

The Tenth
Acolyte Reader



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Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel
First Edition published October, 1994

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Cover design and painting by Mario de Graaf suggested by the story *Serrana Bay* in this book.

The Acolyte Press
P. O. Box 12731
1100 AS Amsterdam
The Netherlands

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Acolyte

The Tenth Acolyte Reader / [ed. Frank Torey]. -
Amsterdam: The Acolyte Press
ISBN 90-6971-054-4
Trefw.: homoseksualiteit; mannen / verhalen ;
oorspronkelijk - Engels.

Empathies

by Alan Edward

1. *The Good Boy*

My dear, I was furious at first. I mean – his third year at college now, wanted to bring his girl-friend down for the week-end. Nothing wrong with that, of course. But when I say that she can have his room and I'll make up a bed on the sofa for him, he just says quite airily, "Oh, don't worry, my bed will do. We'll be sleeping together, it'll be okay."

No, it *wouldn't* be okay. And a nice girl too, by the sound of it. Jeremy had been going on and on about her for ages, I'd even spoken to her on the phone. But now – what his father would have said I simply can't imagine. Next thing, a teenage pregnancy and then...oh dear, no. So I simply made up a bed for Jeremy on the sofa and, if there was going to be a show-down when they arrived – well, I was ready for him.

But what a *relief!* "Toni" was actually *Tony*, not a girl after all but a *boy* – a younger boy from Jeremy's year in college. Quite a lot younger, in fact. That was why I'd been misled on the phone. One of those infant prodigies he was, went up to Oxford about a year ago when he was only twelve and Jeremy had taken him under his wing, so to speak – he'd helped Jeremy with his maths, always his weak point, and Jeremy had to some extent protected the youngster from the older students, from bullying and so on. A really likeable kid too, as it turned out, a little shy, very polite. And very attractive-looking, with big blue eyes, delicate features – well, it was easy to see how anyone would take to him. He was so nice about the sleeping arrangements too, wouldn't hear of Jeremy taking the couch, insisted they would share. And it made me so proud of Jeremy, to see how helpful he was to the youngster – kind and protective, just as any mother wants her son to be. And after supper, as Tony was fatigued after his long journey, Jeremy even helped him with his bath before they went off to bed, unusually early for Jeremy. Yes, the youngster was clearly going to be a good influence.

It wasn't until the next morning that, so to speak, the penny dropped. Not right away – not when Tony first came into the kitchen; that just tickled me. I was pottering about when the door opened unexpectedly and young Tony appeared. He stopped abruptly in the doorway, and his mouth opened with dismay to see me. As well it might, his not having a stitch on.

"Oh, ah, I thought it was Jeremy," he stammered, standing there sort of transfixed.

"Don't you have any pajamas?" I asked.

"I – I don't wear them," he said. Then suddenly he said, "Sorry," and scarlet-faced, turned and scampered back upstairs.

Well, my dear, I've brought up three boys. Not just seen them a thousand times without their pj's, but I also know how boys that age sometimes are when they get out of bed in the morning. Whether he was aware of *that*, of course, I didn't know, but I'm afraid I had a really good laugh to myself when he had gone. Poor kid, though.

When I went along the landing a few minutes later, however, I heard giggles and shrieks of laughter from Tony through the door of the bedroom, and guessed he had seen the funny side of it too. Good.

Then I stopped dead, right there. Something went cold, deep down inside me. Call me slow on the uptake if you like and – yes, I suppose I was. You hear stories naturally, but where your own are concerned you have a kind of a blind spot. Or I had, until then. But suddenly, with a mother's instinct, I *knew*. Some people, of course, say that it's just a kind of phase they go through, but – well, I wasn't so sure of that.

I went down to the kitchen, sat quite still for a moment, then called Jeremy. I'm always one for having things out, right there and then. So I put it to him, straight.

"And I want the truth, mind," I finished.

Well, at first he blustered a bit, tried to deny it. Then when he saw that that didn't work, I got the lots-of-others-do-it routine.

I waited till he had finished, then said, "They may do, but have you considered what age Tony is? You involve a boy of that age, it's regarded as a serious offense, you must know that. You could end up in big trouble."

"Oh, come on, Mum," protested Jeremy, "Anyway, it wasn't me started it, it was Tony, honest. He had this friend before, and –"

Losing patience, I said sharply, "Please, Jeremy, lie to me if you have to – just don't blame the youngster. Whatever happens, *you* are the elder, *you* will be held responsible. You must see that."

Jeremy looked down at the floor, then said slowly, "Yes, I suppose so. But –"

"But nothing. Okay, call Tony down."

"No."

But I insisted, and in a moment the youngster appeared in the kitchen door once again, though this time at least he had a towel knotted round his waist.

I told him to come in.

"She knows," Jeremy told him without preamble. "She's found out."

Tony, his eyes big, stared at him, at me, then to my dismay burst into tears. Jeremy at once went over and put a protective arm round him; the youngster locked his arms round Jeremy's waist and buried his head in Jeremy's chest; his whole body shook with sobs. His towel slid to the floor, but he didn't seem to notice.

Oh dear, oh dear, I thought. Whatever I'd wanted, it hadn't been an operatic set-piece like this. Suddenly, I really began to feel like the Wicked Mother. I went over, patted Tony on the shoulder, and said soothingly, "Listen, it's not as bad as all that."

I stooped and picked up his towel for the laundry-basket. And as I did so I couldn't help noticing that, even then, what he had was right up like a bean-pole again. A funny kid, Tony.

"I don't want to make things difficult for you – really," I said. "I just want to help."

"It's okay, Mum," Jeremy said. "We'll stop, I promise."

"Promise?"

"Honest." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled tinfoil package. "Here it is. That's all of it."

I opened the packet, sniffed and nodded. Yes, I'd have recognized the smell anywhere – even, as I had five minutes ago, on my own upstairs landing. *Cannabis sativa*. To tell the truth, I'd smoked it myself as a kid – though I wasn't going to admit it to *them*. And now I felt a lot better about Jeremy. Indeed, I almost felt proud of him again as I saw him comfort Tony, saw the way the youngster smiled back at him. Yes, he's a good boy really.

So's Tony.

And – best of all – he won't get pregnant.

2. *Scotch Mist*

The wind, as on most days, blew lustily in from the Forth estuary and roared up the Royal Mile like an Inter-City train. The heavy stone buildings around the Mound broke it up and in the square between them it began to die, though it still fluttered through the tumbled hair of the boy piper under the wide battlement of the Royal Gallery. Gusts flickered at his kilt, at the ribbons on his pipes and his long plaid as he played a pibroch, a reel, then a slow lament, the sound echoing poignantly through the old pillars and passages. Knots of tourists gathered to listen, some dropped money on the pavement.

When he finished, the boy picked up the coins and tucked them away, then, slightly flushed and breathless, he wiped his forehead and, pipes alongside, perched on the low wall to rest, swinging his buckled shoes. At length, lifting each knee in turn, he pulled up his scarlet-topped socks and adjusted the garter-tabs, squinting down to get them straight.

Ah, wondrous, thrice wondrous.

On the pavement opposite Pickering swallowed, then he went across and gave the youngster a pound coin. His eyes lit up. "Gosh, *thanks*."

"Not at all," said Pickering. "It was delightful. You must play a good deal."

"I take it as my instrument in school," said the boy. "I just come down here at week-ends; I'm saving for a mountain-bike."

"Doing all right?"

"Not bad. It was the Festival last week, that's always the best time. I'm nearly half-way there."

Pickering took another pound coin out of his pocket, tossed it up and caught it again. His eyes slid down, not for the first time, to the delightful bare brown knees, a poem in themselves, poking from under the tartan.

Slowly, his eyes moved half-way up again. He said, "Tell you what. If you'll satisfy my curiosity on a certain point I'll give you this other pound as well."

The boy cast his eyes up. "Oh, how boring, not another! *Everyone* asks the same thing, Americans even. But I won't tell. *Ever*."

Pickering laughed. "Fair enough. Here – have it anyway."

He tossed the coin and the boy caught it. "*Thanks!*" He turned a brilliant smile on Pickering, brushing back the delicate strands of hair from his forehead again, making the man's heart lurch almost painfully.

"Would you," asked Pickering, "have an equally vehement objection

to joining me in a Big Mac?"

"I shouldn't think so," said the boy. "I'm starving, I haven't had anything to eat for *hours*."

"Not since when?"

"About nine."

It was a quarter past eleven. Pickering shook his head gravely.

"We can't have that, can we? Come on."

"The best burger-bar's right over here. I'll show you," said the youngster, leading the way.

"What's your name?"

He was Gavin, aged thirteen and a half. His pipes tucked under his arm, he half-walked, half-skipped along, just keeping up with the man's longer strides.

"Not quite *everybody* asks, by the way," he said. "The Japanese don't, they're too polite. Not like you."

Pickering, entranced by the boy's gentle, liquid accent, smiled down and said, "Sorry."

"And if it's not that, it's will I play *Amazing Grace*."

"I'd like that as well," Pickering said.

"Tell you what," said Gavin, "I'll have a bet with you. If you can make me tell, I'll give you your two pounds back. If not, you have to give me another two."

"Fair enough," said Pickering. He looked at the boy again. "Is that all your own gear?"

"Not quite. The kilt's my school uniform – the Royal Grammar, you know – and the socks too. The rest I've just sort of scrounged or borrowed."

"Some *scrounge*," said Pinkerton admiringly.

The boy said airily, "The tourists like it. Here we are."

He had been right. The burgers were stupendous, the toppings unparalleled, the accompanying portions of chips gargantuan.

"Well chosen. I compliment you on your taste," said Pinkerton. Then he added, "About the bet..."

The youngster smiled and shook his head. "Don't bother."

"I just wanted to say that there are...other ways of finding out."

Gavin said, "Well, I'm not going to swing from the lampposts for you – or stand on my head or walk on my hands, if that's what you mean."

"Oh."

Gavin smiled again. "Though I *might*, if I knew you better. Could

you pass the ketchup, please?"

Pickering swallowed, obeyed, then said, "And there are still other ways."

The table was blessedly small. His palm rested easily on the youngster's knee, and it was just as easy to slide it up the delectably smooth thigh.

"Do you think they do extra onions?" asked Gavin.

"For you, apes, camels, ivory and peacocks."

"Just onions," said the boy. "If you don't mind."

"I'll inquire in a moment," Pickering promised. His arm slid to its full length, and he swallowed again. "Oh, *wow!*" he breathed.

Then he asked after a moment, "Don't you get cold?"

The boy shook his head. "No, not really. Well – perhaps sometimes. Well – you see, boys don't have hair, do they?"

"No – I – I do see." Pickering investigated further. "Well, just one or two in your case, perhaps." He leaned forward. "We're really talking a *boner*, though, aren't we?"

The boy swallowed a mouthful of chips, then said, "*Your* fault, talking about me doing handstands for you. The thought made me go...well, tingly."

Pinkerton laughed. "As I recall, it was in fact you who raised the topic. However – you can't go out like that, can you?"

"I don't see why not."

Pinkerton clicked his tongue. "Oh dear me, no. Dear, dear, dear. But don't worry, I'll see to it."

"As you wish," said the boy, munching again.

Pinkerton saw to it, diligently. And a few moments later, suddenly, fragments of burger, onion and cucumber exploded all over the table, even speckling Pinkerton's shirt and tie and the empty chair beside him.

The waitress bustled over, looking concerned.

"Is he all right?"

Gavin turned his eighteen-carat smile on her. "Oh, yes."

"You sure?"

"I'm *quite* sure. But might I have a tissue, please?"

"Och, don't worry. I'll wipe the table down for you, no problem."

"It's not for the table," said Gavin, "It's for my – *ow!*" He turned to Pinkerton, eyes wide. "Why did you kick me?"

"You know."

"No, I don't." The boy turned back to the waitress. "I want to wipe my *face*, but my friend seems to object."

"His friend will smack his bottom in a minute," Pinkerton informed the waitress.

"Och, don't be hard on the wee lad, he means no harm," said the latter as she bustled off.

"Well, would the wee lad like a drink the noo?" Pinkerton asked.

"That wasn't very funny," said Gavin. "Still, you're just a Sassenach, I pity you really. I'll have a Coke."

When the boy had his drink Pinkerton smiled, leaned forward and gently touched the youngster's kilt under the table. "Next time it will be better. Next time that will be right off."

"Won't it *just!*" breathed the boy. "But not here!"

"No, not here," Pinkerton agreed. He leaned back. "Still, at least I found out what I wanted to know."

The boy finished his Coke.

"Yes, but I didn't *tell*," he said. "And that was the bet."

He held out his hand.

"I'll take it now."

3. *The Hunchback*

There was just one gas-lamp, on the street corner. It had been lit no more than an hour past, but already the snow was beginning to cover it, like a great night-cap, funneling its yellow light to a dim puddle on the pavement. It was only six in the evening, and within a mile of St Paul's, but it was the darkest time of year, and as the home-going cabs, carriages and hansoms from the City clattered past, the link-boys were all out, running ahead of the carriages, their torches streaming flame and smoke, their nimble bodies flitting through the traffic like dragonflies. There were few lamps in the houses, but firelight shone from between several shutters, because the night was bitter, and freezing fog was beginning to drift up from the river, making the passers-by muffle up heavily against the bitter cold, speeding them on their way homewards.

Amid the hubbub, very few could hear the singer who stood in a broad doorway near the lamp, half-dwarfed by its heavy lintels. He was barefoot, in rags – a shredded jacket, tattered trousers – and he was a degree thinner than any twelve-year-old boy should be, even an unwashed urchin like this. A cap was on the ground in front of him. Most people, already late because of the snow, pushed past unheeding, but not all. Some lingered, some raised their eyebrows in slight surprise, and some few –

but very few – dropped a coin in the boy's cap.

Because the urchin's singing was strangely sweet and tuneful, even as heard through the rattle of the carts and the clangor, now, of the church bells. But those who lingered would soon pass on impatiently as the small body was racked with yet another coughing spell, as the boy stooped and clutched his narrow chest, as again the song broke up and died.

Then one passer-by paused for a little longer than the others. The boy had been concentrating on his songs but, in a moment or two, becoming gradually aware of his companion, he turned and looked at him curiously.

It was a lad only a little older than himself. One he hadn't seen in the street before, one with tumbled fair hair and strangely bright eyes. He wore a heavy cloak.

He smiled at the urchin. "Will you sing that one again?"

The smaller boy looked at him thoughtfully. The newcomer didn't look like he had any money – but then friendliness was rare on the street.

"Awright, then!"

The youngster took a deep breath and began again...

Ave Maria, gratia plena...

Then, after a few lines he once more started coughing; his thin body shaking, doubled up; he gasped for breath, croaked, whooped. This happened more often now.

"Sorry," he said weakly after a moment.

"Don't be," said the other boy. "That was...beautiful. What's your name?"

"My name's Sam, Master..."

"Master no-one. I'm Michael. Mike."

Then Mike said, "Here – sit down for a minute – back a bit, it's more sheltered."

The snow was not yet lying between the massive door-pillars; the two boys sat on the step and Mike reached into the depths of his cloak. "It's not much but – here."

Sam's eyes lit up. "*Cor!*" Just bread and a wedge of cheese – but the half-starved urchin's mouth watered even at the sight of it. He hesitated as the other boy held it out. "You sure?"

"Yes – take it all. I've had plenty." Then, after a moment or two, Mike asked curiously, "Where did you learn that song?"

"There," said the urchin indistinctly, nodding towards the church on the corner. He swallowed, then said, "I always sits in the porch when the

choir sings. They 'ave the stove on, and a bit of heat gets out. An' I hear the singing – it's wizard."

He looked at Mike. "An' I see the boys in the choir sometimes, in their white robes an' all. Coo, I think, they must all be really rich, have big houses like palaces, beautiful mothers, lots of toys an' so on, jus' like a dream it must be."

"Hmm – maybe," said Mike doubtfully.

The youngster went on, "I asked once if I could sing with them, but the vicar said they din't want no ragged kids. Then the bloomin' sexton chased me after that every time I tried to sit in the warm. Eh, what's that?"

Mike had turned his head away and had muttered something, it seemed angrily, but now he said, "It doesn't matter."

"Anyways," Sam went on, "I still listened, and they sing that one more'n any – I learnt it by heart. Don't 'arf like it."

Mike said quietly, "Yes, so do I. It was written by a brilliant young man in a country called Austria, a very long way from here."

"I dunno about nothing like that, said the urchin, munching again. "Ain't never been to school, see."

"But you like singing?"

"Not 'arf," said Sam again.

The bread and cheese finished, Sam started to sing quietly again, but in a moment or two he started shivering, then coughing once more. Mike put his cloak round both of them and pulled the younger boy in against himself. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks, Mike."

In a few moments Sam stopped shivering.

"I'm awright now," he said, and Mike gently drew the cloak round himself again, then stood up. "You want to sing some more?"

The youngster coughed, half-retched. "Don't think I can, Mike."

"Oh yes, you can."

Sam, his attention caught by something new in Mike's tone, turned to look at him, then his mouth fell open in dismay. Now that his new friend was standing, he could see that under his cloak was a hump, an enormous hump that pushed his heavy robe back, and his body forward.

Then, as if realizing that he was staring, he said, "Oh, sorry." Then with awkward sympathy, "Rough luck, Mike."

Mike laughed. "Oh, don't be sorry. Look."

Slowly, he began to remove his robe. The hump seemed to get bigger and bigger, it rose behind Mike's head, spread out on both sides.

The urchin had stood. There was light in his eyes, then on all of his face.

"Cor!!" he breathed at length. "*Cor!!!*" Then he started coughing again, doubling up, convulsing and whooping as if he would never stop.

But he did, and then the other boy put a hand on his shoulder. He asked quietly, "Will you come with me now?"

The urchin, his face still bathed in the pure light, looked up at him.

"Yes. Oh, *yes*," he whispered.

"Come on, then," said Mike quietly. "It's not as far as you think, though it's very dark. But take my hand, I know the way."

They walked together down the pavement and into a long alley beyond it, Mike's strong fingers entwined with Sam's. And at the end of the long alley the snow, the mist and the darkness took them.

Next morning, when the two parish constables came on early patrol, one of them stumbled over what at first looked like a bundle of old clothes on the pavement. But it was the small singer, cold and lifeless.

"Oh, Gawd," groaned one of them. "Not another one. Well...call the cart, Harry."

The other looked down, shaking his head thoughtfully. "Yes, I remember 'im, bit of a card as I recall. But the cold was getting to 'im in the end, talking a lot of nonsense 'e was."

"Look, said his colleague, stooping and then standing up again. From beside the dead boy he had picked something up.

A feather.

A white feather – larger, whiter and more beautiful than either of them had ever seen.

For a moment or two the constable who held it stared, was totally silent.

Then, quickly, he crushed it in his hand and threw it into the pile of rubbish in the doorway.

"Bloody brats," he muttered. "Come on, let's get this pavement tidied up."