffs. He glared at Joe as the cuffs were removed. Then he staggered to the bunk opposite Joe and sat down heavily.

Two officers of the Anton four- person police department then escorted the second prisoner into the cell. He was much shorter than Larry, heavy set, and also very muscular. His round baby face was framed with a red beard. He surveyed the cell, and then turned his attention to Joe. He studied him with gentle gray eyes. Joe had seen both men around town and thought they were woodsmen.

"It's not fancy, Paul, but it's all we got for now," one of the police officers said. Paul was docile. Already his cuffs had been removed. He joined Larry on his bunk.

The door clanged shut and all the officers left.

"Fucking handcuffs." Larry said. He looked at Joe. "What's your name?"

"Joe."

"What are you here for?"

"Nonsupport."

"You got woman troubles too, eh?"

Joe nodded. He had chosen a good lie. He was glad to have created even a small sense of camaraderie with this gorilla of a man. Maybe he would survive.

"This here's my friend, Paul," Larry said. "He's a little shitfaced right now."

"Good to meet you, Paul."

Paul nodded vaguely in Joe's direction.

The men in the cell listened to the four law officers leaving. George returned to check out his prisoners. "Well, I guess you're all settled" he said.

Larry grunted noncommittally in response.

"You all know each other?" George asked.

Larry made a stumbling effort to respond. "This here guy. . . what's your name again?"

“Joe.”

“Hard name to remember. Joe. Joe here’s got woman problems just like me, don’t you Joe?”

Joe nodded.

“That’s interesting,” George said.

“Yep, it is,” Larry said. “They got the poor bastard for nonsupport. If his old bitch is like mine, she don’t deserve no support.”

George peered at Joe with just the faintest hint of a smile on his face. He spoke slowly and carefully, as though he were trying to get the matter straight in his own mind. “That’s funny. This here report I got don’t say nothing about child support.”

Larry looked at Joe. “You lie to me?”

“Why would I lie?”

Larry turned to George. “What’s that fuckin’ report say?”

“Can’t tell you that, Larry. It’s confidential stuff.”

“You didn’t put me in here with no pervert, did you?”

“He might be, he might not be,” George said. “Like I said, it’s confidential.”

“Listen. I got a right to know if this guy’s a pervert.”

“I can’t really say about that,” George said. “Anyhow, these reports aren’t always that accurate.”

“So it does say he a pervert?”

“I’m not saying that,” George said.

“But you’re not saying he’s not.”

“I’m not saying nothing.”

“Could be a baby raper,” Larry said, looking at Joe.

“For Christ’s sake, man,” tell these guys I’m no baby raper.” Joe looked up at the guard with his hands outstretched, palms up, in a prayer of supplication.

“Sorry,” George said. “All that’s confidential.”

“A pervert,” Larry said. “And the worst kind.”

“You never know,” George said. He rattled his keys absently, and then tapped them on the bars. “Well, I’ll leave you fellows to yourselves.”

After George left, Larry raised himself with some effort, and stumbled over to Joe's bench. He sat down beside him and put his arm over his shoulder. Joe tried to pull back. "Don't scoot away, pal," Larry said. "I'm just being friendly. Come on over here and sit with our friend, Paul."

Paul joined them on the bench, squeezing Joe between the two of them. "What you going to do, Larry?" he asked.

"I'll think of something," Larry said.

"This is stupid," Joe said. "I'm not a baby raper."

Larry squeezed him more tightly around his shoulders. "Then why'd you lie to me?"

Joe tried to stand up and Larry pulled him forcefully back into a seating position. "Don't go away just when we're getting sociable," Larry said.

"Leave me alone."

"The baby raper wants to be left alone, Paul. You think we can leave him alone?"

"I don't suppose we can, Larry."

By the time I arrived, I found Joe sitting on the far end of his bunk, leaning back into the corner of the cell. His arms were folded protectively across his stomach, and his knees were pulled up in front. He didn't look up when I entered. Almost imperceptibly, he rocked.

"Joe. It's me."

He looked up without speaking.

"What happened, Joe?"

Joe shook his head. When he made eye contact with me, he began to cry, and as he did the rocking motion became more pronounced. I sat down on the bunk, and put my arms around him. "Tell me," I said.

Joe let himself be held for a long time. Finally he pushed me away. I scooted back, but remained seated on the bunk.

"Have you ever been raped?" Joe asked.

"You mean literally. . ."

"I mean raped."

"Who?"

Joe gestured vaguely toward the outer office of the jail.

“Those two who just left?”

Joe nodded, hugged himself more tightly, and began to rock again.

I had recognized the two men I saw leaving. I knew them faintly through family connections with my parishioners. They had joked in a crude but friendly manner with the guard who was filling out some paper work. I still remember a piece of their conversation.

“The restraining order says you have to stay away from her and Dave,” the guard had said.

“I should’ve killed them both.”

“You were drunk enough to do it.”

“Would’ve served them right. And her fucking counselor too.”

“I don’t say you’re wrong. But they’d throw your ass in prison for a long time for that.”

I felt at the time that the man saying this looked as though he could have killed a person without giving it a second thought.

I turned to Joe. “Can you tell me about it?”

Joe shook his head. “The tall one. . .” He closed his eyes and leaned forward over his folded arms. After rocking back and forth for a few seconds, he sat upright again. He rolled his eyes up to look at the ceiling, and then looked at the floor.

“It was a setup,” he said. “It was stupid. It was just so stupid.”

“It was worse than stupid.” I said. I was shaking with anger.

Joe nodded. “The short one held me.” There was a long pause. “And then. . . it happened.”

“The guard set it up?”

Joe nodded. “Don’t ask anymore.”

That was all he was able to tell me at the time. It was only much later that he told me about it in detail. But the basic facts were already clear enough.

“Don’t be ashamed,” I said.

“Don’t be ashamed.” Joe repeated the words, and shook his head. “Don’t be ashamed.” He smiled ironically as though he had been told a joke. “Why should I be ashamed? Just because I’m a baby raper? Just because I got screwed by a big greasy pig of a man? No. I don’t feel any shame. It’s good to be me. I’m special. . .”

“Don’t,” I said.

“Don’t what?”

“Tear yourself down like that.”

“But I’m a baby raper.”

“You’re not, Joe.”

“Try telling them that.”

“That’s what they called you?”

He nodded.

I remained and talked with Joe about other things until he seemed calmer. Then I stood up to leave. “I’ll find a way to get the bail. It may take a day or two, since this is the weekend.”

On my way out I stopped at the desk where George Fuller was reading a Field and Stream magazine. I knew George — primarily through family and friends who attended his church. No one else was in the small jail. I reached over and grabbed him by a handful of the front of his shirt. I dragged him across the top of the desk, grasped him by the back of his neck, and banged his forehead down on the Formica surface. “God is not happy with you,” I said. Then I dragged him the rest of the way across the desk and threw him on the floor. “I’m a peaceful man, but you really piss me off.”

George was so startled by this turn of events it took a few additional seconds for him to be able to respond at all. Priests simply did not behave this way. Finally he drew his gun and aimed it at me.

“Before you pull the trigger, Mister Fuller, try to imagine yourself explaining to the town council and to the judge why you chose to shoot the local priest, a man loved and revered by all, and noted for his peaceful and unassuming manner.” I took out my reading glasses, put them on, and peered down at him in a bookish manner, as though I were a scholar studying an obscure passage from an ancient text.

The guard holstered the gun, stood up, and rubbed his forehead. “What the hell was that about?”

“That was for the way you run your jail here. A priest hears a lot. I know enough that it could cost you your job, and probably enough to get you thrown into jail yourself.”

“What do you know?”

“Enough. Trust me, Mister Fuller.”

Actually, I didn't have anything particular in mind. I would never, in any case, have used anything against him that had been told to me in confidence. But most people have some dark secret that they fear will someday be exposed to the scrutiny of their neighbors, and I assumed he was no exception.

The guard returned to his desk. "What do you want?"

"I want Joe treated with respect. I don't want people calling him a baby raper, for one thing. Then I want him to have a cell to himself. I want it to be clean and to have a mattress and bedding. And I want him fed decent food."

"Why do you care what happens to a sick bastard like him?"

"You don't know what he is, Mister Fuller, or what he did. But you set Joe up to be raped. You appointed yourself judge and jury, and arranged for the execution."

George Fuller sat back down behind his desk. "What if I report you?"

"Good idea," I said. "Can you imagine it? 'Jail guard presses charges against local priest. Claims he slapped him around, cussed him out, and threw him on the floor.' People would either think you were telling the truth, in which case they would see you as a wimp and a fool, or they would think you were hallucinating, in which case they would conclude you were crazy."

"You're the crazy one — coming in here and knocking me around like you was some kind of animal."

"You're right. I am crazy. I'm capable of anything."

"You really are. Why do you got to protect that pervert in there? He just got what he deserved."

"I don't think so. Think what it's like to be raped. If you tell, you're publicly humiliated. If you don't tell, you let the rapist get away with it. It's a tough choice, Mister Fuller. In some small way, I've tried to help you understand that."

George Fuller glared at me. "You're right down here in the mud with us, now, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "I never thought I wasn't. Just see Joe is taken care of."

He stared at me blankly.

I turned to leave. "I suppose this isn't exactly how you wanted me to handle this, God," I prayed as I walked out the door. But I did not yet feel truly penitent. I still don't. Secretly I like to think that God enjoyed my performance.

The next day I went by to talk with Rachel. “So Marion Bierce and a policeman talked with Artemio at school yesterday?” I was repeating what Rachel had told me in her message on my answering machine the day before. “What did they ask him?”

“About what he and Joe had done.”

“And what did he say?”

“He feels he said too much. He says he thinks they pretended to know more than they did.”

“Smart boy.”

“Yes. And then his counselor, whom he went to see after school, did the same thing. He figures they’re all in it together and that he told her too much also.”

I sighed. “I wonder how much ‘too much’ is.”

Rachel shrugged. “I guess Marion has established that there was some degree of sexual contact between them, though it isn’t clear just how much.”

“I don’t think it was a great deal,” I said. “How did Artemio respond to the news of Joe being in jail?”

“He took it very hard. After I told him this morning, he went to his room and hasn’t come out since, except to eat lunch.” She looked at her watch. “It’s almost five now.”

“You think he blames himself?”

“I think that’s partly it. But also I think it reminds him of losing his father.”

“Can he remember that?”

“He was old enough to remember some things. Of course how much is really memory and how much is how he wanted it to be isn’t always clear. But he does have some memories.

1 “What did happen, Rachel?”

“I guess I’m a little like Temio. Some things I don’t like talking about.” She crossed her arms in front of her, and turned slightly away.

“Can you share with me just the basic facts?”

“The basic facts, as you call them, are really pretty simple. About five years ago my husband disappeared. One day he was there. The next he was gone. I can assume they killed him. I don’t know whether they tortured him; probably they did. It was one of those dictatorships down there that the United States supported because it was anti communist.”

I nodded. "I understand your bitterness."

"It isn't just against the United States that I'm bitter."

"It's against God, too, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Where was this Love Absolute you talk about when my husband needed Him? Where was He when *I* needed Him?"

I shook my head. "I can't answer those questions."

"They seem like questions that need an answer."

"They do."

She stared into her empty coffee cup as if hoping to find some consolation or encouragement, or perhaps even an answer there. "And where is He now that Temio needs a father?"

"Artemio has a father. Or at least someone who is like a father to him."

"Joe?"

I nodded.

"So Joe is the presence of Love Absolute in my son's life?" Rachel smiled. "I doubt that Marion Bierce would see it that way."

"In real life things of the devil and things of God can sometimes be confused," I said. "That's the meaning of the Barabas story."

"What's Barabas got to do with it?" She stood up and went to the stove for more coffee.

"Barabas means 'son of the father.'"

She looked at me blankly. "Son of the Father," she repeated.

"Yes. Origen even claims that in some ancient texts Barabas was actually called Jesus Barabas."

In spite of herself she seemed to find this interesting. "So they were both called Jesus Barabas." She filled her coffee cup.

"That's right. And there were other similarities. Both were Jews. Both were revolutionaries. Both were threatened with crucifixion for political crimes. Each, in his own way, was perceived to be a threat to the established order. They had a lot in common."

"You want more coffee."

I nodded. She poured me another cup and pushed a plate of cookies across her kitchen table so I would have easier access to it. “Barabas was a common criminal, wasn’t he,” she asked.

“He probably was a Zealot,” I said. “Whether he was common criminal using that movement as a cover or was in fact a sincere revolutionary is hard to tell. All sources seems to agree, however, that he was a dangerous and violent man.”

“And Jesus is the one who ushers in the New Kingdom,” Rachel said. “That’s what you keep saying anyhow. Sometimes I have trouble seeing it.”

“Yes. He is the bringer of Shalom — of peace, and well-being. The one who ushers into the world the reign of God, the rule of Love Absolute.”

“And was he successful?”

I sighed. “Empirically it’s hard to justify the idea he was,” I admitted.

“So why do you believe it?”

I considered for several moments how to answer Rachel’s question. “Trust,” I said finally. “I suppose it’s largely a matter of trust.”

“But there is no *evidence* that anything like love is behind it all,” Rachel said.

I recalled Joe huddled on the bunk in the jail that morning. Every day the newspapers challenged the idea that Love was in control of the world, as did the events of one’s own daily life.

“But there is evidence,” I said, finally. “Even though usually it doesn’t make it into the newspapers.”

“Where is that evidence?”

“We find ourselves trapped in this darkness. . . in this ongoing nightmare we individually and collectively re-create each day. There seems to be something fundamentally wrong about the way we’re going about things, yet we don’t seem to be able to come to any agreement about the nature of that wrongness, or how to correct it.”

“Yes, that’s how it seems to me,” Rachel said.

“But, into every situation however dark it is there comes something else; perhaps a small act of kindness, a moment of comfort, a dream, a brief period of time during which a person or a group rises above its usual dreary manner of behaving. It takes many forms. But always there comes the suggestion that things need not be the way they are; this, at least, is my experience.

And that's Love Absolute calling to us — calling through the confusion and cruelty in which we are enmeshed — calling us home. That's the meaning of the Advent of Christ in history. That's what the New Testament story is about."

"So whenever this *something else* comes into an actual situation, that is Jesus?"

"That is the Christ."

"And when this something else does come into the world," Rachel said, "it's not recognized by the world. So the world crucifies it."

"Yes. That's the meaning of the New Testament story. But the final meaning is the resurrection. The love that seems so vulnerable and weak ultimately wins out."

Rachel shook her head. "It's a beautiful sentiment, and beautifully stated. As literature it's great."

"But only as literature?"

"I don't know." With a wave of her hand she swept aside all the previous conversation as so much talk. "We were talking about Joe."

1 "I'm raising the question of whether he is Barabas or Jesus in Artemio's life."

"I understand that."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know, Father Glyphis. I really don't know."

"It's hard for you to sort that out."

She nodded. "Yes, it is."

"How do think Artemio would answer the question?"

"Joe is still his idol."

"I see."

"Speaking of Temio, he said he wanted to talk with you before you left — said it was important."

"I suppose, then, it had better be now. I've got to get on soon."

In response to Rachel calling him, Artemio emerged from his bedroom looking sleepy and a little sullen. After taking a Pepsi from the refrigerator, he joined his mother and me at the kitchen table, sitting beside her. He grabbed a cookie from the plate in front of me and began munching on it without any great relish.

"Your mother said you wanted to talk with me."

Without hurrying, Artemio finished the mouthful of cookie he was working on before speaking. "It's about the birthday party."

"What birthday party is that?" I asked.

"Joe and me and some kids were going to give Michael a surprise party for his birthday today."

"I see. This is his birthday?"

Artemio nodded. "He's thirteen today."

"So I guess it's a problem now that Joe is. . . not available."

"Joe was going to invite him by his place to watch a video. That's when we were going to surprise him."

"Had Joe invited him?"

"Yes, and he was coming. But he knows Joe is in jail now."

"So there goes the party, eh?"

"It's more than that."

"More?"

"More ... serious."

"How is that?"

"Michael is going somewhere else tonight."

"To Norman's?"

"Yes."

"And you're worried."

"If I tell you something, don't say where you heard it."

"I won't"

"Norman would kill me."

"You believe he would actually kill you?"

"He would kill me."

"It sounds like you have something that really needs to be talked about," I said.

Rachel put her arm around her son.

"We'll see that you're safe," I said.

"We have to make Michael safe, too."

"Yes," I said. "But we'll need your help to do that."

“Norman has knives and guns out at his place. Michael told me he goes with him sometimes and shoots the gun.”

“A rifle?”

“No, a pistol, like cowboys use.”

“A revolver?”

“Yes. One of those guns with a barrel in it that turns. They use it to play Russian roulette.”

“Do you know this is true, Temio?” his mother asked.

“It’s true, Mom. Michael told me himself he played Russian roulette. He wasn’t bragging. It made him scared.”

“Is he sure there was a bullet in the gun?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And you’re afraid something will happen out there tonight?”

“This is Michael’s thirteenth birthday. They’ll do something. Thirteen is a special number for them.”

“Because of Satan worship?”

“Yes.”

“What do you know about what they’re planning?”

“Not much. But it has to be something that has death in it.”

“Death in it?”

“Like sometimes they do something in a graveyard, or they drink something from a human skull, or they kill an animal; things like that.”

“I see. What else can you tell us?” I asked.

“Well, when they celebrate something special it also has to have something to do with. . . you know. . . with sex.” He glanced uneasily at his mother.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said. “Just try to answer Father Glyphis’ questions.”

“That’s all I know. Norman teaches that there are two things that give you power. Sex — and being close to death.”

CHAPTER X

After Artemio shared with me his concerns about Michael's thirteenth birthday, I asked to use Rachel's phone. I dialed the number of Michael's foster mother.

"Martha Curry?"

"Who is this?" Her voice was impatient.

"This is Father Glyphis. I hope you weren't already in bed."

"No."

"Is Michael there?"

"No."

"Ah .I was hoping to catch him. We have some work that needs doing around the parsonage here. I understand he's interested in earning a few dollars."

"Michael's always interested in money. But if you can get him to work for it, you know something I don't."

"I see. I would like to give him the chance. Do you know where he might be reached?"

"No."

"Sounds like he's hard to keep track of."

"This isn't the first time he's run off."

"He must be a real worry to you."

"I am worried, I don't mind telling you. Suppose something happens to him while he's off running around? Who are they going to hold responsible?"

"You're afraid they might blame you."

"You know it. But do they tell me what I'm supposed to do to keep him from running off? If I lay a hand on one of these kids they go screaming abuse to Human Services. Never mind if they deserved what they got."

"Have you contacted the police?"

"They say they can't be chasing around after Michael every time he runs away."

“What about human services?”

“I called their emergency number. They said to call the police.”

“Sounds like a run around.”

“So what’s new?”

“You must be feeling pretty fed-up with all this.”

“I may just have the state worker come pick him up,” Martha said. “They don’t pay enough for all the grief he puts me through.”

“Is there any place he frequently goes — or friends he hangs out with?”

1 I conjectured that the silence indicated a reluctance on her part to tell me. I waited.

“Sometimes he hangs with that McLain boy,” she said finally.

“I see.”

“And I don’t even know where he lives.”

“I think I do. How you would feel if I went by and tried to find him? I’m not busy right now.”

“You don’t need to do that, Father. It’s not your job.”

“I know. But I’d like to be helpful.”

“Well, it might ease my mind. I am worried.”

“I know you are,” I said. I could hear the television blaring in the background.

Michael hoped he wouldn’t cough so much as he took the pungent smoke from the marijuana cigarette into his lungs. They had all laughed at him when he choked the time before. Norman, directly across from him in his wicker rocking chair, smiled. Michael detected mockery in the smile, but also genuine affection.

“This is just the appetizer,” Norman said. “I’ve got something really special for later.”

Michael succeeded in getting a reasonable amount of the smoke into his lungs without mishap. He held it there a few seconds, and then exhaled, coughing slightly as he did so. He lifted himself unsteadily from the couch and took the cigarette to Bobby, who was sitting in one of the easy chairs.

Bobby took a deep drag, and leaned back in his chair. A look of contentment dominated the rough features of his face. Michael noticed he had nicotine stains in his beard and mustache.

He looked older than thirty-seven. He handed the cigarette to Terry, the forth and final member of Michael's birthday party,

"Do you think we ought to take something else after getting so high on all this stuff?"

Terry gestured toward the drink in front of him and the marijuana cigarette he had just received. A slender, effeminate fifteen- year-old whose smooth face showed, as yet, no sign of developing a beard, he sat in the second easy chair with his feet tucked up under him.

"These drugs are preparation for what I'm going to give you later," Norman said.

"But I feel dizzy already."

"You shouldn't have drunk so much at dinner. It serves you right."

"I don't feel bad," Terry said with a giggle. "Just dizzy."

"You'll be ready for the stronger stuff when we get to it. But we've got other business first. It's Michael's thirteenth birthday."

"When do I get my presents?" Michael asked.

"I guess it's time to get things ready," Norman said. He rose from his rocking chair.

"Terry, turn the lamp off. Bobby, you light the candles. Michael, light the incense." While these preparations were being made, Norman went to one of the back rooms and returned with a human skull. It had a candle attached to the top. To judge by the tallow drippings on it, the skull had been used many times before. But this was the first time Michael had ever seen it.

Norman placed the skull at one end of the oriental rug that occupied much of the floor space in the main room of the cabin. He then spaced other candles around the edge. Finally he brought out a large package wrapped in birthday paper. This he placed on the seat of the wicker rocking chair. When these arrangements were completed Norman instructed Michael to lie down on his back, in the middle of the rug, with his feet toward the candle.

Uneasily, Michael complied.

Norman then had Bobby position himself at Michael's head. He told Michael to raise himself to a sitting position, and then lay back against Bobby so his shoulders were on Bobby's lap, and his head leaning against his stomach. He then had Bobby take hold of Michael's wrists and hold them crossed in front of the boys's chest. Norman then sat on Michael's knees.

"Terry, get me the silver dagger." He gestured in the direction of the wall where it was displayed near some other weapons.

"What are you going to do, Norman?" There was fear in Michael's voice.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you.”

“Why do you need the dagger?”

“An initiation. A coming-of-age ritual.”

“Norman, don’t hurt me. We’re friends.”

“Don’t snivel.” There was a sharpness in Norman’s voice.

“Please, Norman.”

“Give me the knife,” Norman said to Terry. “And pull his pants down.”

Michael tried to struggle but Bobby was strong and had no trouble holding him. Terry unbuckled Michael’s belt, and then unfastened and unzipped his blue jeans. He pulled the pants down as far as he was able with Norman sitting on Michael’s knees.

“His underpants too,” Norman said

Terry complied. “You aren’t going to hurt him for real, are you?” he asked.

“Who’s in charge here?” Norman glared at Terry.

“You are. Only I don’t think you ought to hurt him.”

“Get his shoes off, and help me get his pants the rest of the way off,” Norman said. This took a little effort as Michael was now in a panic, and the adrenaline pumping in his veins gave some force to his struggling. But soon he was left with only his T-shirt on, and his legs were once again securely pinned beneath Norman.

“Please stop,” Michael pleaded between sobs. “This isn’t fun anymore.”

“You have a choice,” Norman said. “Stop crying and listen.”

Michael brought his crying under partial control. “What choice?”

“Three choices, really. First, we can make you into a girl.” Norman took hold of Michael’s penis and held it up. “Do you want to be a girl?”

Michael shook his head. “Don’t, Norman.”

“Don’t want to be a girl?” Norman asked. “Some guys would jump at the chance, right, Terry?”

“Not that way,” Terry said.

“Well, we can just cut away the balls here, and make you into a eunuch. Know what eunuchs are? They’re boys who never grow up to be men. If you were a eunuch you would have a wonderful singing voice the rest of your life. You would be a male soprano. Men love boys’

voices. But we have to act fast! Your voice may change at any minute. Do you want to be a soprano?"

Again Michael shook his head.

"Well, there is one other possibility. In some places they circumcise boys at puberty."

Norman pinched Michael's foreskin between his fingers.

"Please, Norman. I don't want you to do anything."

"But we have to initiate you, Michael. What do you choose?"

Michael just shook his head and cried.

Norman waited for an answer. Then he shrugged. "Okay, I'll decide for you. We'll just circumcise you." He instructed Terry to go get a pan from below the sink, the vegetable cutting board hanging on the wall, and some gauze from the bathroom. He then asked Terry to hold Michael's hips down so he couldn't squirm so much.

"I don't think you ought to do this, Norman," Terry said. But he complied.

Carefully Norman placed Michael's foreskin on the cutting board and took the dagger in his hand. "Hold still. If you struggle and scream I might slip and mess everything up."

Michael was terrified. But he was even more terrified Norman might decide to cut off all his genitals, so he tried not to struggle. He could not, however, keep himself from crying.

Norman positioned the knife on the cutting board. He paused. Michael braced himself for what he anticipated would be unbearable pain. He closed his eyes. When nothing happened for a few seconds he opened his eyes. Norman was sitting in an upright position with his hands in front of his chest. One of his hands still held the dagger. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be in a trance. "Satan is speaking to me," he said. He paused. "Satan doesn't want this sacrifice." Again he paused. "He wants something else."

Michael thought Norman was acting. It was almost comical. Yet at the same time it felt as though Satan really might be speaking to him.

Norman looked up and saw his birdcage across the room. "Yes," he said. "Yes. We don't want to hurt Michael. But there must be a substitute." The room itself seemed to pause, and hang in a state of suspended animation, while Norman raised himself, went to the cage, and returned with one of the parakeets. He pinned it down on the cutting board in front of Michael, and without further ceremony, cut off its head. He then carried the board, with the decapitated bird on

it, back to the cage where he held it up in front of the remaining bird. "Your lover has gone to Satan," he said. The remaining bird chirped, and hopped nervously around the cage.

After placing the cutting board in the sink, Norman returned to Michael. "You're safe," he said, throwing his arms around him. "A substitute has been found."

Michael tried to push him away. "Why do you be nice to me one minute and scare me the next?" His face was red, and his voice shrill and hysterical. "Why can't you just be nice?"

"I must teach you, Michael. I must teach you the mysteries that Satan has taught me."

"And why did you do that to the bird?" Michael glared at him.

"It was for your sake he had to die," Norman said.

"I want to go," Michael said, struggling in earnest to free himself from Bobby's grip, and from Norman's embrace.

"Help us hold him," Norman said to Terry. "We must hold our baby until he is done with his tantrum."

For about twenty minutes Michael screamed and thrashed beneath the gentle restraints of the other three. Then, without warning, he fell into Norman's lap and relaxed. Norman smiled down into his face. "Your rage isn't for us," he said. "It's for all those bastards who threw you away."

"Yes," said Michael.

"Like your parents."

"My parents are bastards," Michael said.

"And all those bleeding heart judges and foster parents and human service workers, and therapists who pretended to love you but who didn't."

"I hate them."

"The respectable ones, the self-righteous ones, are the worst," Norman said. "They pretend to care but dump you in the end."

"Respectable people eat shit," Michael said.

"But we love you." Norman gently stroked the boy's sweaty forehead. "We won't throw you away."

Michael began to cry again, but this time it was just a quiet release. It gave him comfort. He reached out and put his arms around Norman. Norman held him firmly, and gently rocked him. "My little baby," he said. "Satan loves you even when you're weak."

Whether for a minute or a hour Michael could not have said, but for some timeless and blissful period the four of them remained huddled together on the Persian rug, bathing in the gentle light of the candles, and inhaling the nourishment of the pungent incense. For the first time in his life Michael had named his rage and accurately identified its target. Now he had nothing left to defend. He could know and accept, without shame, the deepest longings in his heart, and for this moment at least, feel that something in the world outside himself understood and responded. He belonged. He was accepted. He was loved.

“We must prepare for the final ceremony, now” Norman whispered. He insisted everybody remove their clothes. Then they replaced the candles that were getting low, and ignited some fresh incense. When he was satisfied with the appearance of the room, Norman withdrew to his bedroom and returned with his revolver, and a handful of shells. He spun the cylinder and checked to see that the chambers were empty. Then he placed one bullet in a chamber and pushed the cylinder back into place. “We must sit down facing the skull, in a semicircle,” he said.

When the little group was sitting cross-legged, Norman allowed for a few minutes of silence. Then he said, “When Satan spoke to me he said I didn’t need to hurt Michael, and I was glad. But he told me something else. He said we must all go to the edge of death. Satan knows our needs and is faithful to those who trust him. But we must show that trust. And we must know how close we are to death at all times.”

Norman spun the cylinder, pulled the hammer back, and handed the gun to Terry. You must show him you trust him.”

“I don’t want to,” Terry said.

“But you must. This is the last time Satan will require this. He will let no harm come to those he loves.”

“The last time?” Terry asked.

“The last time.”

Terry picked the gun up and stared at it a long time as it rested in his hand. Then he gripped it firmly, aimed it at his head, and closed his eyes in a tense grimace.

The gun clicked harmlessly.

Terry breathed again, and handed the gun back to Norman with a smile.

“Good,” Norman said. Now you must show these people who you really are. When you are here alone with me you like to dress up in girls clothes.”

“Don’t,” Terry said. “That’s just for us.”

“These people here are our friends,” Norman said. “It’s okay for them to know. You’re as pretty as any girl. Stand up and show them.”

“I don’t want to, Norman.”

“Yes, you must. In fact, you must dance for us.” Norman went to his stereo system and selected a tape. Soon the sensual melodies of Scheherazade filled the room. With some additional persuasion from Norman, Terry stood and began to sway and move to the slow rhythm of the music. Norman prepared and lit another marijuana cigarette, which he passed around. The three in the audience watched, mesmerized, as Terry danced. Although he made up his dance as he went along, his graceful movements fit the music as perfectly as the disciplined gestures of a trained Arabian dancing girl.

When the last strains of Scheherazade died out, Terry sat down in his place. Norman smiled at him. “You want to be a girl. Satan doesn’t hold you in contempt for the longings of your heart. The world makes you ashamed of the wellspring of your love. The God of respectable people hates you. But Satan does not. Satan accepts you.”

Norman picked up the revolver, spun the cylinder, and again pulled the hammer back into a position of readiness. This time he handed the gun to Bobby.

“You’re a retard,” he said.

“I’m not.”

“You are. You can’t even tie your own shoes.”

Bobby looked down at his bare feet. The skin was rough, and the toe nails were twisted and gnarled. He was ashamed of his feet. Not only were they ugly, but they reminded him of his humiliating disability. Norman told the truth. Bobby could not tie his shoes.

“Satan loves your feet,” Norman said. “He doesn’t care whether you can tie your shoes. Respectable people want to put you in an institution somewhere far away so they won’t have to see you, or even remember you, all because you can’t tie your shoes. But not Satan.”

“Satan loves me?” Bobby asked.

“Yes, he does. So you must show him you trust him.”

Bobby looked down at the gun in his hand. “No.”

“Yes, you must.” Norman crawled over and kneeled in front of Bobby. In both of his own hands, Norman took the hand in which Bobby held the gun. When the barrel was pointed at Bobby’s temple, he said, “Pull the trigger.”

“No.” Bobby was pale and trembling.

“Yes,” said Norman. He placed his own finger over Bobby’s, and squeezed.

Again the gun clicked harmlessly. Bobby smiled.

“Satan loves you,” Norman told him. “You have gone with him to the edge of death and back.”

“Now you,” Bobby said. He handed Norman the gun.

Norman smiled. “Yes .I must take the journey too.” He spun the cylinder while returning to his place. He sat down and cocked the hammer. “I’m not sure whether I want the gun to go off or not.” He pointed the gun directly at his face. After only a brief hesitation he pulled the trigger. The gun clicked. “I’m still here, with all you beautiful people.” He looked at Michael. “Now we have only the birthday boy.”

Norman again spun the cylinder, and set the hammer. He handed the gun to Michael.

“You’ve already done enough to me, Norman. You threatened to cut off my pecker. Why should I have to do this, too?

“Only this once,” Norman said. “This is your thirteenth birthday. It’s the most important birthday you will ever have. You must prove your trust in Satan.”

“Why can’t we just have fun and forget all this death stuff?”

“Being close to death is the ultimate drug. It’s more powerful than peyote or LSD or anything. It’s the drug I promised you earlier.”

“I don’t like it,” Michael said.

“Just this once.” Norman was firm. “You’re a throwaway, just like I am. Trust Satan, and trust me, and you’ll have a new home — one that will not throw you away.”

Michael remembered the experience of belonging when he was being held earlier, and he began to weaken.

“You’ve been brave before,” Norman said. “Try to be brave again.”

“When was I brave?”

“When you betrayed Joe. It took courage to tell on him.”

“It did.”

“So be brave again. Everybody else has done it. You can’t be one of us until you do.”

“Is this the last time?”

“It will be the last time I will ask you to do this. You only need to be initiated once.”

Slowly Michael raised the gun to his head.

I parked my car a few hundred yards short of Norman’s cabin. I didn’t know whether the “birthday party” would be inside or outside, or indeed whether it would be at Norman’s camp at all. It seemed possible they might have the ceremony down at the bridge.

As I approached the cabin I could see the dim flickering light in the window. Then I heard the shot.

It might mean anything, I told myself. But I remembered Artemio telling me they sometimes played Russian roulette at Norman’s, and I began to hurry toward the cabin, first walking rapidly, and then breaking into a run as anxious thoughts undermined my caution.

Without announcing myself I tried the door. It was locked. I knocked loudly and demanded to be let in. “It’s me, Father Glyphis. Open the door, Norman. What’s going on in there?”

I heard scurrying around and furtive voices giving orders and arguing. I couldn’t discern the content of the talk, but when it became apparent nobody was coming to open the door, I kicked it. With a splintering sound the door flew open.

Still naked, Norman stood at the opposite side of the living room with the revolver in his hand. He pointed it at me. “Don’t come any closer.”

I looked down at the boy sprawled on the floor. Blood smeared the side of his head and face, and speckled the floor around him. It took a moment to recognize Michael. His body was trembling with involuntary convulsions.

“My God, Norman. What have you done?”

“I didn’t kill him. He shot himself. We all took a turn. He just wasn’t lucky.”

I started toward Norman. “Put the gun away. We’ve got to get help.”

“Don’t come any closer.”

“For Christ’s sake, Norman. Stop pointing that thing at me. We don’t have time to argue. We’ve got to try to get help for Michael.”

“I have to kill you,” Norman said.

“Why?”

“Because you’ve seen this.”

“But you told me you didn’t do it. You were playing Russian roulette, right?”

“Nobody’ll believe me. They’ll send me to prison for the rest of my life.”

“I believe you were playing Russian roulette with Michael. I’ll testify that I have reason to believe that. It will go better if you just go to the police with me and cooperate with them.”

“I don’t trust them. They’ll make promises and not keep them.”

“Try to trust me,” I said. “You know me.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“We were friends once. You trusted me then.”

“You threw me away.”

I couldn’t answer him.

“Like all the others,” he added.

Those four words, like a bright flash of lightning, ignited the entire inner landscape of Norman’s heart and soul. *Like all the others*. Yes, in the final analysis I was no different from the others. I also had abandoned Norman. I looked at him, at the gun, and then at Michael.

“Yes, Norman, I did.”

“At first I thought you were different from the others.”

“I’m sorry, Norman.”

“You said you loved me.”

“I did love you. I wasn’t lying.”

“I believed you. At least I thought you loved me a little bit.”

“It really was true, Norman.”

“Then why did you throw me away.”

“Because I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what respectable people would say?”

“Yes. And also I was afraid God would condemn my love for you.”

“So it was God who made you throw me away.”

“No. It was my misunderstanding of God.”

“You were afraid, and you ran.”

“I’m asking for your forgiveness,” I said.

“Forgiveness?”

“For putting my fear before your needs.”

Norman let his hand with the gun in it fall to his side. He stared at me. “You did love me a little, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“And you did take me to Boston.”

“We had a wonderful time there.”

“Yes. We did.” He allowed me to come across the room and take the gun from him.

“Thank you,” I said. I put my arms around him hugged him. Norman was tall now, but he still felt like a little child in my arms.

As he got dressed, Norman watched me examine Michael.

“Is he breathing?”

It was clear that Michael was already dead. I shook my head

“What do you want us to do?” Norman asked.

I told him to drive to the nearest phone and call the police and an ambulance. “And I heard some other people in here when I was outside,” I said. “Take them with you.”

Norman called Terry and Bobby out of the back room where they were hiding. “Get your clothes on,” he told them. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

They were only too happy to comply.

After they left, I said extreme unction over the child’s body. Then I found his clothes and dressed him. “You will not throw him away, God,” I prayed. “I know that now.” I picked Michael up and carried him to the rocking chair. There was a package wrapped in birthday paper on the chair, which I pushed to the floor. Then I sat down, and carefully arranged Michael in my lap. I rocked him gently, and told him of God’s love, and of heaven.

CHAPTER XI

For a fleeting moment Joe was able to entertain the delicious illusion that he was outside the jail cell, looking in through the bars at Marion Bierce, who was the prisoner. But the sharp tones of her voice jolted him back into reality. "You are not to have contact with any child while this situation is being investigated."

"Does that include my daughter?" He stood up to face her.

"Samantha and Artemio will be specifically mentioned in the protection order. But please understand: you are to have contact with no child."

Joe paced within the narrow confines of the cell. "No child," he repeated. "I am to have contact with no child. Am I poison?"

"We have reason to believe children may not be safe around you."

"And where are you getting all this information?"

"Artemio told us everything."

"I don't believe it."

"Oh?" Marion raised her eyebrows. "You think there may be more that he hasn't yet told us. I hope you're wrong."

Joe shook his head in disbelief. "You're evil."

"Perhaps you're projecting, Mister Michaud. You, after all, are the one accused of child molesting."

Joe sat back down on his bunk, folded his arms in front of him, and looked at the floor. "Is there anything else you need to tell me before you leave?"

"Yes. Michael is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Your other 'friend,' Michael Quint, is dead. He was shot in the head last night."

"My God. What happened?"

“All we know for sure is he was out at Norman McLain’s, and that now he is dead. Perhaps he was murdered. I guess it was his birthday.”

“Jesus. This can’t be true.”

“I’m afraid it is Mr. Michaud.”

“Why?” Joe sat on the bunk. “Why did you let this happen?” he asked. It wasn’t clear whom he was addressing.

“I thought you might be relieved, Mr. Michaud. After all, Michael might have had a lot more to tell us.”

Joe looked up at her. He could find no words to express how appalled he was at her perception of him. He hoped she would leave very soon. He didn’t want her to see him cry.

The sandwich — cold cuts, wilted lettuce, slices of slightly overripe tomato, and a glob of mayonnaise squashed between two slices of white bread — was served with a cup of black coffee. Joe took a bite and found he could produce no saliva for chewing and swallowing it. He forced the one bite down and set the rest aside. The coffee was too hot to drink.

He lay back on his bunk and tried to find some small piece of debris amidst the wreckage of his life that he might take hold of: any cause for hope, however improbable; any affirmation of who he was, however minimal; any reason at all to think life might now be worth living. Family. Friends. Job. Reputation. Self-respect. Meaningful activity. Hope that it should ever be different. It was all gone. There was nothing.

He had been unable to save Michael. He had been unable to save himself. He thought about the one thing he could have done differently during the last days. He could have screamed when he was being raped. He couldn’t have physically fought them off; either one alone was stronger than he. But he could have screamed. He could have made public their crime to anyone who might have been within hearing, and in that manner, perhaps, he could have forced them either to back off or to kill him. He recalled the terror he felt about the prospect of being grabbed by his testicles again. At that moment he hadn’t preferred torture to disgrace. He was no Spartan youth capable of allowing the fox to chew his belly into shreds without complaint in order to maintain a manly standard of conduct. Joe had kept silent while his humiliation was made complete.

Now he was ready for death. In one respect that readiness was liberating. He was free now to kill his assailants. Then he could either kill himself or turn himself in. It made no difference.

Contemplating his revenge was the only pleasure left. It was the only remaining task around which he could organize a meaningful existence. He had one qualm. Would God cast him out if he murdered the men? He wasn't sure what he thought, either about God or about an afterlife. In his heart God had reality, and he wanted His love. He sat up and placed his feet on the floor. Then, placing his face in the palms of his hands, he tried to pray. "Will you still love me if I kill those men?" Nothing came to him. "Why are you silent?" he asked finally. He stared at the bare wall of his jail cell. The God who was a reality in his heart found no confirmation in the world around him.

The roast beef sub sitting on the TV tray in front of him came from the delicatessen in the Shop and Save. In contrast with jail food it looked like a feast, but Joe was still not sure he could eat it. He had told me he wasn't hungry, but I had insisted on buying him some food after getting him out of jail.

I poured us each a cup of coffee. "Thank you again for getting me out of that place," he said. "And for finding me a lawyer."

"We're friends," I said, bringing him his mug of coffee and setting it down on his TV tray. I then settled into my swivel chair where I had a second TV tray with my own sandwich.

"I think I'm ready to hear about Michael, now," Joe said.

I studied his face for a moment. "They were playing Russian roulette."

Joe sighed. "How much pressure do you think Norman put on him to play?"

"Probably a fair bit. But the whole group was playing — including Norman."

"Crazy bastards."

I shrugged. "People do crazy things when they don't have much hope."

"I wish I could have stopped it."

"There was nothing you could have done, Joe."

He picked his sandwich up, looked at it, and put it back down. "Michael wanted me to adopt him," he said.

"That wasn't realistic."

“If we could have had our birthday party for him, he wouldn’t have gone there.”

“That would have made a difference — at least in the short run. But it wasn’t your choice to be in jail.”

Joe picked the sandwich up again, and this time took a couple of bites. He chewed slowly, almost painfully, and with some difficulty swallowed. Then set the sandwich aside. He smiled apologetically. “I’m really not very hungry.”

“Eat as much as you like.”

“Where is Norman now?”

“They took him down to Bangor for questioning.”

“Are they going to prefer charges?”

“I don’t think they’re going to charge him with 1st degree murder. Beyond that it isn’t very clear. He’s been pretty cooperative with them.”

“In what way?”

“For one thing he cleared up the matter of what happened to David Saunders.”

“Really?”

“Yes. David died, he claims, when the two of them were playing Russian roulette some years ago.”

“And still he played it again with Michael and the others?”

“It was a kind of repetition compulsion, I think. The issue of his guilt about David never got resolved in his mind, because he never confessed it. So he repeated the same scenario again — probably half hoping he might be the one who would be killed.

“Do you think Norman is telling the truth about David?”

“Yes.”

“They have the remains?”

“The body was buried down near the swimming hole at the broken bridge. Norman went down there and got the skull from the body after it decomposed. He used the skull for his satanic ceremonies. It was in the room where I found Michael. It had a candle on top of it.”

“Incredible.”

“It is. The skull would have been the most powerful thing Norman owned. It would have been associated with love, guilt, betrayal, sex, death — the most potent forces in his world.”

“Do you think you can really understand what motivates a kid like him?” Joe asked.

I took a sip of coffee, and reflected. “As it spins itself out, his psychology is convoluted,” I said. “I’m sure I don’t understand it fully. But the mainspring under it all is perhaps very simple. It’s theological. He can’t forgive a God who let his parents abandon him. That’s the ultimate betrayal — to create an unquenchable and irresistible thirst for love in the depth of your being, and then create nothing in your world that responds to that need in a dependable manner.”

“I can understand that,” Joe said.

“You and I both can,” I said. “We also have longings that have no way of being fulfilled in the world.”

Joe looked at me and frowned. “Maybe so,” he said. “Anyhow, what else did Norman tell the police?”

“That was about it.”

“What about that group from Massachusetts?”

“Those were friends of his. I think they supplied him with the drugs he sold up here.”

“Did he say that?”

“No. He won’t tell the police about them. Won’t even tell me.”

“You think he’s afraid of them?”

“No. I don’t think there’s much Norman is afraid of. I think he keeps his mouth shut out of loyalty.”

“He does have his virtues,” Joe said.

“He does.”

“What about the pornography?”

“All the police found at his place were pictures of naked kids,” I said, “like the ones you bought from him. Most of them look like they were taken down by the bridge. None of it was actually pornographic.”

“Where’d the kids come from?”

“A few were local. Some may have been connected with the people from Massachusetts.

Joe nodded. “So the ‘Satanic cult’ turned out to be one very bright and confused young man — hardly more than a kid, really — who dabbled in Satanism, sold drugs, did some crazy and dangerous things, and who had a small following of social misfits.”

“That seems to be about it,” I said.

“Not quite what Marion Bierce was looking for.”

"No, it wasn't."

Joe sipped his coffee and stared off into space for a few moments. Finally he said, "Norman sure is a funny mixture of things isn't he."

"He is," I said. "Had things taken a different turn for him he might have been a saint."

"Do you blame yourself?" he asked.

"I suppose I do," I said. "I think I could have made a difference."

"The same is true with Michael and me," Joe said.

"With Michael and you?"

"Yes. He wanted me to love him. He wanted me to take him into my house and treat him as my son."

"You did what you could, Joe."

He shook his head. "I promised Michael love, and then pushed him away," he said. "And now he's dead."

"You showed him your love as well as you knew how."

Joe slumped in his chair. "I feel very dirty," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"I have nothing left, you know."

"Are you thinking about killing yourself?"

"I don't know."

"I hope you don't."

He sat up. "There's one good thing about it. Now that I have nothing to lose, I'm free."

"Only a person without any significant relationships is completely free," I said.

Joe smiled. "I'm free."

"What about me? I care about you."

"But you don't *need* me."

"Your daughter."

"I can't even see her right now. I'll never have a normal relationship with her again."

"There's nothing meaningful to do with the kind of freedom you're talking about," I said.

"You're not quite right, Demetri. There's one thing left."

I knew he was talking about revenge.

Joe stood in front of the cans in the spaghetti aisle. He was sick of Chef Boyardee spaghetti, but lacked the energy, or the imagination, to come up with an alternative.

He caught sight of Samantha as she walked past the end of the aisle. He had known that sooner or later in the natural course of events his path would cross hers, and with Artemio's as well. Anton wasn't that big. He had wondered what he would do, but had formulated no plan. He decided to wait and see whether she saw him, and if she did, to let her take the lead. He was forbidden to seek her out, but if she happened to see him in the grocery store, and came up to him of her own accord, that couldn't be in violation of the restraining order.

He returned to the dilemma of the spaghetti. He threw two cans into his shopping cart and proceeded down the aisle. He reached the end just as she emerged from the aisle next to his, carrying a large package of Friskies.

She hesitated, then shouted, "Dad! It's you!" She ran up to him and tried to hug him, but didn't put the Friskies down in time. While they clasped the Friskies tightly between them, she looked up into his face. "You didn't do those things they said, did you?"

"What did they say I did?"

Samantha looked down. "Nasty things."

At that moment Karen emerged from the next aisle, pushing her shopping cart.

"Samantha," she called. "Come here."

"I've got to go," Samantha said. "I'm not supposed to see you."

"I don't want it that way," Joe said.

"Did you do those things?"

Joe didn't know how to answer. He shook his head and tried to find words.

"Samantha. Come here now," her mother called.

Samantha obeyed. Joe pushed his cart directly to a check out line, bought the two cans of spaghetti, and escaped from the store as rapidly as possible.

Joe had found the gun advertised in *Uncle Henry's Swap or Sell it Guide*. Rather than invite Joe into his house, the man who had advertised the gun brought it to the porch.

"Can you show me how it works?" Joe asked.

"You don't know?" The man studied Joe with raised eyebrows.

Joe felt ashamed. "Not this particular kind."

“It’s a pretty common kind.”

“Still, could you show me?”

The man complied with a demonstration of how to load and work the gun. Joe flinched visibly at the sharp click of the hammer when the man pulled the trigger.

“Nervous?” the man asked.

“Guns make me that way.” Joe thought about Michael and Russian roulette.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have a gun if they make you nervous.”

“I’ll be careful. It looks just like what I need. I’ll take it.”

As he backed out of the driveway, Joe glanced at the gun on the seat beside him. It excited him. It gave reality to his plan.

He recalled a comment I had once made. “To be in Christ is to absorb the sins of others without taking revenge.” He thought of the gratitude he felt when I came and got him out of jail.

Joe was sorry he was going to disappoint me.

CHAPTER XII

The sun was just rising as Joe and I emerged from the stream and paddled into the east end of Glooscap Lake. With me in the stern, the bow rode high in the water. It was a little difficult to steer, but we didn't seem in danger of capsizing.

"It's perfect," I said.

"What is?"

"The day. Look." With a sweep of my paddle I pointed at our surroundings — the gentle mists rising from the lake and the brilliant splashes of autumn color ignited by the morning sun. Birds announcing the advent of a new day concurred with my assessment. It was perfect.

Joe nodded. "I don't know why I let you talk me into coming." His comment was directed as much to himself as to me.

"I thought you loved being out here."

He shrugged. "I used to."

Despair does that to a person — it surrounds you like a plastic bubble, letting nothing real in. You may be able to see, in an objective sort of way, that something good or beautiful surrounds you, but it fails to elicit any response. It's out there — separate from you.

I had insisted on taking charge of the stern. I know how to handle a canoe, but didn't know the area. Except for Joe's occasional directions, we paddled in silence.

As we approached the island, we noticed a thin ribbon of smoke rising above the tops of the trees. "I think someone beat us here," Joe said.

"Where's the landing area for canoes?" I asked.

"Most people use one of two little beaches on the other side."

"Let's paddle around and have a look."

Joe shrugged. "You're steering."

As the other side of the island came into view, we saw a single canoe pulled up on the beach. "Mostly people like to have this island to themselves," he said. "I know of a couple of other camp sites we might check out that aren't far."

“Let's take a look here first,” I said.

Down the beach from the canoe we caught sight of a child dressed in shorts and a sweatshirt. The beach was still too far away to discern whether the child was a boy or a girl. He (or she) stared at our approaching canoe for a moment, and then retreated from the beach. When the child returned, Joe could see that it was a boy, and he was with a woman. When we paddled a little closer Joe realized that he knew them. Artemio and Rachel stood on the shore, waiting. Joe turned around and glared at me. “You set this up, didn't you.”

I smiled, feeling a little sheepish. “Trust me,” I said. “It will work out.”

“So we just forget about the bail conditions?”

“Who's going to know?”

“But why?”

“There is a higher law,” I said. I knew it was a stupid comment.

Joe shook his head with impatience. “You don't make any sense.”

I shrugged. “I do to myself.”

Joe's protest and indignation were superficial, however. He didn't insist that we leave.

On the beach Joe gave Artemio a quick and mechanical hug, and shook hands with Rachel. After this stilted greeting, the conversation was carefully limited to the mechanics of getting the canoe unpacked.

After we finished setting up camp Rachel withdrew to her tent to read, and Artemio went off to hunt frogs. Joe volunteered to take a canoe the mainland to collect kindling and deadwood.

1 “Let me help,” I said.

“It won't really take two people.”

“That's okay. I'm not doing anything.”

I took the bow position for the short trip across the channel. If the stern had stuck up in the air much farther Joe wouldn't have been able to reach the water with his paddle. “Artemio misses you,” I said, glancing back over my shoulder.

“I miss him.”

“He's still working on his History Day project.”

“Good.”

“He could use some help.”

“You could help him.”

I stopped paddling. "You taught him a lot of important things with that project."

"You think so?" Joe allowed his paddle to dangle idly.

"Yes, like not using violence to solve problems."

Joe grunted noncommittally.

"And not taking revenge."

He resumed paddling. "I guess it turns out that I'm not a very good teacher."

"You could be."

"Don't try to turn me around on my plans, Demetri. If that's why you brought me out here, forget it."

Lunch brought us together. As we ate the sandwiches and soup that I prepared, conversation was friendly, but carefully focused on anything except what concerned everybody most.

"Hey, this is too nice a day to waste," I said after we finished eating. "I'm going for a dip."

"Skinny-dipping?" Artemio asked.

"Is there any other way?"

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Rachel said.

Joe stood and began gathering the lunch dishes "You all run on ahead. I think I'll clean up a bit."

"The dishes can wait," Rachel said. But Joe was not to be persuaded.

The three of us went down to the beach at the end of the island. We were having an Indian summer, so the water wasn't bad even though it was almost October. After we had been in swimming for a while Artemio paddled over to me. "Why doesn't Joe come down?" he asked.

"I don't know."

The water was just over his head. He kept himself afloat by holding onto my shoulder. "He doesn't like me anymore," he said.

"He does."

"Why doesn't he talk?"

"He's upset about everything that happened."

"He's mad at me."

"I don't think so. I think he's ashamed."

He let go of my shoulder and swam into shallower water. I followed.

"Why is he ashamed," Artemio asked.

"He thinks he's been bad."

"He didn't do anything wrong."

"Maybe he needs to hear that from you." We came out onto the beach.

"Do you think he'll come in swimming?" Artemio asked.

"He might need someone to encourage him."

"I'll go," he said.

Artemio grabbed his towel, and started back to the camping area. He found Joe sitting at the picnic table. The dishes were done. Except for the beach towel around his shoulders, Artemio was naked. "Why don't you come in swimming with us, Joe?"

Joe looked down. "We can't pretend that everything is the same after what's happened."

"You're mad at me," Artemio said. He covered himself with the towel.

Joe looked up. "Why should I be angry at you?"

"Because I talked about what happened."

"I'm not angry," Joe said. "But what did you say to people?"

"I said something about it three times," Artemio said. He wrapped the towel tightly around his waist. "I didn't mean to. It just sort of slipped out."

Joe nodded. "I understand. What were the three times?"

"When I went back to the tent with Michael that night, he asked me what happened while I was alone with you."

"Yes?"

"He kept pumping me with questions."

"And what did you say?"

"I admitted I let you massage me in my . . . private places."

"I guess, then, that Michael must have been the first one who talked," Joe said.

"I think so," Artemio said. He looked at his feet and began tracing a circle in the dust with his toe. "Then that woman from the state told me that Michael told her everything," he continued. "So I admitted to her that you massaged me while I was naked."

"You knew Michael would have told her that much."

Artemio nodded.

“That was all you told her?”

“Yes. But then my counselor, Ms. Pinkham, pretended *you* had told everything.”

“She tricked you?”

Artemio nodded. “I think so, unless she was just telling me what the state worker told her.”

“In any case, you thought I had told everything.”

“Yes. So I let her know that. . . we touched each other.” He erased the circle with his foot.

“I see.”

“Do you hate me, Joe?” Artemio took off the beach towel and then wrapped it even more securely around himself. He was shivering.

“Why should I hate you?”

“For getting you into all this trouble. You may lose your job. People talk about you. Your daughter can’t see you.”

“It’s not your fault, Artemio. I was the one who let it happen.”

“We both did.”

“But I was the adult.”

“I’m not a baby, Joe.” He frowned and looked at Joe directly in the eyes.

Joe smiled. “I hurt you, Temio. I’m sorry.”

“You *didn’t* hurt me.”

“Grownups aren’t supposed to let things like that happen between kids and themselves.”

“It didn’t hurt me,” Artemio said. “And I told Mom that.”

“Do you think she believed you?”

Artemio nodded.

“And you believe that?”

“Yes.”

Joe felt a pressure build up in his chest, and then his throat. He began to cry, silently. He turned his head to hide his tears from Artemio.

“Don’t cry,” Artemio said. “It’s okay.” He came over close to Joe and tried to put his arm around his shoulder. Joe gently pushed him away.

For perhaps a full minute they remained silent. Finally Artemio said, "Come swimming with us, Joe."

"You go along. I'll join you in a minute."

Artemio nodded, and returned to the beach.

When he felt ready, Joe took off his clothes and walked down to the beach. He swam and tried to throw himself into the play. But even the beauty of Artemio was a thing separate from himself. He could not touch it.

"If you let it soak for an hour or so it would be easier to clean," Rachel said. She spread her wet dishtowel out on a bush and came back to the picnic table where Joe was sitting.

"Probably you're right," Joe said. "But I'd rather just get this job out of the way." Sitting with his back to the table, and leaning over a large pot, Joe continued scraping away at it with a Brillo Pad.

Rachel sat down beside him. She put her elbows on the table and leaned back, stretching her legs out toward the fire in front of her. "I almost burned the soup," she said. "That's why it stuck."

"It tasted fine," Joe said. "I love lentils."

"That's good. We have enough for about six more meals."

Joe smiled. "So I guess we'll have lentil soup for breakfast," he said.

"Don't laugh," Rachel said. "Demetri says he thinks he can make lentil pancakes out of the soup."

"Think that will work?"

"It might. He's pretty inventive."

"Can you get me a little more water?" Joe asked.

"Sure." Rachel picked up a cup and went to the pot that was simmering on the fire. She dipped out a cup of water and returned.

"Just dump it into the pot," Joe said.

She did so, and sat down again. "What are your plans Joe?" she asked.

"Plans?"

"You know. About everything that's happening."

Joe continued to scrub a while without answering. "I don't know," he said finally. "I'll probably move away as soon as I can." He stopped scrubbing and looked up at her.

"I see," she said. "Any place in particular?"

Joe shrugged. "Portland, maybe Boston, or even San Francisco. Anywhere I won't be noticed."

"You don't want to stay here?" Rachel asked.

"What's left for me here?"

She looked away. "Well, I don't know," she said.

"My job will be gone. My marriage is over. My reputation is shot. What else is there?"

Rachel shrugged. "Maybe...you know..., well what can I say?" She sat up. "Maybe nothing."

"That's the way it seems to me," he said. "Nothing."

Rachel stood and wandered over to the bush where the dishtowel was spread out. She picked it up and shook it out. Then she returned to the table.

"What about Temio?" she asked.

"Temio?"

"Isn't he important to you?" She sat down again.

"Of course he is."

"Isn't he still in this area?"

Joe stood up and went a few steps away and threw the water in the pot into some bushes. Then he turned around and looked at Rachel. "What are you saying?"

"Just that. Isn't Temio important to you?"

Joe shook his head. "My God, Rachel. I can't continue to have a relationship with him after what happened."

"I don't know. . ."

"I do. It can't happen."

"So you'll be leaving."

"That's my plan."

"Have you told Temio?"

"Not yet. Do you think it'll be a big deal for him?"

Rachel glared at him. "What a stupid question!" She threw the dish towel on the ground.

“Maybe he’ll be relieved,” Joe said. He took a cup from the table and dipped out a few cupfuls of hot water and dumped them into the pot he had just washed.

“You need to tell him, Joe.”

“Okay. I’ll tell him.” He sloshed the water around in the pot.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“For sure?”

“I promise.”

Rachel stood up and began walking off without saying good-bye or in anyway excusing herself.

“Hey,” Joe called after her. “Why are you so angry?”

She didn’t answer. Joe sighed and shook his head. He dumped the rinse water out in the bushes. Then he picked the dishtowel up out of the dirt, shook it out, and dried the pot.

After he and Artemio built up the fire, Joe got his flashlight and came to find me. Shortly after sunset I had withdrawn to a little beach on the other side of the island. Joe found me sitting on a rock by the shore. A half-moon shown brightly in a starry sky.

“How’s it going for you?” I asked.

“Okay, I guess.”

“Artemio says you and he talked some.”

“We did.”

“Did you get anything worked out?”

“I want you to see something,” Joe said. He pulled his gun out of his pocket and showed it to me. “This is what I bought to get rid of the two guys who. . . did that to me.”

I glanced at the gun. “Why did you bring it along?” I asked.

“I thought I might learn how to use it — you know, do a little target practice.” He sat down on a fallen tree near me.

“I hope you don’t have in mind starting tonight,” I said. “It’s rather peaceful out here.”

“I don’t have in mind starting” Holding it so that the barrel pointed toward himself he reached out to offer me the gun. “Here. I want you to have it.”

I took the gun and examined it. It was still loaded. “What am I going to do with a gun?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He smiled. “Maybe do me a favor and blow my brains out.”

“Are you still thinking about that?”

“I don’t know what I’ll do,” he said. “I do know I’d rather be dead.”

“There must be something you hope for.”

“I can’t think what it would be.”

I emptied the bullets out of the gun. Then I grasped it firmly and threw it as far out into the lake as I was able. “In any case, you must have had a good conversation with Artemio,” I said.

Joe nodded. “It was after we talked that I changed my mind. I realized I couldn’t do it to him.”

“Yes. He would have been hurt.”

We were silent for some minutes, listening to the frogs and the loons. Then Joe said, “I’m trying to understand something.” He stared up into the night sky. “My happiness — the things that give me joy — and my suffering — my shame and grief, they’re inseparable, like the light and the dark side of the moon.”

I looked at the reflection of the moon in the lake. “Yes,” I said. “It’s like that for me too.”

“I wasn’t able to go to Michael’s funeral,” he said.

“That was unfortunate.”

“Would it be possible for you to lead a service for him tomorrow — here on this island — just for the four of us?”

I thought about his suggestion. “Yes, I think that would be a good idea.”

“I think it might help me.”

We sat quietly for some time, looking at the moon.

Later that evening Joe went to bed without staying up around the fire with the rest of us.

A brief shower during the night brought cooler, more fall-like, weather with it. But the morning was clear. Dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, Artemio was fishing from the shore. He was determined to catch supper for the group.

“Try right over there, just beyond those reeds,” Joe said.

Artemio made several attempts but could not cast it quite that far.

“Let me try,” Joe said.

Artemio gave him the casting rod. Joe placed the lure neatly in just the spot he had indicated. As luck would have it, he hooked something on the first try. After giving a little tug to set the hook Joe gave the rod to Artemio. Glowing with pleasure, Artemio reeled in a fair-sized bass.

“Mom! Mom! Come and see!” he shouted.

She walked down to the beach and looked at the fish her son held up for her inspection.

“That’s great, Temio. Looks like we might have fish for supper after all.”

“I knew we would.”

“You’re quite the fisherman.”

“It was really Joe who caught it,” Artemio said.

“Not so,” Joe said.

“You hooked it.”

“But you reeled it in.”

“So I guess it’s our fish,” Artemio said.

Joe nodded. “Sounds right to me.”

Rachel returned to the campsite, leaving Artemio and Joe to themselves. Joe showed him how to make a stringer for the bass out of a piece of rope and a stick, and then watched in silence as Artemio tried to hook another one. “After today we won’t be able to see each other,” he said finally.

Artemio stopped reeling in the line. “Why?”

“It’s a condition of my bail.”

“Mom told me about that.”

“It means I can’t see you.”

“But they can’t make that forever. I’m going to say nothing happened. They can’t prove anything.”

Joe threw a stone into the water. He watched as the ripples spread out and then settle. He rubbed his face with both hands. Artemio waited.

“I’ll probably leave as soon as the legal issue is sorted out,” Joe said.

“But why?” Artemio began reeling in the line.

“If you refuse to testify against me, that may help me to win in court. And that may keep me out of prison, which is no small thing. But I’ll be ruined as far as my ability to live in this community goes.

“Mom says maybe they’ll drop the charges.”

“I doubt that.”

“They may.”

“Even if they do, everybody knows I’m being investigated. I’ll probably lose my job.”

“It’s not fair,” Temio said.

“That’s not likely to stop them.”

“You can get some other job here.”

“You don’t understand, Temio. Everybody here will think I’m a creep. That’s hard to live with.”

“Your real friends won’t think you’re a creep.”

“I appreciate that, but we have to face facts. I can’t go on living here.”

Artemio dropped the rod and reel in the dirt. “I guess I’m done fishing.”

Joe watched as he gathered his fishing gear together and started up toward the campsite.

“Take your fish along,” he said. “Father Glyphis will want to see what you caught.”

“It’s really your fish,” Artemio said, without turning to look.

Most often when I give a sermon or make some kind of public presentation, I speak from notes. For Michael’s service, however, I wanted to say everything just right, so I spent part of the morning writing it out. We gathered on the beach early in the afternoon. It was one of those incredibly brilliant fall days in which the contrast between the oranges and yellows of the leaves and the blue of the sky make all the colors more intense. After allowing us to simply be together in silence for a while I stood up.

“It was Joe’s idea that we have a memorial service for Michael,” I said. “I agreed with the idea, but I wasn’t sure just how to do it. I decided on something very simple. We’ll have a prayer, a scripture, and a time for some meditation. Finally, I want to say a couple of things. That’s about it. It will be brief.”

I looked at the others. Artemio was leaning against his mother. Joe sat a few yards away. "Let's begin with a prayer," I said.

I read from my paper. "Our father, we come before you today to ask you for help with our grief. A child of yours has been taken from us, and we are sad. We do not understand..." I had to stop and wait until I could control my impulse to cry. "We do not understand You or Your ways," I continued, "but in faith we visualize Michael with you, held in your loving arms. We ask you to add our little bit of imperfect love to Your love. We live in the hope that Michael might be born again in another world where he will have the opportunities for growth, love and happiness that were denied him in this one. Amen."

I then picked up my Bible and opened it to the selected scripture. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ: Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

My intention had been to stay with the brief paragraphs that I had already written, but the scripture moved me to say a few additional words. "I take this to mean just what it says. Nothing can separate us from the love of God — not even wrong actions or wrong beliefs, or any confusion or perfidy on our part. The love of God is greater than any wrong thing that we are able to do. Praise be to God. We are saved by Grace, pure and simple. We can turn away from our salvation. We can fail to see it, to take it into our hearts. We can fail to live a life filled with love. But the love of God does not turn away from us. Knowing this, we can choose a life motivated not by the fear of punishment, but by gratitude to the God who first loved us. Then we come to understand that love is the pearl. When we grow in our capacity to love, we are in the kingdom. We require no extrinsic reward."

"However imperfect or confused Michael's efforts may have been, it was this pearl for which he searched. We pray that he has found it today."

I sat down. "I am not going to recall Michael for you," I said. "Rather I want each of you to remember whatever you wish about him. Try to remember the real person, not just his virtues. If you want to share any memories, do; if not, we'll just remember in silence."

We were silent for several minutes. Joe was the first to speak. "I remember him asking me to adopt him," he said.

A little later Artemio spoke. "I remember him telling me how he sneaked out of his house at night. I admired him for that. I thought he was like Huckleberry Finn."

I allowed the silence to continue for several more minutes. Then I stood and took out the piece of scrap paper on which I had written down my thoughts earlier. "I did not choose the scripture from Romans for Michael." I said. "I did not choose it for Joe. I chose it for myself. Many years ago I loved a boy. He was bright and creative. He was shameless and honest. He had the rare gift of seeing things for himself. He was terribly beautiful. He was also very troubled. His trust in humanity had been shaken by repeated abandonments, first by his parents, and then by an almost endless succession of social service workers and foster parents. I loved him enough that I might have turned that around. But I abandoned him too.

"Why did I abandon this child? I was afraid of scandal, of losing my chosen vocation, of being publicly shamed. I was afraid of the raised eyebrow.

"My friend, as I am sure you know, was Norman. He didn't actually shoot Michael, but he did set up the conditions that led to his death. This will be a great weight on his soul for a long time.

"Norman's God was Satan. In part his concept was right. In so far as Satan accepts the unacceptable, the weak, the outcast, and the morally frail, that is a true image of God. How ironic that he found that image best realized in the traditional enemy of God.

"I ask that we pray for Norman. We must pray that Norman will find it in his heart to return to the Love that is at the center of the universe. But also I ask that you pray for me, pray that even the cowardice and frailty that caused me to turn away from Norman will not forever separate me from the love of God.

"It is not only for Michael we grieve. We grieve for David Saunders, and for all other children who have been abandoned. These children wander the streets of any big city in the world today, selling their bodies and their souls for a piece of bread, a bit of affection or a modicum of security. And rather than reach out to them in love, we build prisons to protect ourselves from them, and gas chambers to kill them when they finally and predictably commit greater crimes against the rest of us. These abandoned ones we can see. But there are many more whose abandonment is less visible. These are the ones from whom affection and love has been

withdrawn by parents, teachers, neighbors, and Sunday school workers. Sometimes this abandonment is done in great secrecy. All the right things are done on the surface. But the love has dried up. These children have only righteousness. They do not thrive on this righteousness. We pray for them also.

“Hail Mary, mother of God. Have mercy on us sinners now and in the hour of our death.”

I crossed myself, and made a sign of blessing over the others. “Go in peace,” I said.

Joe remained on the beach after the funeral. Rachel joined him after about twenty minutes, and sat quietly with him for a while before she spoke. “I don’t ...” She stopped herself. She stared down at the sand and poked at it with a stick. The silence between them lasted perhaps for a full minute.

“You don’t what?” Joe asked.

“I don’t want you to go.”

“Don’t want me to go?” Joe shook his head in disbelief. “You have to hate me Rachel. I betrayed your trust.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“I molested your kid.”

“You sound like Marion Bierce.”

“Well, maybe she’s right. Maybe I am scum.”

“Joe, stop it.”

“I did molest him, Rachel.”

She shook her head. “Temio told me what happened.”

“Did he tell you that I watched him masturbate? And that he played with me until. . . that I let him do that? No, it was more than that. I wanted him to touch me. I seduced him.”

“You and Temio love each other.” She sat down beside him. He pulled away slightly. “I’ll be honest,” she said. “I don’t know what to make of the sex play. It’s difficult to think about. But it’s your love that turned him around and made him into an energetic and happy kid.”

Joe stood up. “No. It’s not okay to whitewash it.” He started to leave.

“Wait, Joe. I want to tell you something’ It’s important.” He stopped and she stood up.

“When I saw how much you and Temio loved each other I thought this might happen. I even read novels about men and boys loving each other. I was trying to think it through.”

“Reading novels about it is one thing. Having it happen to your kid is another.”

“But hear what I’m saying, Joe.” She walked toward him slowly, as a cat might stalk a bird. “In a sense Marion is right about me. I did ‘fail to protect,’ as she puts it. I knew full well what might happen, and on purpose I `failed to protect.’”

Joe reeled around toward her. “How could you have known? I didn’t know myself.”

“Sometimes things are more obvious from the outside.”

Joe stared at the soft cumulus clouds drifting overhead. “Well, I’m glad you see some good in it.”

“I don’t want him to lose you, Joe.”

“I don’t think it will be all that big a loss. There will be other adults who will take an interest in Temio. And maybe their interest will be more wholesome.”

“Did you hear what Father Glyphis said about himself and Norman?”

“He told me that before.”

“So what do you think about it?”

“I’m not sure the two situations are comparable.”

“There are at least some similarities.”

“Look, Rachel. Suppose I was good for Temio, and I’m not sure that’s true, I still couldn’t stay. Even if I don’t go to prison, when this thing hits the courts I’ll lose my job, and my reputation. How can I stay here after that?”

“I don’t think it will hit the courts. Temio denies anything ever happened; says he was tricked into saying things about you that weren’t true. Without him, Marion Bierce has no case at all.”

Joe took a moment to think about this. “He really does want to protect me, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” Marion said. “He wants to protect the love, and your relationship.”

Joe nodded. “Okay .I’m grateful for that. But there will still be talk. How can I face people?”

“By knowing that you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I don’t know that.”

Rachel looked at him with pity. “It isn’t just that you did something that people say is shameful, is it? You’re ashamed of the love itself.”

He turned away from her. “How can I not be?”

“To be ashamed of your own love,” she said. “That cuts pretty deep.”

Joe turned back to face her and spoke with greater force. “Look, it isn’t easy to try to live in a community where people will throw it up in your face every day that you’re a baby raper. I need to get out of here.”

“I think you need to stay, for your own sake as well as for Temio. You need to face the people who would condemn you.”

“I’m not that strong, Rachel. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I’m asking you to stay, for all of us.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “For me, too.” She blushed.

Joe looked at her incredulously. For the longest time they stared at each other without speaking. “Well,” he said finally. “That does throw a different light on the matter.”

The message from Artemio was delivered to Joe through me. On pain of an unspecified fate worse than a fiery hell he was not to return to the rest of the group while they fixed supper. Artemio had a surprise for him.

Joe was on the small beach enjoying the colors of the sky as the sun lowered itself to the horizon when Artemio arrived, carrying a smoking frying pan in one hand and a spatula and a plate in the other.

“What’s happening, Joe?”

“Nothing. I’m watching the sunset.”

1 “It’s pretty.”

“It is.”

“I got something for you.”

Joe glanced at the smoking frying pan. “What is it?”

“Fish.”

“Really?”

“Father Glyphis helped me fix it. We made two fillets out of it, one for you and one for me.”

Joe had him place the frying pan on the ground, and he scraped out one of the fillets. “It only seems right that we should divvy it up half and half. I mean it is our fish.”

“Yes,” Artemio agreed. “It is our fish.”

“Did Father Glyphis help you cook it too?”

“I did that by myself.”

“You did a good job.”

“It fell apart a little bit. Mom said I should have put more butter in the frying pan.”

“Falling apart doesn’t change how it tastes.”

“Try it,” Temio said. He handed him a fork.

Joe took the fork, stabbed a piece of the fish, and put it in his mouth. “Hmm. Good,” he said.

“It’s sort of burnt on one side there,” Temio said, “‘cause the fire was hotter under that part of the frying pan.”

Joe spoke with his mouth full of bass. “It’s delicious.”

“You like it?”

“It’s perfect.”

“Bass is good.”

“So where’s *your* plate?”

“Back at the camp.”

“Why don’t you go get it? We can get you your half of the fish and eat together while we watch the sunset.” With a wave of his arm Joe drew Artemio’s attention to the vivid colors of the western sky.

“Awesome,” Artemio said.

“Hurry now and get your plate,” Joe said.

Artemio had gone to bed, and the adults were sitting around the fire talking. When Joe threw on another log and poked the fire to collapse some of the half burned sticks, sparks flew up.

“I saw a huge shooting star while I was on the beach last night,” Joe said. “It was very bright, and broke up into several pieces as it descended.”

“What sound do shooting stars make when they fall?” I asked.

“I think they create a roll of thunder in the same way lightning does,” Rachel said.

Joe shook his head. “No. I think it would just be a swooshing sound.”

“Can we really say there is any sound at all if nobody is close enough to hear it?” I asked.

“That’s the same as Berkeley’s question about whether a tree falling in the woods, where no one is around to hear it, makes a sound,” Rachel said.

“I remember that question from my college philosophy class,” Joe said. “I thought it was a fake problem. It seemed to me that it was just a matter of defining what you mean by sound.”

I added an additional log to the fire. “You can get around it that way,” I said. “But I think the issue goes deeper. The question is whether we can affirm the existence of anything that isn’t in our consciousness.”

“What do you think?” Joe asked.

“The more I meditate on it the more uncertain it becomes.” I said. “All I can say for sure is that there is no way of knowing Reality, spelled with a capital ‘R.’ The world we live in, that we know, that we share, is an imaginary one. It’s akin to the pretend world that children share when they play. Our shared world is like a small inhabitable clearing that pioneers carve out of the forest of absolute mystery.”

“Don’t you believe in an world that simply is what it is, regardless of what we think about it?” Rachel asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Such a world exists. But we can’t know anything final or definite about it, not as it *really* is. All we can know is how our particular point of view lets it appear to us.”

“So Mystery has the final word,” Rachel said.

“Yes. Mystery surrounds us on all sides, however we decide to design the little clearing of agreed upon reality we live in together.”

“So any question pursued far enough becomes a koan,” Joe said.

“Yes,” I said. “What is the sound of stars falling? If one is going to meditate on something that turns the mind into a pretzel, it might as well be poetic, don’t you think?”

Rachel stood up and stretched. “And what,” she asked, “do we do after we have broken our brains on a koan?”

“Ah,” I said. “That brings us to the most fundamental question that we can ask.”

“And what is that?” Rachel asked.

“Can I trust this mystery?”

Rachel sat back down and stared at Joe.

“Yes,” Joe said. “I guess that’s the bottom line.”

Artemio emerged from his tent, wearing only his underwear and a T-shirt, dragging a blanket behind him. He reminded Joe of Christopher Robin dragging Pooh Bear down the stairs. "I can't sleep," he said.

"It must be lonely in that tent all by yourself," I said. "Why don't you come on out here until you get sleepy?"

Artemio looked to Rachel for approval. She nodded. Then, with the blanket still dragging in the dust, he padded over to Joe and made room for himself in his lap. He pulled the blanket around both of them for warmth. "I'm glad you're going to stay, Joe"

Joe hugged him tightly. "I am too."

"Joe, I keep thinking about that movie we watched together, last summer." He looked up into Joe's face.

"Which one was that?"

"Alcinder and the Condor."

"What were you thinking about it?" Joe asked.

"I was thinking that what the boy wanted was right, and that the Americans were wrong."

"Yes," Joe said. "It seems that way to me."

"But maybe you can't beat the Americans with guns."

"That may be true," Joe said.

"But maybe we can still find some way to beat them."

"I hope so."

"You know something, Joe. I'm not really an American . I'm what my father was."

"Maybe some day we'll go together to your country," Joe said.

Artemio smiled sleepily. "Yes," he said. "That would be good."

The End