

The Tenth
Acolyte Reader



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Ephebes

by B. J. Freedman

His tiny cock stood before me, perfect in its diamond hardness, its moist pearly tip glistening in the morning sunlight that streamed through the gently waving limbs of the redwood trees. Our clothes were in a pile next to a burned-out stump. We had put the chainsaw aside, drained the last drop of bitter coffee from the thermos. Dust rose from the mangled trees we had cut; flies droned around us; far above a blue heron soared and dipped on its way to the sea. "Suck me," the boy said, "Suck me now. I want to feel your fat cracked lips around my tiny burning tool. I want to screw your hot hungry mouth until my hot cream plunges down your throat, I want to fill you until it flows out your eyes like a flooded river."

I have to remember it's just a book, Joe repeated to himself, a mantra, it's just a book, I'm just a writer, a nothing, nobody, a jerk with a word processor and a wild imagination. The words are only sound. The words are only sound, poetry, like *Ulysses*, strung-together words strung together under the influence of dark beer or Irish whiskey, late at night in an abandoned lighthouse... it's only a book, none of it happened, I don't know anybody who actually did any of this stuff and I certainly wouldn't do it myself – well, *that's* true enough, Joe thought, although he wondered if he could say the same for Bernie – then wondered what he had gotten himself into, on his way to having to say the same *as* Bernie. Bernie Boyle, dazzlingly unsuccessful ephebophile writer (Joe's client owing to a distant family tie and a similar homosexual predilection – though Joe's "boys" were usually senior citizens of twenty-two) had flown the coop, gone underground, driven to Mexico, or choked on a twelve-year-old's first squirt barely days before Joe had managed to sell the latest novel, *The Body of a Ten-Year-Old*, to a major house. Joe figured it must have gotten read because to those unaware of the old joke the title promised a mystery story, and been accepted because of

someone's sly sense of humor. To everybody's astonishment, it became an overnight bestseller, was praised by every major publication and condemned by every major religion. The *Methodists* had sentenced Bernie to death. When Oprah called, Joe simply couldn't tell her the truth. Bernie on Oprah plugging his book! It was so far-fetched that it *had* to happen, even if it meant Joe becoming Bernie, just for a while. Joe mused on the boundaries of identity and adjusted his twisted hairpiece in the limo's rear view mirror on the way to the TV studio where Oprah and the millions waited for the suddenly infamous boy-loving author to defend all kinds of unspeakable activities. *But it's only a book!* Defend the words, and never mind about the acts depicted! Of course the conundrum was that if it weren't for the goddamn *acts depicted*, there'd be no best-seller list, no twenty percent of a million, no Oprah. The repulsive acts depicted were highlighted by Bernie's perverse attitude – namely, that the characters' actions weren't perverse in the least. Bernie had written a repulsively hilarious account that was utterly convincing despite its manic, mock-pornographic tone. The lack of apology, the absence of any moral tone whatsoever, made the book offensive even to true believers in the cause. Really, he was exploiting the subject instead of treating it with the reverence Joe knew Bernie felt. Making the ephebes into a bunch of cocksucking, unrepentant, chicken-stalking geeks certainly didn't do anything to make them more acceptable to the masses – though it *was* funny. Everybody (practitioners often included, Joe noticed) thinks Bernie and his tribe should beg forgiveness for all that hilarious licentiousness, and write the story from prison, like Humbert Humbert. Instead, Bernie flies off to parts unknown to suck on parts unknown. The success of *The Body of a Ten-Year-Old* was an outrage that made Joe chuckle, but selling it as light comedy to Oprah's audience was going to be tough. But he knew that when he finally located Bernie and told him about all this Bernie would laugh instead of grabbing the nearest ice pick. Joe figured Bernie's annoyance would be eased by the knowledge that the publicity generated by the Oprah appearance had netted him another couple hundred thousand, minimum.

Aunt Betty had gone to pick up Julian's little brother at daycare, leaving the two of us together in the swimming pool. "I'll just be a minute, Nick," she called out from the kitchen. "Have a couple of hot dogs if you get hungry." As soon as we heard the purr of the Honda wagon, Julian got hungry. He was lying on his back at the side of the pool, soaking up the sun, one thin arm dangling into the cool water. I

swam to him and held onto the concrete edge. His smooth white skin was turning red; his sandy brown hair had sprouted streaks of swimmer's blond. He was wearing a baby blue nylon bikini that had set me back twenty-five dollars at Bullock's – but it was money well spent; the outline of his half-erect twelve-year-old cock was clearly visible and maddeningly, impossibly sexy. I treaded water and watched as the tiny, soft lump jumped and stretched to its three-inch limit. Julian sighed and turned to me, his green eyes glistening in the afternoon sunlight. "Now," he said. I pulled the swimsuit to his ankles. "Please," he said.

Oprah thought Bernie's acts, or what she assumed were actual depictions of them, were perverse enough to warrant a guest list comprised not of middle-aged Jewish book reviewers from Connecticut but, instead, three pissed-off women with hairdos. The first was a flat-chested, permed-and-streaked Mom, whose claim to fame was that her son was "molested" repeatedly by a family friend on camping trips in Upper Michigan. She had just won a ten million dollar judgment against the guy, a balding, penniless shoe salesman, who had to send her his paycheck every week until the year 2037 – the one he would be earning in the penitentiary. The guy had also, Joe read in a sheaf of notes a headset-wearing assistant had handed him, agreed to undergo hormone therapy to quell his sexual desires. Not *change*, Joe noted, so the guy would beat off to a Brooke Shields poster in his cell, but *eliminate* until he burned his wallet-size Ricky Schroeder photo. In the meantime the guy would grow little *faux* tits to remind him of who put him in prison. The second was a psychologist specializing in child abuse cases, whose severe Nazi-era crewcut brooked no nonsense and understood no fun; and the third, an overweight anti-pornography crusader and avid hairsprayer who claimed to have been serially raped by three different stepfathers – a Pole, a black golfer, and a crippled ex-priest *I wouldn't touch her if I were a ten-inch Pole*, Joe thought, *she's flattering herself*. Joe wondered if the evil stepfathers were merely using the tubby sister to get to a more attractive brother. He exchanged the usual pleasantries with them in the Green Room, amused at first that none of the three offered a handshake, then annoyed: why not shake hands? Am I – is *Bernie* – worse than Yassar Arafat? He marched behind them, resisting the urge to fan the flames by patting the fat one on the rear as they made their way stageward.

There were, as yet, no bright lights. The stage seemed smaller and more disorganized than Joe remembered it from watching the show. The audience was chatting, crew members were laying cable and communicating through

tiny headsets, and Oprah – larger than tabloid photos in a shiny blue dress that struck Joe as overdone but probably sold well over the tube – sat on a stool, ticking off items on a yellow legal pad. No one disturbed her, and she didn't look up as Joe slumped into a guest's chair. The women, apparently spotting friends or fans, descended into the audience and worked it like up-and-coming politicians. "How's your case going?" Joe heard someone ask. After a minute Oprah looked up, pulled off her glasses, gave him a well-rehearsed smile, and gestured for him to join her. "You must be Bernie," she said, and Joe took it as a command, not a statement of fact.

"No, actually, I'm *not*, I'm his agent," he said, with a perky smile that looked odd on his obviously sixtyish face.

Oprah smiled, too, but she wasn't happy. Joe noticed that despite her hundreds of millions of dollars in net worth, she had something stuck between her front teeth, a tiny fleck of croissant, perhaps. "Sounds like there's been some mistake," she said, with a piercing look that seemed to precede a quick ripping out of Joe's heart.

"Bernie's not really *available*," Joe tried to explain. "Kind of a Salinger thing, you know –"

"I know I have a show starting in fifteen minutes and a hundred million people from here to Timbuktu expecting Bernie Boyle, the world's most famous *at large* child molester."

"Okay, okay," Joe said, protecting his investment. "I know. I came here to go on as Bernie. No one knows the guy, anyway, and I can assure you he's so far away *he'll* never know I did it."

"But you don't look the type." Oprah studied Joe's weary, Hebraic New York face. She frowned at the obvious hairpiece, which looked borrowed.

"What type? There's no type. Do you think there's a type? Bernie's nothing unusual. He's a regular guy, you see him walking down the street he looks like any old schmuck, could be anything, a data processor. He's really a very low-key guy. He's, what, he's a writer."

"Hitler was a painter," Oprah recalled, returning to her yellow pad.

So now the hundred million residents of here-to-Timbuktu associated Joe's wrinkled, badly toupeed visage with the heinous acts written about and *probably* committed by the disappearing louse, Bernie Boyle. Sensing Joe's unease, Oprah wisely began the show with some set-up questions for the three women, who proudly paraded their credentials to victimhood or helper-of-victimhood. Exalted victims of mindless acts; defenders of the defenseless and weak against the terrible abuses of

monsters – that is, men with penises, or *bigger* penises. Having watched Oprah often enough to know the basics of their stories, Joe sat and stared at the women's oddly misshapen bodies, their badly chosen clothes, their rigid high school drama class posture, neglecting to listen to what they were saying. An occasional steely glance in his direction woke him up, but he couldn't seem to make out *words*. Just snarling expressions, a kind of high-pitched barking, and the excessive glare of the stage lights. And each time he tried to piece together what had just been said, the audience broke into warm, supportive applause while they glared at him – *him!* – united in a simmering fury. I should have my hearing checked, he thought. Eat more garlic or something. In the midst of his confusion he was trying to imagine what *Bernie* would say if he were here. As Joe, he was ready to spoon up some Maalox and call it a night, but he knew Bernie wouldn't give up until he had spit back as much venom as he had taken, or, more likely, used a dose of childish sarcasm as an antidote. It's just a *book*, lady. No one ever got molested by a *book*.

Oprah handed the microphone to a plaid-shirted, overweight young woman in the audience and stepped back to hear her question. "Mr. Boyle, I'd really like to know, like, what do you have to *say* to your victims?"

Joe paused and looked at his shoes. Just for a second he wanted to kill Bernie: personally, perhaps with a bungee cord. Well, the show must go on. Wonder if the publishers are watching. "Victims? What victims? I don't have any victims," he said as casually as a counterman explaining that the pastrami was finished for the day.

Boos and chatter, followed by a hint of microphone feedback as the woman shot back, "The boys! The boys, I'm talking about!"

Joe's first thought was, *what boys?* but he recovered enough to answer, "I'm a writer. My book is fiction. I am merely describing a reality – inventing it, really." Expressions of miffed disbelief from the troika on stage. They were stamping their feet like impatient bulls.

"But your writing makes this terrible predatory activity look so *good*," noted Oprah. "So positive, appealing, even *fun*."

"Well, maybe it is," Joe said, falling into the trap.

"For *whom?*" Oprah swung the cordless microphone like a policeman's baton. "For the twelve-year-old boy whose innocence is ripped from his heart by a monster consumed with a twisted lust?"

"Well," Joe said.

"For the girl whose stepfather rapes her while her mother is out getting her bowling ball cleaned?" chimed in the hairsprayed victim of this

adventure.

"No, but," Joe said.

And then, suddenly, he tuned it all out, having heard it all before. He noticed he was sweating at the neck, an unusual place. Must be the lights. He was looking into their hot glow when he noticed Oprah glaring at him, expecting a reply.

"Well, like I said, I'm just a writer, the book is fiction, a story. I made it all up. But," Joe shifted into Bernie mode. "You know, when some Boy Scout out on an overnight hike looks up at his Scoutmaster and grabs his – I mean the Scoutmaster's – uh, *member*; and smiles and asks him '*Can we do it again after the campfire?*' I have to wonder, you know, where's the victim here, unless it's the other troop members, excuse the expression, who are being left out of the fun."

"You were in the Scouts?" asked the severe psychologist." I was under the –"

"No, it was only a for instance."

"Then how do you know such a thing –"

"Oh, don't be absurd, lady," Joe said, forgetting the national audience, and Oprah, who was smiling cannily for reaction shots. "We've all been around the block a few times. We all know about guys who've had affairs with kids for years at a time. Their Scoutmasters, teachers, Uncle Sid, whoever. Certain kids have a, I don't know, an attraction, I mean, they're attracted to older men, and of course if the men are into it, well." Joe realized he was parroting one of Bernie's old standard raps, and making a hash of it. But it was tough defending a perversion you didn't share, or truly understand. He tried to remember what ridiculous arguments Bernie used to justify what Joe called his *conquests*. "These kids, they know exactly what they're doing, what they want. It just so happens they're younger than the norm in our society. I know –"

"Oh, you know children like that?" Oprah interrupted, happy. "And they're *still alive?*" She turned swiftly to a camera with a blinking red light. "We'll be back," she said.

"Get over here and stick your giant rod up my hot crack," the boy said. Well, not actually said, more like indicated, but as far as Nick Craner was concerned it was as good as shouted from the hilltops – so to speak, as the boy rolled onto his stomach, sighed, pouted, and raised his tender pink hilltops for Craner's delectation. Craner made haste to remove his last remaining article of encumbrance, his ancient Jockey

shorts, the front of which was stretched out a foot in front of him, barely able to contain the massive erection brought on by the boy's insatiable desire. He smeared coconut oil on his huge pulsing spike and eased it slowly into the quivering pink bud. The boy gasped, then sighed with relief and pleasure. "Oh God, Nick! Give me more!" Nick felt the boy tighten himself around his captured cock. He started to move deeper. The boy relaxed, sighing, and farted quietly. "More," the boy said. "Please, more."

"Mister Boyle, do you honestly think that what you're peddling is literature? Is this really the kind of story you're proud to have written, and sold?"

"Well, I don't know – Kevin Costner wants to play Craner, but I'm waiting for a break in Daniel Day-Lewis's schedule." Joe coughed as the audience hummed. Was that woman going up the aisle in a huff on her way to call in her resignation from the Kevin Costner fan club? Joe was reminded of the old Groucho line about not leaving in a Huff, leaving in a Ford. He smiled, wondering what Groucho and Chico would make of this scene.

"Just because people like it doesn't mean it's popular," Oprah opined. "You are pandering to our basest instincts!"

"*Your* basest instincts, Miss Winfrey? I had no idea!" The audience gasped at the effrontery of his instinctive reply. He was sweating so much his wig was about to slip.

"Don't get clever here, Mr. Boyle. The topic under discussion is *perversion, child molestation, the rape of innocent children, pornography, and –*"

"And pleasure!" Joe shouted, nearly losing his wig. He leaned forward in his seat and squinted through the lights at Oprah, at the audience, directly into the blinking red light of the electronic faceless masses. "And love! And tolerance! And affection! And joy at being alive! And a sense of humor!"

"*Spare* me," Oprah smirked. She ambled slowly over to the podium where Bernie's book lay naked and vulnerable.

With Alex it was always a wrestling match, a contest; we fought for satisfaction. Of course, I always won, but only in the end, when he seemed to allow me the victory. After perhaps a , half an hour of violent tickling, rolling around on and falling off of my massive king size waterbed, Alex would lie on his back, his tiny, elegant, hairless scepter thrusting straight up, its pink tip pulsing with expectation... "I give up!"