

The Pale Black, the World Servant, and the Voice of God

by Robert Campbell

CARTER SAW BAOBAB TREES as monsters, vast, obese pillars of flesh, topped by branches so much like roots that they defiled the air. Farmers in Zimbabwe told him there were no young baobabs, anywhere, ever. Carter saw none. He had not seen a baobab of any age for more than a day when the axle on his Land Rover broke in northern Zambia, near Mpika, but one appeared, like an omen, not twenty yards from the pot-holed road. He imagined that the roots of the huge survivor blossomed below the earth in violent blues, purples, and yellows amid bilious green leaves. Looking closely, while his driver assessed the damage (Carter knew it was beyond repair), he saw that the tree was not one tree, but an incestuous merging of a dozen trunks, flesh into flesh, an act of slow giant lust.

Responding to his own impatience (but calling it urgency of his mission), Carter left his driver with a letter of credit at the doubtful telephone of the crumbling Mpika hotel. A bus was then already six hours late, but it promised to deliver him to the Tanzanian border. It did so, but the experience was not a good one. The Tanzanian customs officer sneered at Carter's passport as he seized it, observing that an American, traveling on a bus but pretending to be an officer of the United Nations was obviously a CIA agent. He ordered Carter to wait on the bus until the customs post opened in the morning.

He slept badly, woke after three hours, cleared customs, and waited for the bus. Six hours later – still without food – he was waiting still. God, he thought, had often punished him. Not always for a clear reason. The sins of his father perhaps. But why, he asked, in this way? At last the bus did move, and Carter boarded it. Carter was sick with hunger, heat and dehydration, and he was bitter and depressed by the failures of the past two days. As a boy Carter had found God's peculiar injustice comforting. Such capriciousness, known and anticipated, tempered a child's reaction to hurts and frustrations. Carter was no longer a child,

and he felt himself falling into the sins of anger and racism, blaming the blackness of his tormentors for his suffering, and blaming his suffering on the sins of anger and racism. It was a theological paradox that made him even more angry, racist, and tired. Those feelings left him indifferent to the splendid naked hills the bus traversed near the edge of Africa's Great Rift.

But he began to notice, as the road flattened near Mbeya, that Tanzania had young baobabs. On both sides of the bus, he could see them, no longer great mounds of flesh, but each single and slim, ten, twenty, dozens, hundreds perhaps, scattered chaotically, each like a pillar, with hair, upon a moonscape. He felt almost lighthearted, graced by the little trees, when the bus deposited him not twenty yards from the hotel entry.

The lift to his mood was brief. The hotel clerk was cool, clean, and suspicious of Carter's sweaty coating of dust. He held up his hand – the palm an ocher contrast to the almost blue-black of the rest of his visible skin – and said, “No.” A weary and bitter ten minutes later, Carter had, to make peace, and in hope somehow of a bed, paid the full rate for a booking made in error for July 6, ten days previous. The clerk, appeased (and probably pocketing the money himself), promised to telephone for some sort of help, when the telephone was “back in service”.

Carter's mood was at its blackest as, responding to the clerk's only helpful advice, he retired to the hotel lounge. Hungry, even ravenous, he had been warned that the dining room was closed until seven. He looked, grim and narrow-eyed, at the Europeans, Asiatics, and Africans, sitting at tables in discrete groups, sharing the afternoon tedium in the dingy white room. Off to the left, concealed from the lounge but visible to Carter at the doorway, was the small dark bar. Two people were seated on bar stools. The sight made Carter's eyes narrow even more, and his emotions more grim. One, a fat Asian, was gently caressing the bottom of another, smaller person. Into Carter's oppressed mind came the image of a great baobab's fleshy union with a young tree, unresisting to the irresistible.

Carter was not the puritan his parents had reared him to be, but he preserved their prejudices. He detested, and this was immediately to the point, crude public displays of sexuality. It was his father's teaching, teaching which especially reviled displays of unnatural sex. The revulsion was evoked at this particular moment by the realization that the small person at the bar, dark, with black hair in shining curls, was almost certainly as male as the Asian.

Now Carter's rage had an objective. No longer trapped in helpless anger, he possessed moral justification and a duty to act. He had the presence of mind to know that in East Africa no American, however righteous, has the authority to attack a Pakistani pervert, when he, himself, is not the object of the pervert's attention. He could, however, invade the obscene privacy of the bar, and, by his presence, publicize and quell the pervert's abuse of the child.

Rather more loudly than he intended, Carter, at the bar, demanded "Whiskey!" then looked to see if the fat caressing fingers had moved from the boy's buttocks. They had not. Instead the bottom had moved when its owner turned to look at Carter. The fingers now, more obscenely than before, rested on a thigh.

"They don't have whiskey," the boy's voice said – and it was a boy's voice; the boy was there, looking up at Carter, the boy who had not resisted the fingers, and his accent was Midwestern American. Carter looked back at the boy and felt, very briefly (hunger, thirst?) a dizziness, a sense that he was on the edge of nausea. Carter couldn't – didn't have the time even – to rationalize the response: the boy was the most beautiful child he had ever seen. "You'll have to order beer. That's all they've got here." Brown eyes, set wide under black brows, furrowed, showing concern. "You okay? Hey, you're all covered with dust!"

Carter nodded, partly to shake off the evaporating sensation. "I need to wash – and, yes, I'll have beer."

The vile fingers moved at last, waving to the barman. "Sampson! A beer for this master. Very cold!"

The boy was giggling. "You can't wash. There's no water. Are you American?" Under the still-shining curls was a straight nose, nostrils slightly flared; then full lips, now the white teeth, in a smile against a skin the color of ginger snaps. "Yes, you are."

"So are you." Carter grasped for his rage, discontent, and righteousness, but they escaped him.

"Sure. But I don't live there. I live in Tangier. Where do you live?"

The effort to speak was almost more than Carter could manage, yet he couldn't choose. "I don't live – in the states either." He paused for breath. "I live in Geneva." He slumped, exhausted, onto a bar stool, and found there that his own eyes were almost on a level with the boy's, intent and gleaming. The look was so nearly hypnotic that Carter was relieved by the distraction of the steward's putting down on the bar a 600 ml green bottle on which was a label showing a rampaging elephant. *Lucky elephant*, Carter thought, and did not know why.

He rallied to see the Asian paying for the beer. Carter raised his wallet in a futile gesture while the fat man smiled happily, saying, "The stranger is a guest in Mbeya." Defeated, Carter cast about for some way to show his disapproval; none came. The Asian said, "Call me Punjabi." Rather than be rude to the boy's friend, Carter chose civility, saying, "Carter; Carter Seward."

The boy mimicked the Asian. "Call me Tommy." Then he held Carter's hand a moment too long and brushed his palm with fingertips.

Tommy. Carter blushed. A summer camp. A canoe trip, and a naked swim. Something furtive, freeing on the grass after. But why the memory? The name had not been Tommy. This boy's eyes were on him again, and Carter would have blushed again but for Punjabi's kind solicitude interrupting, with gentle questions that led Carter to say why he was dusty, why he had no room.

"Use my room," the Asian said, seeking some sort of grand gesture. "Rest there. I would give it to you, but an associate," – he dwelt on the word a moment, as if saddened by it – "will need it later." His look was wistful, not seeing Carter but focusing instead on Tommy's curls. "I have its private use for only a few hours more." The Asian was making a sacrifice. Carter had his victory. The boy was saved. Instead of elation, Carter felt sympathy for a man who accepted defeat so gracefully.

"Try Mrs. Henderson," the boy said. "We can walk. It's not far."

Punjabi laughed. "Almost two kilometers. You will carry the luggage on your head, like an African?" He put a hand onto the curls, causing Carter's hand to move, spasmodically, as if to resist. "I will take you in my car. You and our friend. It is my thanks to you for walking so far to visit me here."

Tommy smiled, and his voice was gentle, contradicting his message: "I didn't come to visit you. I didn't know you. I found you."

"It was decreed." Punjabi spoke only to Tommy, but his message was to Carter as well. "You, ah, *intuited* that I would be here. In my country we have a different word for it." He sighed and released the boy. "Now you have another friend you were destined to meet. He is an American, like you. Except for a touch of the tar brush. Yours is the darkest skin at Mrs. Henderson's guest house."

"No, it isn't," Tommy said, unoffended. "The stewards are African."

MRS. HENDERSON MOVED AROUND THE SPACIOUS lounge as if she were a hostess at a large party. She floated to a chair by the couch where Tommy and Carter sat, side by side. "So good of you," she

said, "to bring Tom back to us. We'd have been frantic if there were any trouble a boy could find in Mbeya." She allowed herself to be amused by Tommy's smile. "I don't doubt you were looking for mischief, but you found Mr. Seward instead." She returned her attention to Carter. "Did the hotel decline your reservation?"

Carter felt grateful for the sheer Europeaness, the Britishness of her courtesy. "A mistake in Harare, maybe," he said. "But who knows?"

"Indeed who? I think the mistakes were fewer when we could call it Salisbury, but there's the colonial past speaking. Forgive me. We're all on the side of black rule now, aren't we? You especially. It's your job. It's mine too." She had the English gift for self mockery. "So you'll go on to Iringa tomorrow." It was a statement, not a question.

"My Land Rover is still in Zambia. Somewhere. I doubt if I'll see it again." She sighed gravely. "You had better have a drink." She called to a steward, "Komo."

When the steward stood waiting, Carter asked, "Do you have whiskey?"

"A double whiskey for this master. Tom?"

"Beer."

"Of course, dear. A double whiskey and an orange squash, 'Komo.'" She turned back to Carter with a kind smile. "You've been having a difficult time. You must go to Iringa tomorrow. There's no room at the hotel, and your room here is booked."

"There's no transport," Carter said. Then he added, as apology, "Of course, I got here on the bus."

"No need for that. I'll put out feelers. Someone will have space in a car." She leaned forward, to take Carter into her confidence. "We have delicate antennae here. No secrets at all. It's the hell of the land of the Zanj." She drew back again, and sighed. "In poor Dr. Livingston's time it was scabies."

"Very good, 'Komo.'" She said that to the drinks, not to the steward, then looked at Carter again. "I'll see who's going north." She rose from her chair. "Dinner is at half past seven. You can have use of the club across the way. But I must warn you" – she began to float away – "the club has no whiskey. I have the only supply in Mbeya. Ah, Mr. Smallchurch!" She was gone.

Carter cocked an eye at Tommy's drink. "Orange beer?"

"She won't let us drink beer, me and my brother. My father would raise hell if she did."

"Is your brother here?"

“And my father. I don't have a mother.”

Carter decided not to ask him to explain that. The more immediate mystery was that Punjabi had been right: no one else at Mrs. Henderson's had skin so dark – except the stewards. Wary, Carter asked, “Your brother and father – where are they?”

“At the billiard table.”

Carter saw a sandy-haired man and a sandy-haired boy putting cue sticks onto the rack.

“I guess they're finished,” Tommy said. “Here comes Donny.”

Carter looked again. The man had a weathered face, and the stare he returned to Carter was weary. *He's younger than I am*, Carter thought, *and he looks ten years older*. As Carter turned away, he distinctly heard the word “Fag”. The sandy-haired boy was passing. Tommy replied, “Airhead”. Neither word sounded malicious; they were like passwords.

Carter imagined his mother's grandfather, the Confederate Army major, whose body servant died with him at Antietam; they had been “breast brothers”, from the same black breast and, legend had it, the same father. Carter looked at Tommy's darkness with a new surprise, but now with something else: the boy's whole body tensed at the approach of his “father”. The voice that said, “Dad's coming,” was constricted, almost fearful. A new image occurred: a newspaper story about a convicted pederast who had adopted one boy, and was detected only when he was adopting another. Carter felt a renewed protectiveness. The first danger had been Punjabi, now this American pervert was an even greater threat. Carter would have liked to touch Tommy, to reassure him. Instead he rose to face the pederast.

The pederast, smiling, extended a hand. “Lemuel Tolliver, Thomas's father.” His accent was familiar, educated redneck. He called to the steward, “Komo, yes, here, bring this master – that's whiskey, isn't it? – double whiskey with ice in it. Ice, now, 'Komo. It don't look like you put in any before. Who're you saving it for?”

'Komo smiled. “I doan save it, sah. You aks, I bring it.”

“Orange squash for me. Ice in that too. Go along – but bring some ice for Thomas too.” Tolliver sat, Tommy between them. “Mrs. Henderson told me who you are, Mr. Seward. I hope you'll visit the construction site. It's not your line, but I want your folks in Geneva to know we're making progress.”

“I have to go to Iringa tomorrow.” Oddly, in view of what he'd just said, Tolliver seemed relieved. “You're restructuring the water supply,” Carter added, adopting a professional tone. Tolliver was immediately

happy, talking about a dam and piped water for irrigation. Carter had little need to speak. Tommy, some invisible crisis past, sat serene, glowing in the dim light of kerosene lanterns. Carter studied Tolliver. *No more likely to seduce boys than I am*, Carter thought. *Less perhaps.* The thought amused him.

Dinner was served at tables for four. When they sat, Tolliver asked quietly, "Please join us in prayer." He took Carter's smooth left hand in his own calloused right, a surprising intimacy, and took Donald's in his left. Carter reached to hold Tommy's hand. It was restless throughout the grace. Carter looked briefly and caught Tommy's half-shut eyes on him, and a sudden smile of satisfaction.

Donald, across the table from Carter, had the same wide-set eyes and straight nose as Tommy. His brow was lower and his mouth coarser, like Tolliver's. Donald's shoulders were heavy, as if he were the lineman and Tommy the leaner, quicker quarterback. The pairing was so odd that Carter could not resist asking their ages.

"Fourteen in November," Donald said.

"Twins," Tolliver said. His tone was flat. Then he smiled. It was rehearsed. He had said it just that way, and smiled, many times before. And he'd responded to incredulity like Carter's "Twins?" by saying, with the same laugh he used now, "Did I say identical?" The boys laughed, at the old joke, and at Carter.

"We won the booby prize at a twins contest," Donald said. "The judges were gross."

Tolliver's voice was gentle, a practiced reassurance. "It was a long time ago. In their first year of grade school."

"That was our *only* year of school in the states," Donald said, grinning at Tommy. "Dad had to get *him* out."

Carter looked at Tommy. His lack of reaction seemed practiced too. *What was it?* Carter asked himself. *A lurking gene? Less likely, almost impossible, but more comforting than the truth. Comforting to Tolliver, but what did Tommy know?* Carter felt his silence weigh upon the table. "I see," he said, and smiled at Tolliver. It was enough.

After dessert, Tommy appealed to his father, "Can I take Mr. Steward – to show him my rock?" Before Tolliver could answer, Tommy added, "That's *all*."

"I don't think Mr. Steward would want to see it, Sonny," Tolliver said. "He's tired."

Carter did not like decisions made for him. "I like a walk after dinner," he said. He was careful not to sound insistent; he didn't want

Tolliver to think – Carter's mind hesitated – what was it he did not want Tolliver to think?

Tolliver looked anxious. “Don't let him bother you. You can walk without him.”

Tommy rose, implying that permission had been granted. “Maybe,” he said to Carter, “we can see the Rift.”

“It's too dark,” Donald said, with an inexplicable laugh.

“The moon, Airhead. The moon's full.”

“Don't answer him, Donald,” Tolliver said quickly. To Tommy he added, “Don't keep him out long, with your tales and your stars. Or any of it.” The last was a warning.

Donald mouthed the word “Fag” at Tommy, letting Carter see it, then said, “Excuse me, sir,” with excessive good manners, and followed his father.

THE MOON LAY LOW, full and mocking, in the northeast sky. It washed the road white on black tar, gleaming, and subdued the redness of the rock Tommy had leapt up and now stood upon, waiting, moonlit. Carter gathered the sight slowly before following. “They call it the end of the world,” Tommy said. Together, they looked west, out onto the badlands. Though they were only a thousand yards from the guest house, the rock was the peak of a hill beyond the last houses of the town, and in the quiet they seemed, and were, entirely alone. The Great Rift, if it was there at all, was beyond the far darkness. “You can see it in the afternoon, when there are shadows in the Rift.”

Tommy's voice was hushed, as if he were suggesting a mystery, saying, “You can see, really *see*, Africa being ripped open.” He waited for a response.

“I'd like to see that,” Carter said, meaning it, catching some of Tommy's awe.

Now assured, Tommy was enthusiastic. “There's a road to the edge – out toward Chunya. We could go in a car tomorrow. Why not stay? It's the biggest thing happening in all the earth.” Tommy looked into the moonlit distance intently, then up at Carter.

“I'm on a mission,” Carter said; “my work is in Iringa, and I should get on it tomorrow, to meet my schedule.”

“I know,” Tommy said; “I mean, I thought so.” Tommy's voice verged on anger. “And there's no room for you here, anyway. But just – it won't make any difference – I'd like to know.” Tommy seemed irritated, perhaps by uncertainty about how to proceed. “The Rift – you

know – Dad says it's just the way God made it, the way the Bible says, but I say it's getting wider, even if we can't see it. Donald says Dad's right.”

Carter was cautious. “Your father's an educated man, Tommy.”
“Bullshit.”

Carter was offended. It wasn't the word, itself. It was just the first obscenity he'd heard in more than a week, unless passengers had used African scatology after he boarded the bus at Mpika. They didn't count. “Where did you learn about the Rift?”

“At school, the American School, you know, in Tangier. My science teacher gave me a book when I told him where Dad's project was. It's a pretty simple book. But I did some more reading in the Britannica.” All that was said quickly, almost as a preface to his apology: “I'm sorry I said 'bullshit'.”

The boy was quick, sensitive to more than Carter thought he showed. “I don't mind it much,” Carter said, reaching to touch Tommy's shoulder. “It was just unexpected.”

Tommy shrugged off the hand, impatient. “You weren't going to answer my question.”

Carter felt hurt that his touch had been rejected. He felt the coldness in his own voice as he said, “Does it matter?”

“Yes.” Tommy faced him now, a bit defiant, as if a great deal did depend on Carter's answer, as if, hearing the wrong answer, he was prepared to have nothing further to do with the stranger in such a hurry to get on to Iringa.

The moon did strange things to Tommy's face, now that he turned it toward Carter. The moon lightened the skin against the black brows and hair. Carter wished the boy were not so beautiful, nor so concerned about geology. “You're asking if the world is very old. It is.” Carter framed his answer carefully as if he were lecturing. “You're asking if the earth's tectonic plates have been moving for millions, billions of years, and are moving still. They have been, and they are.”

Tommy, appeased, said tentatively, “And the Bible – it's a lot of crap.”

Carter wasn't ready for that; it irritated him. But he smiled. “Are you going to apologize in a minute for saying 'crap'?”

“No.” The boy was challenging him.

As a test of wills, it was absurd. Carter's feeling for the once Holy Scriptures was a reverence, a remnant of Sunday School teaching and parental piety. A cultural respect, literary awe. “The creation story's a

fable,” Carter said coldly. “Every primitive society has one.”

“They're all – what I said.”

This was tiresome. To agree did not befit a religious liberal. “Not to the people who believe them.”

“Let's go back,” Tommy said, and turned away, down from the rock.

Carter felt something was ending, and ending because he was unwilling to say some simple truth in a way that a thirteen-year-old boy, brighter than most, wanted. Not moving, he said, “If I have to choose between your beliefs and your father's, why not let me do it before you go?”

Tommy turned. “I think you just did. You don't have to say it. But you did, didn't you?” Carter nodded, elated. “Dad's okay,” the boy went on, “but he lays this Bible stuff on me, and –” he paused, uncertain.

Carter helped. “You wanted to know.”

“Yes,” Tommy smiled, expressing a new hope. He came close to Carter again. “Do you know the southern stars? They're what I really come here for.”

“No. Can you show me?”

“If you look for the Southern Cross – there – above it... Wait. I'll show you Centaurus, and Alpha – it's the nearest star. Maybe it has a world too, like the sun.”

Later, as they walked back, Carter felt an odd discontent. It had all gone so strangely; far more was at stake – for Tommy and for himself – than the age of this world or others. It was more what thou shalt not do. He resisted the impulse to put a hand again on the boy's shoulder. This time, it might be welcome. But now he could not touch Tommy spontaneously, as he had only a half hour before. Now he would be a fool, courting disaster. Carter had yielded – drunk, yes he was drunk then, at his fifth Yale reunion – yielded to an undergraduate, one of the boys on the work-crews. He forgot it, except to remember when in danger, as now. He'd not told Margaret, nor explained to her why he never afterward attended reunions. She'd have blamed herself, her inadequacies, her miscarriages, though it had nothing to do with her.

Besides, now, he was cold sober.

WERE HE NOT IN THE comfortable lounge of Mrs. Henderson's guest house, Carter's situation would have been like his the day before, in Tunduma. This morning, he'd been ready at seven, packed, and had spoken farewells to Tolliver and his sons, putting an end to the evanescent friendship of a man and a boy. The image of Tommy, looking

back from the departing Land Rover, stayed. Carter had gone inside to sit alone, philosophizing about the meaningless heartache such partings gave to the modern world, and contrasted himself, the ultimate product of the whole world's diaspora, with the simple African villager who parted from friends only in death. He was inclined to such speculations, and had no doubt engaged in similar thoughts yesterday (though he could not remember what his thoughts had been then) until, as now, the time grew too long. His digital watch read 9:18.

Mrs. Henderson, in deep distress, hovered. "We'll have to double you up somehow. If someone's willing."

Carter stood, surprised. "The car's not coming?"

"Oh, Mr. Seward, it's my doing. Several have gone. You were to go with a Mr. Singh. He was traveling alone, and it was a kindness to him. He wanted to meet you." She sat, and waved him to sit too. "It's no good standing; there's nowhere to go. He tells me his battery is dead, and it won't take a charge. He could start out, but it's too great a risk."

Carter sat, unshaken. He felt the need to feel concerned, so he said, "What can we do?"

"It's no use until a new battery is brought from Iringa. If Iringa has one." That, her tone implied, was unlikely. "It will be all right tomorrow. Someone will be traveling. What you need is a bed for tonight. The question is, whose?"

Carter wondered if she was about to offer her own, then abandoned the idea as too bizarre. He let the silence speak for his own helplessness.

"The Tollivers," she said. "They have two doubles. The boys have one, Mr. Tolliver the other. If you could bear to share his bed, I expect his Christian charity would require him to allow you." She sighed. "He's a great Christian, you know. Not the sort we see much, but he's not unkind."

"He was hoping I'd visit his project." It would be a kind of payment.

"The waterworks! By all means, let's go visit! You Americans can sort it all out among yourselves, can't you?" Mrs. Henderson rose and called for 'Komo. "Leave your suitcase here and I'll drive you. Mr. Tolliver will get his visitation, and you will get your bed. If you can help him, you should. God knows that this country will never bloom, but a little more water might do wonders in the farms. And it will make baths easier."

The project was a half hour out on the Tukuyu road – eleven miles. Tolliver welcomed them into his "office", an iron roof on four posts. He

dismissed Mrs. Henderson's apologies as of no consequence, and immediately began illustrating what he'd told Carter the night before about the dam. Donald, coming to join them in the shade, wearing only shorts and sneakers, shouted back to Tommy, "Hey! He didn't go!" Tommy, wearing shorter shorts yet looking less nude, hung back, entering only as Mrs. Henderson was saying, "Can I leave Mr. Seward here? It seems what you and he wish."

"Yes, sure," Tolliver said, brushing dusty hands together, relishing an audience.

"And I'll have Mr. Seward's things put into your room?"

Tolliver was saying "Yes," when Tommy, half a beat behind, said, "Dad!" Tolliver scowled at the boy, then turned an appraising look at Carter. He stared at the ground a moment, a great weight on his mind. Carter felt uneasy, and looked to Mrs. Henderson with an unstated question, to which she offered no answer. Tolliver at last nodded and turned, frowning, on Mrs. Henderson. "Your beds. For you English people, they may be double, but I don't see two grown men the size of me and Mr. Seward in one of them."

Mrs. Henderson looked shocked. "But then – oh, very well, I'll see what we can do. But I don't know what."

"It's not a problem," Tolliver said, with unnecessary force. "Donald can share with me. Put Mr. Seward into the boys' room."

Carter didn't need to look at Tommy to sense that he was caught up in some sort of plot, or plan. Or brought unwilling into one. An expected victim. Yet Mrs. Henderson seemed to see the arrangement as quietly amusing, and, when Carter did look at Tommy, he saw happy innocence there. As Mrs. Henderson drove away, Tolliver was already moving Carter out onto the works, showing the interrelationship of plan, difficulty and structure.

In an hour Carter was impressed with Tolliver's engineering skill and ingenuity. His estimation of the man grew, as did his recognition that the project was underfunded. Tolliver was careful, tactful, never demanding. A good report in Geneva would help, even from Carter, a non-specialist, and Carter resolved to give it. When Tolliver had made his case, he asked Tommy to take the Land Rover and show Carter the Rift. "They call it 'The End of the World' here, and you'll see why. It's the end of these Africans' world," he waved toward his workers, "and it's the sight to see here."

"Won't you be needing it?" Carter asked, meaning the Land Rover.

"Donald and I can get back in the lorry. That's what they call our

truck.”

Tommy spoke for the second time since Carter arrived. “Can we go to the club too?”

“Whatever Mr. Seward wants, Sonny; not what you want. He's our guest. Remember that.” Tolliver's tone was fatherly.

An hour later they reached the End of the World.

The new world, beyond this one, was greener, fairer, deep in a canyon broad as Eden. Carter, as always since early childhood, imagined a population more pure than any he knew. Tommy stood out at the edge itself, the edge of a fall grandiose in its danger. Scuffing loose stones ahead, seeing them start a fall to invisibility, Carter moved to stand at Tommy's side, and was inspired. He felt a terror in his loins, and a desire to end this foolishness about the boy and Margaret. It would require only one final step more, a step that seemed for an instant certain. Heights always had that effect, the child in him wishing to be free, wishing the splendor of an act that dared all others. Carter stepped not forward, but back. “I promised you I'd play tennis,” he said., Tommy nodded, uncomprehending.

“NEXT TIME, I'LL WIN.” Tommy was stripping off his shorts in the shower room of the club. The bath attendant was getting water. Rotting floor slats, designed to protect footing as wet bodies drained, confirmed the decay that the old colonial club manifested everywhere, even on the tennis courts, sandy deformations of what had once been infinitely fine clay from termite hills. On those courts, with their peculiar bounces, Tommy had lost one set 2-6, then on the second came back from down 1-4 to lose in a tie breaker. Now the boy, exuding confidence, tossed his socks, the last of his clothes, onto the floor, and stood, expectant. Around the middle of his body, from hairless pubic excitement to a decorous dark navel, was a sun-shaded pale stripe, the mark of civilization. In spite of it, Carter imagined that he saw before him a young god of renewal, who made the decaying lockers testify to a past that once too was young.

The attendant carried two buckets of water into the shower stall. Carter sat, motionless, still dressed for the courts. He looked away from the god, pretending exhaustion. “You go first,” he said.

Tommy did not move, but he looked at Carter with something like the impatience, the irritation he'd shown on the rock. Then he went into the stall. In a moment, he cried, “Ow! The water's cold!”

Good, Carter thought. When he was thirteen he'd used cold showers

at Choate. He'd needed them in that sensuous world of adolescent hostility. When Tommy came out, Carter went in and doused himself, feeling the same shock, the same quelling of emotion. Then, involuntarily, he whispered, "Damn!" That boy had not been named Tommy either. Cold water was not always enough.

It certainly was not enough for the sight of Tommy, still naked, posing, one leg on the bench and his upper body muscles flexed. "How would I be as a model?"

What did Punjabi say? Carter asked inwardly. *We do what it is said we will do? No, but that was the meaning. Now, somewhere, the gods of motor vehicles and hotels are gambling for my soul. If there are gods, these are they.* "Good," Carter said, toweling himself briskly. "Too good. Get dressed. What's the bath guy going to think?"

Tommy relaxed his pose and rubbed his hands over his chest and stomach. He looked serious as he said, "He thinks all whites are crazy. Even me."

NOTHING IS INEVITABLE, Carter thought at the dinner table. He felt an irony in holding the hands of Tolliver and Tommy during Tolliver's recitation of grace. *There is something between them, and I am part of it.* Later, he stayed overlong at the billiard table, watching, not playing, and he delayed going to bed by having a late whiskey with Mrs. Henderson. But even she deserted him, reminding him of the early start to Iringa in the morning, and Carter went to face, or not to face, the sleeping Tommy.

As he entered, Carter knew that he'd seen the room before, but was not prepared for the yellow glow of the kerosene lamp by the bed. What had been drably ordinary, four colonial walls, peeling light blue paint, were now the setting for a nimbus that brightened Tommy's black hair, shadowed his dark face – but somehow not his eyes, awake, watching – and illuminated his right shoulder, strong and soft. Tommy reached his right hand forward, toward Carter and the door, as if to touch across eight feet of space, then withdrew it, and, hand turned impatiently, said, "It took you long enough." He waited a moment, seeming to judge Carter's reaction, then asked, "You're not going to wear pajamas, are you?" Carter felt his head shake in an involuntary negation. Tommy laughed. "You can't anyway. I hid them."

It is in the hands of the gods, with Punjabi's blessing. Carter told himself that resistance was futile. He stripped, silent, and slipped under the sheet and blanket. *But I won't do the gods' work for them. Let them*

do their worst. He did not even look at Tommy. They did not touch.

From far, far away, it seemed, he heard Tommy say, "I'm glad you got me away from Punjabi."

Carter did not want to answer, but his silence had grown so much that it intimidated him. "He had," Carter resolved on the truth of his intention, "his hand on your bottom."

"He wanted my ass."

The word hung, knife-like, over the bed. Carter resolved to have it out, once and for all. "Were you – was he going to – going to get it?" Carter stopped breathing.

"There's got to be a first time."

That was worse than Carter had feared. But what if it was true? Carter was lost.

"So what's wrong?" Tommy was angry with the silence, the stiffness. "In Tangier, kids smaller than me do it. All the time. They go out looking for tourists, and their families know. So what's the big deal?" Tommy was up on an elbow. He whispered fiercely, "Say something!"

"But they –" Carter knew there was an answer to the boy's outrageous conception. "They are – Tommy, it's different with them. Those street boys –" Where was the answer? He looked back at Tommy, helpless.

Tommy let himself fall back, then turned away. "They're different. They're niggers, right, Mr. Seward?" He turned back to Carter. "Well, I'm a nigger, too, so where's the difference?"

"Don't call me Mr. Seward." Carter knew that was the wrong thing to say while he was saying it.

"Shit, Mr. Seward, I know my place. I just thought you didn't."

"Tommy, Tommy." Carter was pleading now. *No, I won't refuse love.* "It would be the first time for me too." That lie was almost true. *Such lying, he told himself, comes easily to a diplomat.*

In the dim shadow of the kerosene lamp, Tommy frowned, yet his voice was soft. "Do you want to?"

Yes. Good gods, yes, Carter thought. "I'll try," was all he said. He reached down, beneath the covers.

HE FAILED. THEY FAILED. Carter felt sick with anger – after so much, after the commitment. They had been like machines, or whores. Women could get away with that, and pretend. Carter searched for consolation. To the back of Tommy's head, to the curls, tinged with the

yellow light of the kerosene, Carter said, “Then you're not – what you thought you were.”

Tommy wrenched one word out of the sobs he was concealing: “Bullshit.”

Carter tried again. “Don't you see?”

“I'm what I am. I'm a nigger fag, and you can't get it up for a nigger fag.”

“Tommy, look at me.” “You didn't even want to.”

That, at least, wasn't true. “No, Tommy. I wanted to. I did.”

Tommy turned, tear stained and scowling. “Why? Why did you? If you did.”

The hardest words – they choked the diplomat. *Sometimes we must speak truth. Forgive me, Margaret.* “I think – I think I love you.”

Tommy's scowl changed to a puzzled frown. “I *know*. I mean, I thought you did.”

Of course he did; he must have. But – “When?”

“All along. With Punjabi. On the rock. All the time. You wouldn't even take a shower with me. But I thought so anyway. The way you looked at me.”

The young baobab. Carter could not speak, but he knew the boy was right. It was from the first.

“Don't you want to know –”

Carter cut in. “I know.” *I can't risk seeing him now. I can't risk another failure.* Yet the need for Tommy was beyond his control. *We risk death breathing. I could have stepped off the End of the World.* Carter turned his head and found Tommy's mouth almost touching his.

THE STEWARD AT THE DOOR said, “Car for the master is coming.”

“Don't go today.” Tommy blocked Carter's attempt to unlock the door. They struggled, cold and naked, in the early morning air. “Say you're sick. Just till tomorrow.”

“I'm sick,” Carter said through the closed door. “I can't go. Say thank you, but I can't go. Do you understand?”

“Master can't go. He sick. Master says thank you.”

“That's right.” The struggle over, the two bodies were still in contact, clinging. “Iringa can fall into the Rift,” Carter whispered. “What will your father say?”

“Don't listen to him.” The room was grayly lit from the one curtained window. The light made Carter intensely conscious of his

nakedness and his excitement. He tried to pull away from Tommy, but his touch was too gentle, and Tommy held him close with only one hand. With the other, Tommy held both their erections and pressed them together, measuring. "Mine's going to be bigger," he said. "Come on, back to bed. We have to fix these. Come on. Now."

THEY WERE THE LAST GUESTS at breakfast. Mrs. Henderson sat with them. "If you're going to make yourself ill sitting up to all hours with your whiskey, which I presume you did after I urged you, solemnly, to be ready this morning, you will never go to Iringa at all. And no doubt you disturbed the child when you staggered, drunken, into the bedroom." Tommy found her vision comic; Carter was embarrassed. "Your father," she said to Tommy, "and your brother were up. They wanted to say goodby to Mr. Seward. I suggested to them that you were both ill – gastritis perhaps – though I don't think your father was impressed, and I know your brother wasn't." This, too, Tommy found hilarious. Carter began to realize that Mrs. Henderson was in on the joke not yet explained.

She went on, this time to Carter. "I'll send for you at seven tomorrow. You won't refuse Major Willowbend and his Mercedes. I've rather been saving him. Write me if you find out how he got it. That's if you want to go. Perhaps the night air at Mbeya has a fatal attraction for you."

"At seven," Carter was saying, while Tommy was saying urgently, "No, Buzz, take me with you." Carter looked – showing helplessness he thought – to Mrs. Henderson.

Mrs. Henderson rose. "You should, you know. He's bored silly here." She walked away, leaving Carter stunned.

"Until school starts, Buzz."

"Don't call me that." Carter tried to remember why, in post-coital conversation within the past hour, he'd been so foolish as to tell Tommy that name. "Not even my wife uses it. Only people who've known me twenty years call me that."

"And me, Buzz. Until I've known you twenty years. Then I'll be old enough to call you Carter."

The man gave in. "All right."

"You'll take me?"

That was absurd, a dream, not a possibility. "No. Call me Buzz. I've got a wife, for Christ sake."

"I'll be nice to her." Tommy showed no sense at all of the

impossibility.

“She's not stupid. She'd know.”

“Then just till you go back to her, so she won't have to know. When's that?”

Carter decided to go to hell. “September.”

“That's a month and a half, Buzz.”

It was still absurd. Carter turned away.

“You think it's wrong.”

“Of course it's wrong.” The image shocked Carter: “A man my age traveling with a thirteen-year-old child. And with passports that show we're not related.” The scandal would surface at every hotel.

“You think us fucking's wrong?”

“Yes. I don't know.” That was true. “Anyway, your father does.”
But if the gods are not just, what does it matter?

“I don't care.”

“I can't kidnap you onto a pederastic joyride, if that's what you want me to do.”

“No kidnapping.” Tommy seemed sure. “He'll let me go.”

“I don't believe it. He's a fundamentalist Christian if I ever saw one. My father's almost the same. They hate this kind of thing.”

“Sure, I know. But he says I've got free will. I don't care whether I do or not, but – Buzz, just ask him.”

“I wouldn't know how.”

“Can I ask him?”

It was going too fast. He'd already given away September. Carter nodded. Tommy kissed him. “No!” Carter said, shocked. “Don't do that in public again. Not ever.”

“You liked it.”

“YOU ARE LOST WITHOUT YOUR SHADOW,” Mrs. Henderson said, lowering her bulk beside Carter. “Komo. You know what this master will have.”

“Why do we still use that word?”

“Komo thinks it is a lower title than chief. He's quite irreverent.”

Carter laughed. “I don't deserve reverence.”

“You've dropped all pretense.” She waited, but Carter found nothing to reply. “You'll have an interesting evening.”

“You know, then –”

“I knew you would say yes. Here's your drink. The devil is very active here. He's at home. He's friendly, and tells me everything. I'm on

his side, you know. That seems to put me on yours as well.” She sighed. “Poor Mr. Tolliver. God can't help him much here. God lives in America.”

TOLLIVER'S GRACE AT DINNER seemed even more grotesque; holding his calloused hand and Tommy's polluted flesh linked improbably so starkly that Carter doubted Tommy had asked the question. Tommy quieted the doubt with a grin during grace.

Tolliver quieted it too almost immediately. “So, Mr. Seward, you invited my Thomas here to go on a six weeks safari. All expenses. You must be right well pleased.” Donald giggled. “You be quiet, Donald, or you go without supper. Is that so, or has Thomas been lying to me?”

Carter put a clean face onto it. “It would be educational, just at this time in his life, and –”

“You mean to say, sir, that I've been neglecting the boy's education?”

“No, that's not it.” *What the hell; come right out with it.* “I like the boy –”

“He gave you satisfaction, isn't that it? And you're going to give him satisfaction, and then he'll give you more satisfaction. Is that right?”

Carter didn't want to come that far out with it. “I'd put it differently.”

“You want my son to be your whore.” He pronounced it ho-wah, so Carter was slow to catch the meaning. At the same time, Donald had the shakes. “Donald, I'm not warning you again.”

The steward served soup. Carter's gesture of refusal wasn't successful. The soup looked orange. Tolliver was going on. “Do you understand?”

“Tolliver, if you are refusing –” Simultaneously, Carter and Tolliver caught Tommy's desperate signal to Carter. Carter stopped.

Tolliver glared at Tommy. “You'll both leave the table if you mess in this conversation. Eat your soup.” Tolliver turned back to Carter. “My son's a child.”

Carter felt trapped by the soothing tone Tolliver adopted for that line. “Yes. Well, yes.”

“Yes. A child who you, a married man, picked up in a bar two days ago and sodomized.”

“Tolliver!”

“Was that the wrong word? I don't talk about these things usually. Why would I?”

Tommy broke in. "I didn't tell him you were married."

"I'm shocked, Sonny," Tolliver said; "I'm shocked you tried to keep me from knowing that. You best keep quiet now." He turned back to Carter. "You don't care about marriage vows. You have the freedom to be damned."

That wasn't fair. "My marriage does matter."

"Then you will want your wife's permission. Sonny, eat your soup."

"I'm too excited to eat," Tommy said. "Besides, it's carrots." He pushed his spoon around the bowl. "I think."

Carter put in, "I don't understand you, Tolliver. I don't understand the terms you use – the way you use them."

"My terms. There you go. You can take him with you on my terms."

"You mean he can come with me?" Carter was not expecting that, not without a fight. "But then I suppose—"

"The queer black bastard," Tolliver said, evenly. "You think I want to get rid of him."

Carter appealed to Tommy with a look. Tommy said, "I told you. Don't listen."

"If you're not eating, you can excuse yourself."

"No, Dad; I just don't like the soup."

"Then shut your mouth up."

Carter couldn't hold back. "How can you call him that?"

"I'll answer to Thomas, not you."

Carter looked, and Tommy nodded. "All right," Carter, said. "What are your terms? Or is this talk supposed to go nowhere?"

"Thomas, did you tell Mr. Seward what you did before?"

Carter hoped that the secret was about to come out. But Tommy only said, "I didn't do anything before."

Donald said, "You tried."

Thomas let his irritation show. "Tried? I was trying when Buzz first saw me. He saw me trying. You ought to thank him, Dad. He *saved* me." Suddenly he grinned. "I don't think you'd have liked Punjabi."

Tolliver allowed himself a bitter laugh. "My son's defying me. When the school term ended, he told Donald that he was going to commit sodomy as soon as he could. Six weeks ago. You are merely his first success."

"He's a fag," Donald said.

Tolliver's look quieted Donald. "I cannot force Thomas to choose

God and eternal salvation. He is damned for his decision. I have prayed for him and I will pray for both of you – and hope that my prayer can save you from hell, and bring both of you back from uncleanness.”

Carter said, “I don't believe in hell.”

“Thomas doesn't either. Heaven and hell don't need your belief to exist.”

“Chicken stew again,” Donald said; he was being served the main course. “There's never enough chicken.”

“Take more rice. I thought, Mr. Seward, that you were going to disappoint the boy. I was wrong. I could see that I had been wrong when you didn't go to Iringa this morning. Then I assumed you were a fraud. It wasn't possible. A man of your name, your honor, your distinction – and a boy? No. So I checked on you.”

Carter felt a new threat. “But the telephones don't work.”

“We use radio at the project. A relay through Iringa to Dar. It goes very slowly. I spent the day making sure of you.”

“What the hell did you say?”

“I didn't give a reason. I'm not a slanderer, not a backbiter, Mr. Seward. You will slander yourself. Thomas slandered himself, first to Donald, and then to a gentleman here.”

Donald grinned. “What was his name, Sonny? Oh, yeah, Jack, Jack Otis – he came on real strong, all about how much he liked boys, so we figured he'd be the one. But Sonny goofed, and the guy told Mrs. Henderson.”

Tommy cut in quickly, “She told him to forget it, but the son of a bitch told Dad anyway!”

Tolliver was livid. “Not at this table, Thomas. Say what Satan puts into your mouth, but not in my hearing!” Tommy's only reply was a push of his fork at his dinner plate. “So, Mr. Seward, I took Mr. Otis's accusation to Donald, to see if it could be true.”

Carter felt it was his turn to sneer. “Not Tommy?”

“No”

To Carter's surprise, Tommy seemed hurt by Carter's tone. “It wasn't Donald's fault, or Dad's.” He paused. “But, Dad, if you had asked me, I would have told you.”

“I know, Sonny. But I was afraid. Afraid you'd lie.” Tolliver's emotions were mixed, apology and regret: “It didn't seem possible to me that you'd be proud of what you'd done.”

“I wasn't. I messed up.”

Tolliver ignored that. “I'm often wrong, Mr. Seward. It's worst

when I fail to pray for guidance. God has never deceived me, but my own will has often.” He paused and raised a hand to forestall an interruption. “I must tell you something. More than thirteen years ago I almost made a terrible blunder. Their mother would nurse Donald but not Thomas. Before I prayed, I had decided to give him away. But God stopped me. If she would not feed him, I could make formula, sterilize bottles. Thomas – Sonny – you see, he’s something more my son than Donald. I was Sonny’s mother, though not, perhaps, his father.”

Carter felt something like awe. Tommy returned Carter’s inquiring look with a brief nod, then looked down at his plate. His food was still uneaten. “Where,” Carter asked, hesitating, fearing tactlessness, “where is she now?”

“Where are they all? My church, my father, my mother, they all wanted Donald. I asked God and God told me to take them together, to take them where they both would never hear the word ‘nigger’.”

“We heard it, though,” Tommy said. “First week in school.”

“East Lansing wasn’t far enough. I couldn’t finish my degree before they began school. I hadn’t been prepared. But since then, God has enabled me to work among heathen, in Riyadh, Tripoli, here. You’re not eating. None of you are eating.”

Donald said, “I ate most of the rice. As long as the chicken lasted.”

Carter, though subdued, felt the need to return to the main issue. “You said Tommy could go.”

“He goes freely, and at no cost to you.”

“I can easily –”

“I won’t have you buy him!” Tolliver thrust his face toward Carter in accusation. “You won’t ensnare him with obligations. He says, on fifty hours experience, at thirteen years of age, he says he *loves* you.” Tolliver looked sick a moment, then went on. “Very well. He may be damned for that. I can’t prevent it. But if he wants to be free of you, if he wants to save his soul, you will not take him to hell with you!”

Though Carter could, indeed, easily afford Tommy’s expenses, he couldn’t resist a smile at Tolliver’s offer of substantial cash savings. “I accept that.”

“Second, I will advise your wife that Thomas has my permission to be her rival.”

That was monstrous. Carter stared for a moment, then said, “Tolliver, that’s absurd. In your own God’s name, and I mean no blasphemy, for Christ’s sake why?”

“She is one flesh with you. She has to have a choice. It is not you

and me alone. You were, I have no doubt, married before God in a church?"

Carter, for the first time, was furious with Tolliver.

"No! I suppose next you'll write the Secretary General? Dear Sir, the boy sleeping with Carter Seward is my wife's bastard. Yes, sure. You should write my mother too. And that sanctimonious son of a bitch, my father. Hell, publish it in the *Herald Tribune*. No, Tolliver. I don't agree."

"Well then," Tolliver said, "it's settled. Do you want coffee with dessert?"

Silent invective against Tolliver raced through Carter's mind, but, as if stunned, he remained silent.

Then Tommy was standing at his side, pushing on his arm. "Say something!" When Carter only looked up at him, with a tiny shake of the head, Tommy turned. Carter reached to restrain him, but Tommy, turning back, brushed away. The hand, saying coarsely, "Layoff!" and left the room.

It loosened Carter's tongue. "Tolliver. Be reasonable."

"I've offered you my son, and you ask me to be *reasonable!*"

"It's not just Margaret. There's a world we're part of. You'd be breaking our marriage."

"I don't intend that, but, yes, it may happen."

Carter rose and, standing high over Tolliver, cursed: "Damn you."

"God may," Tolliver said mildly, "but not at your request."

CARTER SAT ON THE BED, Tommy's bed, their bed, in yellow light, meditating on Margaret. He loved her still. Could she accept – what had Tolliver called Tommy? – this "rival"? Her capacity for justifying him was great, but it would not be equal to this challenge. Carter had to smile, ruefully, because fifty hours ago – fifty, Tolliver's count had been right – he too found such a relationship monstrous.

No, not fifty. Fifty-one hours. *Where is Tommy?* A low level desperation set in. *Would he go to Punjabi?* Carter knew he could never follow the boy there. *He won't come back here, now.* Carter decided he had to go to the rock.

Out on the verandah, Carter was surprised to find Donald, sitting on the rail. "Where's Tommy?" Carter asked.

"I don't know. I guess you got to give him up. Anyway, tonight's my turn." He climbed down from the rail. "We got to do it quick, before Dad comes down."

Carter found that he was beyond surprise. He walked out to the road. To the right, the hotel. The likely direction. To the left, the rock. Carter walked left, up the hill, into the brilliance of the stars, the low-lying moon on his right.

On the rock, he sat, arms around his knees, looking at the moon, hardly changed from two nights before. Yet it seemed saddened, now, and kinder. It evoked tears. For the moon, not Tommy. *It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. I'm well out of it. If I'd taken him, there would have been other Punjabis. Such a man, more generous than I, perhaps he deserves the boy, deserves all good, more than I.*

Then a sound, a breath, told him that he was not alone. It could only be Tommy, and Carter's body warmed at the presence. He didn't move, not consciously, yet another sound from Tommy showed they were mutually aware: each knew the other knew, and neither moved nor spoke. Then the boy, the less patient of the two, came and sat next to Carter, and looked at him.

"You've been crying," he said. "I haven't. I knew you'd back out."

"We were married the year you were born." Carter knew it would not explain anything to Tommy; he said it to please himself.

"What's she like?" This was polite conversation.

"Me. We're cousins. We grew up the same way. We studied the same things. We have the same ideals."

"You're alike. Sure thing." The boy's voice was rich with indifference. "No room for niggers."

That cut. And it was true. But Carter had to lie. "No, Tommy. It's not that."

"I bet" – this was polite conversation again – "you and your wife are all for civil rights and equal opportunity. I mean, you're liberals. Right?"

Of course it was right. "You make it sound stupid."

"It's not stupid. It's bullshit. You're full of bullshit. You were, you are, and you always will be. That's why I'm not crying. I haven't lost a fucking thing."

But I have, Carter thought. His faith, and his love. Perhaps not yet. He was a rational man, one who calculated well; it was one of his admirable qualities, and he knew it. What he calculated now was that he was much stronger and probably quicker than the boy sitting beside him. "You're right," he said. "You're right because I'm not through with you." He hoped Tommy would accept him, would move first, understanding. But instead Tommy began to get up.

Carter moved decisively. Tommy saw the embrace coming and

fought himself away. They grappled and rolled, until Carter's weight held Tommy firmly down. "Just don't bite me when I kiss you," Carter said.

Tommy didn't bite. He spat. But it wasn't enough.

TOLLIVER SAT IN PAJAMAS on the edge of the bed, the letter in his hand, listening, sullen. Donald yawned irritably on the far side. Tommy sat on the floor, watching Carter with renewed fascination. "I've told Margaret the essentials. I'll seal it. You can mail it to see that it goes."

"His name. My name. These are not the essentials. No."

"Oh yes they are. Because there's another condition, Tolliver. He goes to school in Geneva."

Donald sat up, alert, understanding more quickly than his father. Tolliver said, "Absolutely not! It's –" then he paused. "You expect –" he gasped in astonishment, "to have him and your wife, both?"

"If she's willing – which I doubt. Anyway, as Tommy says, Arabs do it." Having committed himself, Carter no longer cared what Tolliver thought.

"Again, no!"

"I'm going," Tommy said. "I already gave Buzz my passport."

"I'll stop you."

"You can in the morning, maybe," Carter said, "but by noon he'll have hitched a ride on a lorry."

"Any maybe get killed, Dad, like you say lorry drivers usually do." Tommy, was having fun. He stretched out on the floor. "Death or dishonor, Dad. Take your pick."

"He's a minor. The police will stop you."

Carter laughed; he was enjoying this too. "Tanzanian police? You know better. So you get on the radio to Dar and Interpol. I'm rescuing a child from an abusive father. I've dealt with Interpol, Tolliver, and Europe's my territory. You won't have a chance."

"The answer is still no!"

Carter took the letter back from Tolliver's now-trembling hand. "Then I'll deal with Margaret my way. And take Tommy. It's too late to change that. I've given him my word." Tommy got up and stood beside Carter. "I'll pay all the expenses." He put his arm over the boy's shoulders. "He'll be my little ho-wah."

The image seemed to fascinate Tolliver. His mouth open, he stared. Then, very slowly, he turned on the edge of the bed and slipped to his

knees, his back to his tormentors. "Jesus," he said softly, "Sweet Jesus. Speak to me. Comfort me. My son Thomas defies me, Jesus. Tell me, please, o living God!"

Donald grinned a long grin at Tommy, then plopped down beside his father. "Hear him, Jesus," Donald said. "Tell him."

Tolliver made it into a chant. "Hear our prayers, o Jesus."

"Hear us, o Jesus," Donald said, picking up the rhythm. "Hear my dad. Put your spirit in him, Lord, put your spirit in him to let these queers go. Let 'em go, Jesus."

"Hush, boy. Listen to God."

Carter held Tommy closer. In Carter's world, Tolliver was a madman: asking God an essentially obscene question. Yet Tolliver was a clever engineer, a dedicated father – and, upon reflection, Carter wondered if Tolliver's God might not have fairly good sense. He was at least as intelligent as Tolliver.

Tolliver rose, murmuring, "Thank you, Lord. Thy will be done." He patted Donald. "That was a good prayer. God forgives the word, however vile, that is spoken with faith and charity. But don't use it in a prayer again."

Tommy rushed to Tolliver, hugging him. "It's okay!"

Tolliver sat on the bed, embracing Tommy, kissing him on the forehead. "Yes, Sonny. God's ways are strange, and he made me no promises. Now, let me go." He turned to Carter. "Mr. Seward, we have to be friends. It's the lesser of the evils. So take my hand and swear to me that you will be good to him, by your lights." He shook Carter's hand, then rose and went to pick up a sheet of paper from the table by the bed. "I drew up this list of expenses before dinner. It won't be complete, especially now that the school will be changed. A saving, probably, since he won't be boarding."

"You didn't mind me calling you queers, did you?" Donald asked Tommy. "I mean, it worked."

Tommy punched Donald on the upper arm, hard. "No, airhead."

"Don't answer, Donald," Tolliver said, mechanically.

"But Dad, he really is a fag! I mean, now it's not even an insult."

"But it's not kind."

"What about Thanksgiving, Dad, and our birthday and Christmas?"

"Tommy should have a week with us in November, and at least one at Christmas. You come, too, Mr. Seward. And a week before school starts? We can settle the expenses then. You boys get to bed now, and Mr. Seward too. Your car is coming very early, and Donald is tired."

“Aw, Dad, I'm awake now. I want to be with Sonny.”

“Come on,” Tommy said. “Help me pack. Your stuff's all mixed up with mine.”

“No fights, Sonny.” Tolliver said. “Take only what you need.”

“Okay, Dad. Come on, Buzz. I *told you* he'd let me go.”

“That's right,” Donald said, softly, beyond Tolliver's hearing. “You just got to handle him right. You'll catch on.”

The boys went into the room and turned up the lamp. Carter could hardly conceive that it was over – that it had begun. And uneasily he became suspicious again that he'd been caught in some conspiracy too complex for him yet to penetrate. The boys dumped drawers full of clothes onto the bed, and began sorting. A sweater – whose was it? – began a dispute, and Tommy threw stuff, seemingly at random, into piles while Donald protested.

Carter, faithless at the end, prayed. *O gods of motor vehicles and hotels, he murmured, you gave him to me. Do not abandon me when we live among houses and schools.*

[A slightly modified version of this story appears in Robert Campbell's own book – *Singularites* - eEd.]