

DANIEL MALLERY

STRANGE CATHARSIS



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Richard: an author suffering from writer's block, the profession's most dreaded disease. Danny: a tough boy exploding through puberty, whose first instinct is to challenge all authority with his fists. Hansa: a gentler, reserved boy desperately seeking parental (and other kinds) of love....

These three, and many others, come together in a small private boarding school for children in Care located in the wild Scottish Highlands. Here the writer is confronted with a hidden drive-spring in his erotic make-up — and the boys discover in him a protector, a champion and, sometimes, a lover.

Daniel Mallery knows the Highlands, knows the speech patterns of the area; especially he knows disadvantaged boys, their pretences and defences and their often contradictory yearnings for acceptance, individuality, freedom and stability. In *Strange Catharsis* he has woven a compelling tale of one man, and a handful of wonderfully individual boys, growing up.

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“There are lusts that can manacle more surely than chains.”

—*William Ewart Gladstone*

“In the long mornings on the beach his heavy gaze would rest, a fixed and reckless stare, upon the lad; towards nightfall, lost to shame, he would follow him through the city’s narrow streets... and at such time it seemed to him as though the moral law were fallen in ruins and only the monstrous and perverse held out a hope.”

—*Thomas Mann*

One

The main beam picked out the steep, winding, tree-lined up-grade—a driveway that almost immediately opened on to a spacious low-walled yard fronting the building. A solitary light burned above what was obviously their reception point. Richard coaxed the vehicle towards it, face to the windscreen, trying to determine the size and shape of the structure. The darkness defeated him.

“God, how I hate arriving at strange places at this hour,” Louise said, twisting to give the little boy in-back a shake. “Wake up, Lee. We’re here.”

“It’s not exactly peach pie for me either, Louise.”

She flicked on the interior light as the car came to a standstill and checked her presentability in the vanity mirror.

A light inside the building blinked on and the front door opened. A woman of stocky build was seen in silhouette, framed by the jamb.

Stepping from the car, Richard introduced self and family (“Say hullo, Lee.”).

“I’m Elizabeth Hurst-Sanders,” she told them, warmly welcoming. “Do come in.” She was a smartly attired, pleasant-looking lady in her early forties. The gold chain at her throat glowed warm against dusky skin (from vacationing in Florida, the Bahamas, St Tropez?) and gypsy-style earrings added to her unconventional appearance. “Thank heaven you finally made it. You must be quite worn out. I do hope the rest of your journey wasn’t too disastrous.”

“Very nearly,” Richard said. “We made it on a wing and a prayer. It couldn’t have been petrol because the gauge registered empty for miles. Came over the moor. The road seemed endless.”

She smiled. “It always strikes newcomers that way the first time. We *are* rather remote, but it does get shorter. Thank you for your call by the way. Running out of fuel on top of your broken fan belt really would have been bad luck.”

“We might have imagined fate was trying to tell us something,” put in Louise, with a glance at Richard meant to convey unspoken thoughts.

To avoid possible misinterpretation, Richard was obliged to say that his wife was somewhat apprehensive. “And to be perfectly frank, so am I, a little. When we applied for these positions we didn’t think we had a hope in hell, but here we are.” “Of course, but please go on through. You must be dying for a cup of coffee.” Resting a hand on the visibly drooping boy’s head, she asked the obvious. “Ready for your bed, young man?”

“Not really,” said the eight-year-old, shyly.

“It was a silly question,” Elizabeth said, smiling at his parents, and ushering them into an extensive oak-panelled reception hall in which a huge crystal chandelier seemed wasted. The parquet flooring was so highly buffed it was clear no one ever dared walk on it. They proceeded up centre over a rich, deep carpet runner with a pattern like fallen leaves. There were a number of animal trophies high on the walls, amongst them a wild boar and several fully-antlered stag’s heads.

Richard’s first impression was that it seemed overly grand for a school. He said so.

Elizabeth chuckled. “The rest of the building is much more practical, but this is my husband’s ‘grand facade’, as he calls it. He says they give the place character, so there they must stay.”

Richard asked if her husband Charles (headmastering his other school) had been the hunter.

“Good gracious, no. They were all here when we bought the property. It had been a private residence before. The previous owners travelled a great deal. There were others. African animals. They took some away with them, thankfully. There was a crocodile, complete, awful.”

They had passed beyond the hallway, were standing on drab well-trodden linoleum at the foot of a wide winding stairway.

“Your rooms are up there,” she went on, “but we’ll go to the kitchen first.”

Louise noted the time. "It's just gone midnight, Elizabeth. We've kept you up. Really, if it's a bother..." "No bother at all, I'm a late bird. Please come this way."

A polyphony of children's voices drifted up from the schoolyard below, slowly impinging on Richard's dawning.

He sat up with a jerk not immediately comprehending the unfamiliar sounds. He was in a smallish twin-bedded room to which a camp bed had been added for the boy—as a temporary measure, Elizabeth had promised. Of course, the new job, but today they were to take things easily. He was not tired even though his sleep had been fitful. He had to have a preview of the kids. Mixed feelings of apprehension and eager anticipation jetted him from his bed. Two of the three windows in their adjoining first-floor sitting room overlooked the yard. With stealth calculated to leave his wife and son undisturbed, he slipped into the other room. Standing at one of the windows he drew back the curtain and looked down.

They were all commendably smart. The boys wore grey shorts, even the older ones, and the girls pleated skirts. Otherwise they were uniformly outfitted—grey jumpers over grey shirts, with navy and white striped ties.

Richard saw a number of boys kicking a ball around, often forcefully, and he was concerned about the car. Because of their late arrival it had been left directly below the window he was looking through. A considerable masonry overhang prevented sight of it.

He observed some of the kids grouped around a tall, bearded man in a track suit sitting on the low wall. Even as he watched, the man rose to his feet and bellowed a single word at the top of his voice. 'Stand!' All activity ceased instantly, and the children remained rooted to their various spots. He then commanded them to 'Move!' and the statues sprang to life again forming themselves into four lines facing the building.

One boy chanced to look up, saw the face at the window and waved. Richard waved back and withdrew, embarrassed. The kids would have been told of their arrival and he wondered what kind of reception they gave newcomers.

The morning wore on. School playtime came and went. Louise and Lee were up. They were all thinking of putting in an appearance downstairs, when there came a boisterous rhythmic rat-a-tat on their door.

Before anyone could answer, a grinning head thrust itself in and with Yorkshire accented ebullience it said, "Ah, I see you're up and about then. Can I come in?" And again, without waiting for an answer, the complete person was in.

It was Uncle Eddie, the housemaster. He was of athletic build, tall and slim, in his early thirties. His dark wiry-looking hair, beard and moustache all joined up, framing close-set eyes, a sharp nose and practically non-existent lips. He wore a blue tracksuit and sneakers. He declined an invitation to sit telling them it was his tea break. "Have you had anything to eat yet? Come on down, have some breakfast, then I'll show you around if you like."

They agreed. Eddie indicated the door to his own room and that of teacher Alastair Lowe. Other than Elizabeth, whose flat was another flight up, these were the only resident staff members. The entrance to the boys' dormitories opened from the head of the stairs. Talking loudly and continuously as they descended, he went on, "You're a likely looking lad, Lee. Play football do you? I'll try you on our team. How would you like that?" And without waiting for a reply, "You must have been late last night. I waited up, but not for long. Need me beauty sleep y'know. How did you find Elizabeth? She's not a bad old stick. If you handle the kids the way they like them handled, you'll get on all right with her. Only don't let her catch you calling her Elizabeth when the kids are around. She's the matron, you know." He gave them no time to respond. "And here we are. This place is for the staff. No kids allowed."

They found themselves in a spacious richly-appointed room, where a dining table had been set for lunch.

Eddie was prattling on. “Nice in here. We can light a fire if it’s cold of an evening. Where’s that tea? It’s usually waiting for me. I’ll go and sort ’em out.”

Lee plopped into an armchair. “This my school, mummy?”

“No Lee, of course not. I’ll take you to see yours this afternoon perhaps.”

Strolling prince-like, clasped hands behind, Richard was admiring some rather good water colours of Scottish mountains and lochs. “Rabbits on a bit, doesn’t he?” he quietly commented. “Nice chap though. Wonder if we’ll ever get a word in edgeways.”

Eddie was back, with a tray. “All ready it was. Mrs Twiddie—funny name that, Twiddie—she’ll be in with your bacon rolls in a minute. Should tide you over till lunch, eh? Now, Auntie Louise, how would you like to be mum?”

“Auntie Louise?”

“Aye, didn’t Elizabeth tell you? The house staff are always aunts and uncles and the teachers sir or miss. You’ll get used to it. I saw you looking at my paintings. I do them on me days off, when I get days off that is. What do you think?”

“They’re yours are they? You’re quite an artist,” Richard said.

“Well, modesty forbids me to boast, but I am considered to be quite a dab hand—funny that, dab hand. They’re all real mountains you know, none of it’s made up stuff. Good, eh?”

“Very good. Ever try selling any?” Richard responded, beginning to warm to the man’s good-natured banter. “Ah—”

Pushing the door open with her back, a little white-haired old lady entered, carrying a tray aloft so she could see where her feet were going. “Three bacon rolls, is that right, Eddie?” she chirped.

And as Mrs Twiddie left the room, Louise said, “She’s nice.”

Eddie again: “Now then, Lee, are you stuck to that chair? ’Cos if you are I’ll have it chucked out. You just sit here by me and tell your Uncle Eddie all about it.”

A shy little giggle wobbled his ‘No’ as he sat, to be drawn closer by Eddie’s blue-sleeved arm. Lee was unused to special attention from grown males and resisted a little.

“Going to Raigman Primary is he, Louise?” Eddie asked, aware of the resistance. “See Mr Hillary. Headmaster. A good man.”

“How long have you been here, Eddie?” Richard interposed.

“Let’s see, this is 1972. Six years all told, lad.”

Eddie went on to explain that this was a special school for what the authorities liked to term ‘maladjusted’ children, a label he clearly disagreed with. There were thirty-two boys and eight girls—which Richard thought admirable, though he didn’t say so.

Louise had her doubts. “Scares the hell out of me, Eddie.”

“It’s child’s play, Louise. Funny that, but it is. Nae sweat, as the kids say. You just start as you mean to go on.” He switched to Lee and football again. “You any good, by the way?”

“Okay,” Lee replied, through a mouthful.

“Doesn’t say much, does he? Cat got your tongue has it, laddie?”

“Can’t hardly talk ’cos for you, Uncle Eddie,” he rejoined, the shell opening the merest crack.

“Don’t be cheeky, Lee,” Richard retorted.

“Ooooooh!” Eddie roared, obliterating Richard’s rebuke in a voice that rattled the cutlery. “Who—me?” All sham innocence. “You hardly ever hear a peep out of me.” And he laughed loudly. Young Lee, infected by the man’s good humour, laughed as well. Eddie cuddled him more closely.

“Well, come on then. If you’re ready I’ll show you around our little stately home.”

“Haven’t finished my roll yet,” said Lee.

“Well hurry it up then. Get that lovely grub down yer right smartish, else you’ll never grow up a lovely big lady like what I am,” said Eddie.

“You’re not a lady,” Lee bubbled, cramming in the last piece.

“Oh heavens and dearie me, the secret’s out. How did you know?”

“You’ve got a beard.”

“Beard, what beard, where?” He looked around in pretended confusion, as they left the staff room to begin their tour.

“You’ve seen the hall already.” Eddie gave the decapitations an imperious wave. “I shot and stuffed that lot before breakfast. Nothing to it, but that feller-me-lad led me a merry dance.” The boar. “Now then, this way ...”

After lunch, Eddie invited Richard to ‘come and mingle’ and took him outside where they would supervise the break.

“Thomas Bums! Get your body over here on the double,” Eddie bellowed across the yard. He was clearly heard above the general noise of the kids at play.

Richard watched one boy break into a run as he emerged from the mass of milling youngsters. He stopped several yards short, covering the rest of the way rather more hesitantly.

“Yes, Uncle Eddie,” he asked, timorously. He was a pint-sized, freckle-faced redhead of about seven, trying to avoid looking directly at the man.

With laughably mechanical sternness, Eddie demanded, “What have you been doing what you ought not to have been doing?”

“Nothing, Uncle,” Tommy answered, all wide-eyed innocence.

“Then why have you got that guilty look written all over your face?”

“I haven’t, Uncle.”

Eddie’s tone softened. “Of course you haven’t, laddie. I was only joking with you. Come a bit closer, I’m not going to bite. I just want you to meet someone.” The man sank one of his big mitts into the boy’s hair, fondling. “This is Lee. He’s come to stay with us and I’d like you to look after him. Can you do that?”

“Sure. Hi Lee.” Relaxed now, he offered his hand, which Lee grasped a little tentatively.

“You see—proper little gentlemen, Uncle Richard. Show Lee around the outside of the building then, laddie. He hasn’t seen it yet.”

Tommy took his new friend’s upper arm and led him away, Richard hearing his receding voice asking, “Is he your dad, is he gonna be the new staff, you gonna stay here long?”

“I’d stick your car round the back if I were you,” Eddie was advising. “Best to be safe.”

Richard reversed his Zodiac into the centre of the yard to the accompaniment of Eddie yelling.

“Stand clear, you stupid ignoramuses. You! Steven McKimmie, shift your useless carcass, ’less you wanna end up escaloped veal on tonight’s flaming menu. Barbara Yates, I’ll tan your rear end if you don’t cut that out right now.”

“Well, she’s calling me names I don’t like.”

“I’ll do more than call you names you don’t like, I’ll chew your ears off. Go and stand facing that wall and don’t move till I tell you, even if I forget and you’re still there at Christmas.”

Whereupon Barbara complied, and Richard lost the scene as he drove towards the vacant lot at the rear of the building where a number of other vehicles were already parked, including two blue Transit buses emblazoned with the school crest and the beautifully scripted lettering, ‘Pinewoods Hall School, Kylerossie’.

Richard locked his car and returned to the yard to ‘mingle’.

First, he quickly appraised his new world. The main building was an attractive stone structure, over a hundred years old, but of no particular architectural persuasion. The tacked-on annexe was an eyesore in drab grey brick. It was the girls’ wing, having its own entrance. An interior doorway, separating girls

from boys, was kept locked at night nowadays, Eddie had told them, because Brian Snapley, 11, had been found in bed one time with Barbara Yates, 9.

There was an extensive wooded area below the yard, and a large timber construction at the end furthest from the driveway. This was the gym hut which doubled as a play area when the weather was bad.

As Eddie had joined in a kick-about with a bunch of the kids aiming for goal posts chalked on the walls, Richard strolled around wondering how to get started.

Three boys who looked eleven-ish were engaged in a friendly tussle, and as he drew nearer one of them disentangled himself long enough to ask the inevitable. "You the new staff, mister?"

"That's right," Richard replied, straightway stuck for something to add.

"Uncle Richard?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Matron said. That your kid with Tommy Bums?"

"Yes, that's Lee. Now you know who we are, how about telling me your names—though I guess I'm going to have a bit of a problem trying to remember forty new ones right off."

"I'm Hansa," the first boy said, giggling along with his pals who, through curiosity, had stopped bashing one another.

Richard wasn't certain he had heard right. "Is that your surname?" he ventured.

"What's 'e on about?" the boy asked of his pals.

"I meant is that your first name or your last name?" Richard explained.

"Handsome's his first name," said another.

"Oh I see. Funny name that, isn't it?" Cursing himself for sounding like Eddie and irritated by the stop-start nature of the encounter.

The boys were propping each other up and grinning widely (to Richard sickeningly) at each other again.

"And what about you two? What are you called?"

"I'm John Greig and he's Sandy Jardine." The boy who spoke sniggered, as did the others.

"Yeah, we are the champions," intoned the third, sticking out his front, legs apart, thumbs up at the ends of outstretched arms.

"Oh well, that's a start anyway," Richard continued, knowing he sounded idiotic. "That's three names I've got then, Handsome, John and Sandy—"

The boys burst into uproarious laughter. They were ridiculing him, Richard knew, and doing his hardest to ignore it he continued, "And that's Barbara Yates standing by the wall, and I know Tommy Bums of course. Now, which one is Brian Snapley?"

A remark provoking near-hysterics as the boys began bashing away at each other again. A fat, obnoxious-looking girl, drawn by the laughter, waddled closer.

"Get lost, Mimsy," said the boy who had called himself John.

"Go shite yoursel'," she retorted—to Richard's chagrin.

"Ignore her and she might disappear up her own fat—" the proposition ending with a loud sniff from the boy called—Handsome?

Mimsy was standing too close for comfort. Body odour! She was grossly overweight and as she rubbed up against him, seductively she must have been imagining, she said, sing-song fashion, "You staying 'ere for long, Uncle Richard?"

"I don't know yet. Everybody tells me what a great bunch of kids you all are. If I find out it's true, then I just might." He moved away a little.

"If they told you that they was meanin' the lassies, 'cos all the boys are lumps o' shite," she responded, moving closer again.

“You have a delicate turn of phrase, my dear,” he added, beginning to feel queasy.

“What the fuck’s that when it’s at home?” She farted deliberately, then belched. And the boys, erupting into a fresh round of raucous howling, ran off leaving him alone with Mimsy, aware that he ought to be putting her in her place but not having a clue how to go about it. He sat on the wall.

So did she, emitting another burp in his direction.

“You shouldn’t do that, you know, Mimsy. It isn’t very ladylike.”

“I do it all the time,” she said flippantly, looking the other way. Then, “Auntie Louise, that your wife is it? She gonna be in charge of us lassies, is she?”

“Yes, and I suggest you try to contain yourself when she’s around. She won’t like it.”

“‘Ave to lump it then, won’t she?”

“She’ll stand for no nonsense, Mimsy.”

“Couldn’t give a fuck.”

Richard was somewhat relieved to see young Tommy returning and was surprised when the little boy took his hand and parked himself against the inside of one of his thighs, leaning. “Lee’s playing with Scotty, Uncle Richard, so I came to see you.”

“Fuck off, yer clarty wee sook,” Mimsy snarled.

“He’ll do no such thing. Tommy and me are gonna be great pals aren’t we, Tommy?”

At which juncture, to his relief, she got up and waddled away again throwing yet another loud belch over her shoulder fat.

“She’s horrible is Mimsy, Uncle. She’s always trying to boss the wee boys, she is,” Tommy informed him, moving nearer to his crotch so that the man was obliged to put his arm around the boy’s waist.

“Is she, Tommy? Well then, we’ll just have to keep an eye on her, won’t we?”

The boy was studying Richard’s face closely, taking in every facet, blemish and wrinkle. “How old are you, Uncle?”

The question took Richard by surprise. “I’m forty-schnoom,” he mumbled, passing a hand over his mouth.

“Ooh, that’s old. My dad’s old. I bet my dad’s older than what you are.”

“More than likely,” he commented, trying to hide a smile, for the boy was very serious about it. “And may I ask how old you are, young gentleman?”

“Seven.”

Uncle Eddie came over, red-faced and blowing from his exertions. There were boys tugging at each of his arms shouting, “Aw c’mon, Uncle, give us another game.”

Eddie shook them off, raised himself to his full six feet two inches, and said theatrically, “Enough pudding is as good as a feast.” Then dropping his shoulders, he added, “Anyhow, I want to talk to Uncle Richard. Oh, and you’d better make the most. You’ve only got a few minutes.”

Groaning, they returned to their game without him.

“Phew, takes it out of you that does. And how are you getting on, Uncle Richard?” He sat on the wall beside him.

“Well, I seem to have made a big hit with Tommy here, but otherwise I’d hardly call it an auspicious beginning.”

“Don’t worry, takes time. And did you look after Lee for me, Tommy?”

“Yes Uncle, he’s with Scotty. I’ll go get him.”

“Good lad.”

When Tommy had gone, Richard commented, “He’s a friendly little boy, isn’t he?”

“He’s a nice kid, starved of affection like most of them here. You’ll find ’em all pretty friendly when you get to know them—you mark my words.”

“Even Mimsy?”

“Oh, you met Mimsy—aye, well yes—in her own godawful way she’s crying out too.”

“With foul language I might add. Four or five swear words.”

“Really,” said Eddie, looking pleased. “She’s trying you out. Let’s show her she didn’t win.”

“What do you mean?”

“When the pocket money is given out on Saturday we’ll deduct a bob—five pence—still can’t get used to this new bloody money can you? And we’ll make sure she knows why. You won’t hear her swear again I’ll betcha, and you’ll have taken your first disciplinarian step.” He looked at his watch. “Oh well, that’s another lunch break over.” He rose to his feet, shouted as he had earlier, and the routine started over again. Richard herded Lee through the front door as the little procession of forty snaked off around the side of the building, with Eddie in the rear bawling like a sergeant-major.

The next time Richard saw the children they were all lined up outside the dining room for tea. Eddie, still attired in his track suit, had disappeared into the dining room for a moment. The kids had changed from their short-trousered school uniforms into playclothes, often their own, and almost all of the boys now wore trendier long trousers or jeans and these had the effect of making them appear taller, tougher, and much more intimidating.

Richard was painfully embarrassed by the supposedly surreptitious tittering and staring that was all aimed at him alone. Patrolling along the line, he came upon the three boys he had spoken to on the yard. He threw them a wink, which didn’t have the effect he had hoped for. It creased them all in silent mirth. A hush descended when Eddie suddenly reappeared, a hush which Mimsy failed to notice as she chatted with Barbara.

“Mimsy Halliday, get your body over here,” Eddie commanded, grimly.

The other kids switched allegiance, giving Richard’s self-consciousness a break. They evidently liked seeing Mimsy in trouble. Richard half-expected the fat girl to counter with invective and was surprised to see her shuffling uneasily. Eddie merely towered above her in silence, and when at last he spoke, it was to demand why she had been talking instead of quietly facing front as was expected.

“I don’t know, Uncle,” she almost whispered.

“Oh, you don’t know. Then I’ll tell you what you do. You take a run ten times round the yard before tea. Uncle Richard will watch from the window and he will make you do another ten if he isn’t satisfied. Isn’t that correct, Uncle Richard?”

“Certainly,” Richard said, avoiding a stutter by a hair’s-breadth, surprised to have found himself involved.

“And when you return you will have remembered why you were talking, right? Double away.”

Mimsy on the double was a pathetic sight, and had Richard not felt so downright uncomfortable, he would have found her amusing. As it was he tried to look over the kids with the same severe expression Eddie was exhibiting.

They were given a hands inspection as they filed into the room, taking their seats with little more sound than that made by the chairs. The trolley was already there and a lifted lid revealed steaming macaroni-cheese, which would be followed by sticky buns and tea. A thick slice of bread rested on each side plate and butter and jam pots were set on each table.

Richard walked to the window at the further end of the dining room and watched Mimsy completing her first circuit. Now looking even more ludicrously fat in tight jeans that tapered to nothing, she flopped on her way like a pregnant hippo.

To the accompaniment of clattering knives and forks, Eddie drew a spare chair into the centre of the room and straddled it facing its back. He glanced about, watching, as plates were gradually emptied. Some of the children looked for his approval as they made little productions of correctly placing finished-

with cutlery on their plates. Richard envied his colleague's command and wondered whether it was from fear the kids responded as they did. It was early yet. Time would tell.

Mimsy staggered in looking sick. She stood before Eddie who managed a contemptuous look before turning to Richard and asking if he was satisfied with her performance.

"Yes, Uncle Eddie, she was fine," he replied, not sure he would have dared say anything else.

"Thank you, Uncle. Now, my girlie, perhaps you can tell me why you were talking."

"It was Barbara sir, she was blowing on my neck," Mimsy wheezed.

"Barbara Yates, stand up." She did so. "Is that true?"

Barbara emptied her mouth with a gulp and stammered, "Well Uncle, I—erm—yes, Uncle Eddie."

True or not, Barbara had learned from experience, you never crossed Mimsy Halliday.

"Report to me immediately after tea," Eddie growled, slowly turning his gaze from Barbara back to Mimsy, who kept shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "And you," (he prodded her beneath her heavy breasts) "pour everyone's tea. Uncle Richard and me will have the first cups."

"Yes, Uncle Eddie." She slopped over to the trolley hardly able to raise her feet.

To ease the tension a little, Richard elected to stroll around the room and when his eyes lighted on young Tommy, he was accorded a most beguiling smile. He returned the smile, pleased that he had at least made one conquest. Then, aware other eyes were on him again watching his every move, he felt he must be doing a pretty good imitation of a tiger on the prowl. He cursed himself, felt foolish again, and despite a fleeting impression that he might have made a monstrous mistake in coming here, he reminded himself there were reasons why he must stick with it.

He was looking forward to tomorrow and to all the tomorrows that would follow, and the expectation was strong within him, that this place, this attempt at a new beginning, would provide the peace of mind he so much needed. *He so much had to have.*

South of a veritable shock of steel-wool hair, and in back of dark heavy hornrims that looked like they meant business, was acting-headmaster Ramsden Eldred, introduced as Ramsie. His forehead and eyebrows overhung the rest of his craggy features, giving him a permanently fierce expression. He was in his late twenties, comparatively short, but built like a tank. Formidable as far as the kids were concerned, Richard imagined.

Alastair Lowe was short too, though slight, and much more the egg-head type. He too was in his late twenties, but appeared appreciably older because of a slight stoop, the John Lennon specs he invariably looked over the tops of, and his thinning, lifeless-looking hair. ‘Soaks up books like a ruddy sponge’, Eddie had informed Richard earlier, and he had before him now a huge open volume as he crunched through crackers and cheese towards the close of tea.

Elizabeth was supervising the kids whilst Eddie and Richard got stuck into Mrs Twiddie’s gammon steaks and pineapple.

Louise and Lee, having finished their meals, were seated on the sofa by the fire. Ramsie had been speaking with them but returned to the table with a fresh cup of coffee when the two housestaff entered.

Following the introductions, Ramsie addressed Richard in an aggressive tone that was a fixture. “So my friend, what do you think of our little establishment so far?”

“Rubbish,” grunted Alastair, splattering cracker crumbs over his open pages.

With a sidelong glance at Alastair, Richard replied, “Looks good. Y’know, to be perfectly honest, neither of us quite knew what we were letting ourselves in for—we still don’t—but to judge from first impressions it certainly looks good.”

“For real?” Alastair mumbled, not greatly interested.

Richard knew he’d sounded impossibly lame but was still shaken by Alastair’s put-down interjections.

The teacher blew crumbs from his book and added, “We’ll ask you that question again next week!”

“Never ’eed Alastair, lad, or you’ll be heading south again by tomorrow lunch,” Eddie said. “Bit of a paradise this, but he actually hates kids?”

“Paradox, Eddie,” Alastair corrected, eyeing them over his glasses. “Let’s put it this way. This would be a great place to work if we could just get rid of the bastard kids.”

Eddie tried to shush him, but young Lee wasn’t listening.

Richard decided the teacher must be joking. “You wouldn’t be here, surely, if you didn’t like kids a little.”

“I would.”

“Then—why?”

“The monthly pay cheque, due tomorrow. Ask *me* that question next week.” He grinned and slapped a piece of Cheddar atop another cracker.

Ramsie said, “Elizabeth tells us you’re new to this child care thing.”

“Right. It’s a completely new departure for both of us.”

“If it isn’t too impertinent, may I ask what you did before?”

“No bother, only too pleased to tell you. I haven’t done a thing for several years.”

The Ramsie eyebrows, looking as if nothing less than block and tackle could raise them, shot up unaided.

“Before that I was a writer, professionally that is,” Richard continued.

Alastair Lowe looked up. “Oh. What did you write?” Crunch.

“Mostly fiction—with natural settings. Animals and so forth. Travel books. A sci-fi trilogy early on.” He wished his past to remain secret but, feeling at one with his new surroundings, he allowed himself to

let in a little light. He had his author's ego, after all.

Alastair: "And you were able to make a living at it?"

"Several bestsellers, some of which were made into films."

"I never heard of you," grumbled Alastair, who must have been thinking he should have, seeing as how he 'soaked up books like a ruddy sponge'.

"Ever heard of Jay Gaynor-Smith?"

"You're not he?" Crunch crunch.

"Guilty."

"Christ, we have a celebrity in our midst. Jay Gaynor-Smith. Would you bloody believe it? *Rainbow Over Rannoch*, right? What else? *Dragonfly Lake*, *The Grizzly Bare!* Great title that. My god!" Alastair enthused. "I think I've read all your nature stuff. You hit the mother lode all right. Well, whadyer know! A distinguished author right here. Your books are bloody brilliant, man."

"If you say so, Alastair."

"So what in God's name are you doing in this debauched den of delinquency drawing a salary of one and eleven a week, when you could be making millions?"

"When you find that out, let me know," Louise tossed in from the fireside.

No one heard her for Alastair had an idea. "I got it You're here to research a new book, right?"

"No, that isn't it Alastair, but it's a thought, certainly. It's hard to explain. No, it isn't hard to explain at all, it's dead simple really. The reservoir dried up. No inspiration, gentlemen. Writer's block. Ridiculous perhaps, but true."

"Okay, but of all the things you could have chosen to do instead, whatever made you pick this piddling occupation?"

Ramsie jumped in first. "If it's inspiration you need, Richard, you'll get plenty of it here, multiplied by forty every single day month in month out. You'll be up to your eyeballs before you know it."

Richard couldn't tell them the truth. He palmed them off with something about a growing philanthropic urge. He didn't much care to talk about his reasons for doing or not doing. As it happened, he didn't have to.

Ramsie was addressing himself to Eddie who, for once, had not been able to get a word in. "I'll take three of them off you for a couple of hours this evening, if that's okay with you, Eddie."

"My pleasure. Which three?"

"Need you ask? The terrible trio, Robert, Hansa and Brian. Fooling around in class this afternoon. A good dose of long-division will keep them tied up till spray time."

"As for the others, there's a good western on telly which they'll all watch whether they like it or not," said Eddie. "Randolph Scott. Pass the jam please, Richard. You coming through this evening by the way? This was supposed to be your day off to rest up after your journey." He swivelled around to face Louise. "And how about you, Louise?"

"Yes, of course I'll come. Can't put off meeting the kids forever can I? Or can I?"

"Can I come too, mummy?"

"You'll have to ask Uncle Eddie, dear."

"He doesn't need to ask. Do you like Randolph Scott?"

"Don't know," Lee replied, hovering midway between Eddie and his mother.

"Oh well, we'll have to find out then, won't we, laddie? Did you have one of these chocolate buns? Come and have another chocolate bun."

When Richard entered the children's all-purpose room a little later he discovered a transformation: the dining tables and most of the chairs pushed around the perimeter of the place; a huge thick rug rolled out to cover the linoleum; three centre-sited armchairs.

Although the kids were all sitting backs to the door watching the film, a number of them turned to see who had entered. Two or three murmured ‘hello’ as he picked his way towards the armchairs, in one of which Uncle Eddie was ensconced.

To his surprise he saw Lee sitting on the man’s lap; another older boy sat on an arm of the chair with his own arm around Eddie’s shoulders; yet a third sprawled on the rug resting his head against the man’s legs.

Tommy’s face appeared above the back of the adjacent chair. He whispered, “I saved you a chair, Uncle Richard.” Richard sat and was pleased when the young boy crawled on to his knees.

Eddie turned to Richard and with a wry smile said, “Tommy saved you a *staff* chair, Uncle.”

“Did he indeed? Wasn’t that clever of him?” He adjusted his position the better to accommodate his little package more comfortably. He wondered what it was about himself that had caused the boy to latch on to him with such endearing enthusiasm. He was coming to view Tommy as his figurative foot in the door, hoping the other kids would see and learn to attach themselves in the same way. Preferably boys who were a little older.

“This is one of our quieter evenings,” Eddie was saying. “The kids sometimes seem to appreciate the intimacy.”

“So I see,” Richard said, glancing at Lee who was trying to avoid meeting his father’s gaze.

Without seeing the glance, Eddie sensed it through Lee who had been scrimming uneasily from the moment Richard had entered the room. “Oh here, I hope you don’t mind your young ’un sitting with me. I never thought.”

“Let’s just call it lend-lease. I’ll trade you Lee for Tommy,” Richard said, with a chuckle designed to camouflage a truth. Strangely, though he loved young boys, he had no feeling for his own.

“Very well sir, we’ll draw up the papers tomorrow.”

“Shush please, Uncle Eddie,” one kid implored, eyes glued to the screen.

“We have to do as we’re told sometimes, Uncle,” Eddie whispered with a wink.

They watched the film without interruption until Elizabeth entered with Louise and the eight girls. “Quietly now, girls. Find a seat and settle down quickly.” They took up spare chairs or joined others on the rug. Elizabeth bade Louise take the third armchair, and departed again adding, “I’ll be in the office for a while, Uncle Eddie.”

“Very good, matron,” he threw over his shoulder.

Lee found new residence on the arm of his mother’s chair.

Mrs Twiddie wheeled in the supper trolley coincident with an orchestral crescendo confirming ‘The End. A Warner Bros. Picture.’ The kids stirred. Stretched. Punched one another. Noisily.

“Quiet,” roared Eddie, and the hubbub quickly died. “Sharon, will you pour the hot chocolate please and—erm—Mark will hand it around and—”

“Me sir, me sir,” chorused an eager few as Eddie looked them over. “Big Joe,” (who had not volunteered) “pass the biscuits around, laddie.”

Those designated bent to their tasks, serving the staff members first with efficiency and politeness, and little pockets of quiet conversation buzzed.

“Well now, if they’re always like this, it’s going to be a real pleasure working here,” Richard observed.

“Without wishing to spread further alarm and despondency, they’re not,” Eddie said. “But dinnae wurrly yerr wee heeds, as the French would say.” He leaned forward so he could see Louise, who was sitting on the other side of her husband. “And how did you get on at the girl’s end, Auntie?”

“Fine, I think. They were all so helpful and welcoming. I’d be a fool if I expected it to last, but at least I’m up and running. The fat one, Mimsy—where is she by the way?” Satisfied she was beyond earshot she

went on, "I think she's on heat, the poor creature. Imagines she's in love, and wants me to talk to her about it."

"Punctuated by the emission of bodily breezes from north and south no doubt," Richard put in.

"What do you mean?"

"Flatulence, darling. All burp and the other thing when she was talking to me."

"Don't be crude."

"It's true, ask Eddie."

"True," said Eddie, laughing. "Just watch our Mimsy, Louise. She's a devious bitch, but at least you broke the ice. I'm busting to know who she thinks she's in love with, though."

"I'll see if I can find out, Eddie," Louise promised.

Then Ramsie came in with the three waywards, all of whom were sporting appreciable facefuls of smirk, and to Richard's astonishment they were the same three he had encountered on the yard.

Eddie approached the miscreants. "Thank you, Mr Eldred. How were they?" he asked, ominously.

"Passed muster, just about. They're all yours."

"And now you've finished, I'll start. Come here you three."

They came there. A move involving a single step forward. Two of the lads had sobered, but the one Richard knew as Sandy was still gloating. Eddie disapproved, as the suddenly administered face slap betokened. The boy took on a belligerent look, but held his tongue.

"You should know by now, laddie, that I cannot abide sickly grins when I'm talking to you. If you could get that one simple lesson into your idiot noddle, you'd save both of us endless hassle. I might learn to keep my mitts to myself for instance. It's called tit for flaming tat, laddie. So elementary even a no-face nig-nog like you should be able to grasp it."

Then he addressed himself to the three of them. "Last night it started. Talking and carrying on after lights out. Correct me if I'm wrong, but don't dare say one word. Nonsense at lunch today, matron informs me. She docked points and clipped your lug-holes for you. Trying to sabotage the game on the yard till I slung you out..."

Richard watched the castigation with detachment to begin with, but even as he did, he sensed a growing interest and was at once beset by mixed new impressions; fascination, concern, infatuation. Though he had seen these boys before, he was seeing one of them as if for the first time, the one called—Handsome? The youngster's eyes were firmly fixed on Eddie's face. He was submitting to the verbal lashing with an eloquent little-boy-lost expression and an air of such engaging defiance, the sight of him tore away at Richard's reserve and grappled with his very substance, wresting from them a strong protective urge. This boy was, indeed, strikingly good-looking and he wanted to spare him, to take him under his wing, to get to know him better—and to love him. Eddie's voice was muted, the whole room and everyone in it perceived in a kind of mental soft focus, except for this one boy who stood out in stark relief. He was slim, yet sturdy, standing resolutely erect with shoulders held back, comfortable seeming in his lithe young body. He was clothed in well-scrubbed, contour-caressing blue jeans and tee-shirt—elements which amplified Richard's attraction to him.

Jesus! he thought, what in hell's come over me? Unexpectedly he was party to his own conscience and conscious in conversation. *You've been too long bound by the barbed wire of morality. It's confines are not for you. Do you think I don't know that? Okay, so break out, old son. Let fancy fly free. Let it take you where it will. Do its bidding, grasp it, succour it, in whatever form it chooses to present itself.* This is all too new. I'm scared. *Don't be. It's why you came here, damn it.* But it's just too good to be true. I must be dreaming again. *Nonsense, your dreams were always bad dreams. No one knows that better than you. This is no dream. It's real, it's right. Life's for living, friend. I suggest you get on with it.* Thus he was determined not to fight such emotive feelings as this young boy engendered, assuring himself he'd seek closer contact at the first opportunity. This one boy would become his first conquest. *You're into self*

deception already, man o' mine. Be true to yourself. Don't pretend you haven't been touched by others amongst these boys, many of whom are lovely little larrikins. They are to your starved soul as insects to a chameleon's tongue. Go on, admit it. Okay, I admit it, but quit shoving, will you. Time must be the master.

He snapped out of his reverie casting furtive glances in case it had showed. Not so. All eyes were on Eddie who was concluding his admonishment. Thunderingly. "If you don't cut your nonsense post haste, I'll cut it for you. I'll rip your 'orrible arms off and beat you to death with 'em. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, Uncle," they chorused weakly, temporarily deflated.

"Right. Get your cocoa then you sit there, you over there and you by the door and woe betide the first who breathes."

"Well done, Uncle," Ramsie said, jovially, when the kids were beyond hearing. "Jesus, is cocoa the best you can do?"

"'Fraid so, matey. Thought you were meeting Alastair in The Highlander."

"Was, but it's peeing buckets. I'll have a drink in the staff room." He addressed Richard and Louise. "Fancy something a little stronger?" he asked.

Louise said she'd stay and keep Eddie company. Richard went. So did young Tommy's smile.

The staff room was warm and quiet, save for the spattering of rain on the windows. The drapes were drawn against the darkness and Richard was impressed by an almost tangible ambience and an absorbing acoustic which, for him, inspired a cocooning sense of peace and security. They were alone. And, large whiskys in hand, they sat.

"It's great having you with us, Richard," Ramsie began. "First impressions now—what do you think?"

"Well, I know it's early days, but lunchtime on the yard was a disaster. With typical unerring instinct I seem to have been drawn to the worst first"

"Like who?"

"Coincidentally they were the same three boys you had this evening. They succeeded in making me feel like the idiot of the year."

"You mean Robert, Brian and Hansa?"

"If you say so, but those weren't the names they gave me."

"Really?"

"Really. They called themselves Sandy Jardine and John Greig. I guessed Handsome must be a nickname."

"The snotty little bastards!" Ramsie ejaculated, obviously incredulous. "Is that what they told you? Those first two names ought to mean something, yes? Or maybe not, you being a sassenach an' all." He grinned.

"You got me."

"Rangers players both. Glasgow Rangers football club. The third one is Hansa." He spelled it. "And he is a little bastard in the literal sense. Bom in Dunoon of a yank, Howard Luft. The Polaris thing, you know, in the Holy Loch. The kid wasn't wanted; taken into care soon after he was bom; came to us when he was five; carries dad's monicker for some unknown reason."

"Luft, you mean? Hansa Luft," Richard mused. "Some handle."

"Say it backwards," Ramsie suggested, rising to refill the glasses.

"Tful Asnah?" he stuttered.

"No old chap, transpose the names."

"Luft Hansa. Blimey, Lufthansa, the German airline."

"You got it. Weird senses of humour some folks got eh?" He had an idea. "Tell you what—how about this for your first exercise in child care? Get on the right side of Hansa. He's a good lad in bad company."

Brian and Robert really are nasty little shits. See if you can bust up the clique.”

Richard’s heart leapt. He could scarcely believe his good fortune. He was actually being pushed in the one direction he most wanted to go. Mustn’t appear too eager. With restraint, he asked how he might begin to go about it.

“Your pigeon. I’ll leave it to you. The kid doesn’t know he’s got yankee blood, oh, and he’s a chronic piss-bed.”

“I gathered that much. Mimsy was taunting him before tea.”

“We have one or two entireties, but he’s the worst. Every night, swimming in it, the poor little sod. However, you take him in hand and see how you go.”

“I’ll have a bash, certainly.” He drew on his cigarette too deeply, sucking his cheeks in, inadvertently making himself feel cheap. He coughed self-consciously, and added, “Wish I had half Eddie’s self-confidence. He has the kids in the palms of his hands, manipulating them like puppets on strings. Most of them seem terror-stricken one moment, yet hang on to his coat tails the next. I don’t quite understand.”

“You will. They’re currying favour, but make no mistake, kids like to know exactly where they stand, though they’re not aware of it, of course. And Eddie’s their strong arm. His recipe is toughness tempered with tenderness and it works brilliantly, for him. We all have to come up with our own best ways of handling them and this comes with experience. Don’t worry, given that the approach is right, you’ll find that none of the kids are as bad as they are made out to be. The ones at fault are those who should have prevented them needing to come here in the first place. ’Nuff said. Let’s talk about other things, like you for instance. You must have some stories, other than those you’ve written, I mean. Tell me about yourself. How did you get into authoring for one thing? How did you hook Louise? She’s a sweetie.”

“Well thanks. I’d pass on your kind words, except that flattery goes to her head.” He injected another cough. “Truth is, she hooked me. I met her at a bookshop in Oxford where she’d worked straight from school. I was doing a promo for one of my books, y’know the sort of thing, an all day sit-in signing session. Got suckered, didn’t I? Coffee on tap all day. Salmon and cucumber sandwiches. Cream gateaux. Surprisingly school-girlish she was actually. A bit startling to begin with, she seemed like a nutter, but a nice nutter. Shop closes, she’s in full cry by now, bearing down on me as I duck around behind paperback fiction. I’m ensnared somewhere between Waugh and Wells if I remember correctly. Oh come on, Ramsie, you don’t wanna hear this. It’s straight out of Pissville, Indiana. How about another drink?”

“Coming up. You just keep going, old chap.”

“Okay, just this, then I’m closing the book on me and mine for tonight, okay?” He took a deep breath. “I’ve always dabbled, writing-wise. I’m telling and writing silly stories before I’m weaned. English master spots my talent and takes me in hand. First book published late teens. Whilst filming travelogue near Vienna, strike up relationship with American screenwriter, Aaron Kohner, who lands me job of preparing my Grizzly thing for the movies. Came as a helluva surprise, or it would be nearer the truth to say it came as a shock. The picture was actually quite good. Boils down to this: I’ve never been completely happy with anything I ever tackled.”

“I’m told that’s what all artists say, Richard. If you had the chance, you’d do it differently and so forth.”

“Well anyway, talent gets broadside and sinks without trace circa 1962. Cheers!” He raised his glass and downed its contents in a oner, which took his breath and effectively silenced him for several minutes. Semi-articulate again, he groaned, “Don’t much dig blowing my own trumpet, Ramsie. Enough for one night, yes?”

The door opened. Eddie entered and scowled. “Hmm! Okay for some, eh?”

Ramsie: “Is that you got the little bastards bedded down? Come and have a drink.”

“Aye, in a minute. I just wanted to ask Richard, will you come and tell wee Tommy goodnight? He says he won’t go to sleep till you do. I think he’s adopted you.”

“He’s adopted me? That’s a switch. Yes, I’ll tell him goodnight, if it’s okay that is—die drink you know.”

“You don’t look exactly under the table yet, lad. Come on, won’t take a sec. I’ll show you where he is.”

Richard followed Eddie up the stair and along the boys landing to room five. Eddie did not switch on the room light. Rather, they moved in the light cast by those in the corridor. He indicated a bed in shadow.

“That’s the biggest little hoodlum in school just down there, Uncle Richard. I wouldn’t have anything to do with him if I were you.” He left to quell giggling emanating from another room.

“He’s only kidding is Uncle Eddie,” Tommy whispered, his curly-haired head sideways on the pillow.

“Yes, I know he is. He’s always having a little go at you, isn’t he, Tommy?” Richard assumed a squat position beside his bed. “I just came to say goodnight, sleep tight and—”

“—and don’t let the bed bugs bite.” He giggled.

“I was going to say God bless you, little pal,” Richard laughed, straightening bedclothes that didn’t need it. “Are you going to go to sleep now?”

“Okay.” A pause. “Uncle—”

“Yes.”

“I like you, Uncle—a lot.”

Richard was touched. “Do you, Tommy? Well then that’s fine, because I like you too—a lot,” he replied with sincerity. “Now, off to sleep with you. G’night.”

“‘Night Uncle. See yer ra’morra.”

He stepped back into the corridor part-closing the door behind him. Doors were always left ajar. Eddie was sitting on an upright chair along at the end He beckoned Richard to join him then flicked a switch that took out the main lighting, leaving only the faint glow of nightlights. A few more inaudibly whispered words and giggles from room three.

“Silence, Mark Selby. This is positively your last warning.”

The two men stayed where they were for a few minutes, then crept through the door and down the stairs, leaving the kids the impression they were still there.

“It does the trick,” Eddie smiled. “Sometimes I do sit there for maybe half-an-hour. They never know whether I’m there or not. Psychology. Elizabeth said goodnight, by the way. She’s packed in for the night, and I think Louise did too.”

“I’ll see her later. Come and have that drink.”

Just after ten, Alastair staggered in and the four men continued drinking and talking until the small hours, and when Richard, under the influence, returned to his bedroom at a little after two, his family were asleep.

Three

Richard had always been an immaculate, though assiduously staid, dresser. But powerful mental processes were nudging him in new directions. Inspired partly by housemaster Eddie's casual approach to workwear, he decided upon emulation, an idea that would have seemed positively crackbrain, had he not retained his trim waistline and an admittedly youthful appearance. So, he took on a new devil-may-care insouciance and gone were the old-fangled collar, tie and waistcoat, then hail the figure-hugging Levi's, the grey sweatshirt and the white Converse hi-top sneakers. He felt more sprightly, he looked more sporty, and there was an unexpected bonus. His new appearance elicited encouraging comment from some of the kids and, in looking more like them, he felt more like them too, and blast off! Richard Two was launched.

Louise couldn't understand his new look any more than she had understood his wanting to come to the school in the first place and, denied access to her husband's innermost thoughts, she would often resort to sarcasm born of exasperation to score points. Her proposition that he'd turned juvenile delinquent was crowned with, "Switchblade and bower-boots for Christmas, Richard?"

"Nice one, my darling. Been at the caustic soda again, have we?" Richard retorted, roughing his hair and admiring his reflected image. "Second childhood. That's how I see it."

"And whatever makes you think you grew out of your first?"

Which caught him with his answers down.

On Friday morning Big Joe was not going to get out of bed. Eddie had warned the determinedly contumacious fifteen-year-old that if he hadn't shifted his butt by the time the others were ready to go down for breakfast, he would be dragged bodily from his pit and shoved under a cold shower.

Joe was a big boy, surely not easily manhandled, Richard thought, and he awaited the outcome with some degree of fascination. Having made the threat, Eddie would certainly be able to follow through if necessary.

Richard was not to see Eddie in action. Joe hauled himself out a moment later, went through the toiletry routine, dressed, and then perched on the edge of his bed looking agonisingly morose. He was sitting legs apart, an elbow on each knee, cheeks resting in the heels of his hands, finger ends concealed in a tangled mass of dark hair.

Richard hovered apprehensively. He had not yet had any dealings with the boy and was typically stuck for an opening gambit. He sank slowly to his haunches, bringing his eyes more or less level with those of Joe.

"What's wrong, Big Joe, don't you feel good?"

Without replying Joe swivelled sideways, cutting the man's view of his face.

"Must be the weather, Joe. I felt lousy this morning too, but it soon passes when you're up and doing."

This time Joe rose to his feet, walked across the room and assumed a similar position on another bed.

Undaunted, Richard sat on the radiator and persisted. "Hey look, come clean, feller. If there's anything I can do—"

Joe uttered a click of annoyance, nothing more.

Richard shot off the too hot radiator rubbing his backside. "My god, that was hotter than I thought," he yelped, hoping a lighter note would loosen Joe up. "Tell me what's bugging you, son. Maybe I can help. Be my pleasure."

The boy mumbled something practically inaudible (maybe 'piss off') then got up again, stuck his hands in his pockets and walked from the room, batting the door wide enough with a shoulder.

Feeling thwarted, Richard went into Hansa's room where he found the younger lad disconsolately heaving soaked sheets from his bed. No longer subject to ribaldry from his room-mates, he nevertheless felt crushed each day as he screwed the sheets into a laundry bag, then carted the red rubber waterproof

off to the bathroom. Richard followed, partly to watch what happened next, and partly to find a way of getting to know his ‘exercise’.

This was a bathroom with no bath. Instead, a number of unpartitioned showers along one wall, and a half-dozen washbasins along the other. In common with most other rooms in the building, this one was also large and high-ceilinged. Despite the space, Eddie had jokingly suggested swimming trunks when supervising the showering each evening.

Several other boys were washing, cleaning teeth, combing hair at the mirrors above the washbasins, but Richard was drawn to just one. Hansa peeled his clinging pyjamas and stepped under a hot shower taking the rubber sheet with him. He rinsed it, draped it over a towel rack and then washed himself down with a flannel. He had his back to Richard, who stepped closer.

Finding himself at close quarters with glistening pubescent nakedness for the first time begat contrition, but, with a leavening of intimidating excitement, he swallowed hard and said, “How are you feeling this morning, Hansa?”

“Okay.”

Christ, a reply! Brief yes, but a reply. Emboldened, he went on, “Hansa, that bed wetting, can’t be much fun, right? How would it be if I got you up in the night? Think it would help?”

The steam-enveloped boy turned to face him with eyes screwed up against the spray. “It’s been done. Uncle Eddie done it, mebbe three times some nights, but it didnae do no good.”

“Hmm, well, I’ll have to try and figure something else then, won’t I?”

“I dinnae care no more. It’s jus’ when some’dy like that fat cow Mimsy Halliday calls me names, an’ stuff like that.”

“And do you call Mimsy Halliday a fat cow, to her face?”

“Aye.”

“Well then, one cancels out the other doesn’t it? Anyway, I wouldn’t let name-calling worry you, Hansa.”

The boy reached for his towel.

“Allow me,” Richard said, taking the towel and enclosing the boy’s head in it. “The best way I know to stop mickey-takers is to say nothing and do nothing, except smile. I’ll bet they get more upset than you do, and they’ll soon pack it in.”

A most disarming smile found its way through the towel folds.

“That’s it—like that. Hey, you’re not taking the mick out of me, are yer?” Richard said jocularly, drying hair that was practically non-existent. Hansa’s soft mousey-coloured spikes were little more than half-an-inch long over his entire scalp, a hairstyle the kids called a ‘skinhead’. And on this youngster it was wonderful, Richard decided. It admirably suited his round head which gave the impression it was precariously poised on a slender neck atop a well-made and equally slender form, which Richard explored further—through the towel.

“Listen, how would you like me to get you up in the night even if it doesn’t do any good?”

Hansa shrugged. “If you want.”

He rubbed the boy’s legs down, lingering a little, then handed him the towel. “There now, you finish off quickly. It must be about breakfast time.”

“Can I get toothpaste, Uncle?” Mark Selby asked, a shade insolently.

“Of course you can. There it is.”

“Not allowed. Staff have to give it,” said Mark, this time sporting a superior grin.

“Oh, all right.” Richard squeezed an inch-long dollop on the bristles, testily adding, “Now get a move on or you’ll be late.”

“Yes Uncle, certainly Uncle, anything you say, Uncle.”

Richard felt the need to check his impudence, but didn't quite know how to tackle it. He was forestalled by Eddie bawling in the corridor. "Get your backsides in line here sharpish, you 'orrible shower, or go without breakfast."

On Saturday afternoons the school role was broken down into smaller units, with one staff member in charge of each. Awkward kids were detailed, but for the most part they were given a choice of activity.

Richard's popularity soared when it was announced he would take a swimming party. The nearest swimming pool was forty-odd miles away, and no staff member had hitherto been prepared to drive the distance. Though inundated, he was forced to settle for just fifteen, the number governed by the capacity of one school bus.

Suitably equipped, they all piled into the Transit and took off, initially over tortuous single-track roads through remote, ruggedly beautiful countryside which characterised that part of the Scottish Highlands. It was a clear, cold autumn day. The kids chatted away happily because this was a new experience for them, and Richard exulted in being entrusted so soon with so many.

A little over an hour later they parked outside the riverside building which housed the pool.

Watching from the side to begin with, Richard was pleased to see several of them performing well in the water. Young Tommy executed a clever cross between his own doggie-paddle and a breast-stroke, and Hansa sheared through the water like a dolphin despite a somewhat untidy, splashy crawl. They were shouting for him to get in, throwing water at him, striking cold, making his mind up for him. He dived and surfaced near the centre of the pool, where Tommy immediately turned him into an island, hanging on grimly, for he was out of his depth. He played with the boy, tossing him in the air and flinging him over his shoulder. Hansa hovered close by, treading water, wanting to play too, being shy. Richard seized him and drew him close, launching both boys from his shoulders in turn—until an attendant blew his whistle and wagged a warning finger. Too much enjoyment, it seemed, was taboo.

He was forced to berate Brian Snapley a little later for splashing the younger girls to their annoyance and fear. He also observed that Big Joe stayed strictly on his own throughout the entire visit, never once venturing close to anyone. At the deep end he tried to interest the taciturn youth in surface diving, but Joe wanted no part. Other than Richard himself, only Hansa was able to touch bottom at twelve feet, on one occasion recovering 'treasure' which, to their disgust, turned out to be a discarded sticking-plaster.

What a captivating youngster Hansa was, with his fresh, open, expressive features! As Richard covetously grasped the boy's lean firmness whenever opportune, an amplified tactile awareness produced an immense surge of warmth and sensual pleasure, liberating sensations for so long repressed. The boy responded affectionately to Richard's every tactic, seeking him out freely and often. He was full of fun and adventure, and a willingness to be played with. And Richard took full advantage. With feelings unfettered, he thrilled to their closeness; savouring the hold and smell of the chlorinated, wet-skin lad; rejoicing in Hansa's firecracker body slithering through his grasp; wanning to uninhibited laughter silenced mid-shriek by sudden submersion; to the excitement of splash and splutter as he broke surface, locking his legs around the man's middle for safe anchorage. The lad took off again, kicking up a spray, stroking vigorously through the squabble of frenzied wavelets. A backward glance to be sure he was followed, then spitting water he duck-dived and was gone, hitting bottom, Richard in pursuit, gouging into the eye-smarting depths in a fizz of rising bubbles, catching the youngster a quick hug before boosting him upwards again. Truly, this was a real boy, a boy after his own heart, and the way towards that closer relationship was surely nearer. Now he would speedily ingratiate himself all the more, at the same time perhaps lessening the influence Brian and Robert seemed to exert.

Back in the bus, he started the engine and sat patiently behind the wheel, as the kids boarded through the sliding door opposite his own. Most of the boys were present but the girls had not yet appeared. A

scuffling broke out beside the vehicle, beyond his range of vision. Someone swore. He looked around, attempting to determine who was missing, at the same time shouting, "What's going on out there?"

"It's Brian and Big Joe, Uncle. They're fighting," Hansa said, taking a position immediately behind the driving seat

"Get into this bus right now, you two," Richard demanded.

The girls arrived and still he waited. Then Brian appeared wearing his usual superior smirk, and as he boarded, a stone was flung at him. It missed, bounced, and struck Richard's leg, though without force. He could see Big Joe now too. To his alarm the boy was actually walking away from the bus. The last thing he wanted was to have to report one kid missing on his first time out with them.

Sounding as aggressive as he knew how, he shouted after him. "Joe McIntyre, get your body back here, now!"

Joe turned, stuck up two fingers and continued on his way.

Richard was enraged. A sudden flood of adrenalin, itself something of a new sensation, seemed to fill him with strength and resolve. Switching the engine off again, he tore after Joe. Joe saw him coming and broke into a run. Richard ran too. Faster. Rapidly bearing down on the runaway, he grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, then hanging on to his jacket collar, frog-marched him back to the waiting vehicle.

"You're strangling me, yer bastit," Joe croaked feebly, offering no resistance, which under less inflamed circumstances would have surprised Richard. This lad was as tall as he was and probably tougher than he was, and in a different situation Richard might have thought twice before tackling him. "I surely will strangle you, you awkward young bastard, if you don't learn to do as I tell you. I don't know what that little barney with Brian was all about and I don't really care, but that's the second time you've walked away from me, and I've got news for you. It's gonna be the last, right?"

He delivered his stentorian spiel so close to Joe's ear, the boy flinched. He shoved him into the bus roughly, telling him not one word till they got back to school. He noted the self-satisfied look on Brian's face and understood how Eddie had been unable to avoid slapping it. He wanted to crash his fist into it right then but checked the impulse, believing his display of malevolence might carry. He didn't know Brian Snapley...

Calming a little, he re-started the bus and drove away, initially somewhat erratically because he still fizzed. All of the kids remained silent for a good deal of the time. Were they collectively resenting his action, or were they in awe of it? Young Tommy, who was seated beside Hansa, reached forward at length and rested a hand on Richard's shoulder. Richard patted it and the simple act seemed to effect an easing of the general mood. The girls began to sing, at first having to endure derisive jeering from the boys who themselves eventually joined in. By the time they entered the school driveway they were all in happy chorus, except Joe and Brian.

Richard hadn't finished with Joe yet. He marched him inside hoping to force some sort of explanation from him.

Eddie was on the point of chivvying his scruffy little urchins aloft to clean up. They were still in football strip, Lee amongst them. Eddie's expression on seeing Richard manhandling Joe was something else again. Looks of astonishment, puzzlement and approval were all there—at the same time.

"Big Joe has some explaining to do, Uncle. Is there somewhere we can be alone?"

"Aye, take him into Mr Eldred's classroom." Then, "Come on you young heathens, up that stair. You've all seen Uncle Richard and Big Joe before."

Joe was instructed to sit at a desk and not move until he had opened up. Some little time elapsed and it was with surprise that Richard became aware the boy was actually sobbing. He did not subscribe to the view that real men never cried, but it somehow seemed out of place here. He sympathised. "Tears alone won't tell me a thing, will they, Joe?"

The boy's whole body juddered to spasmodic in-drawn breaths. Richard approached him, laying his hand on a shoulder. "Tell me about it, Joe? I know something's wrong, but I'm no mind-reader, y'know."

"Ah dinnae ken what yer want me to say," he cried, and it looked as if he genuinely did not understand. "I'm sorry Uncle. I'm sorry. I didnae do nuthin' an' I—"

Richard lifted the Kleenex box from Eldred's desk, handed it to Joe, told him to mop up. "Okay, one easy step at a time. First, why wouldn't you talk to me the other morning? I was only trying to be friendly."

Hesitantly and through sniffles he stammered, "'Cos I thought yer was jus' bein' nosey and I dinnae know yer. An' I couldnae tell yer anyhow 'cos I dinnae ken what's wrong. I was just crabbit an' I dinnae like nub'dy."

"Right, accepted. And what about today?"

"It was that head-banger, Snapley. He's always bummin' off about how many times he's had it an' he's only eleven, an' how I'm a bent-shot 'cos I'm fifteen an' I huvnae. He telt me ah'm a pouf, so I chucked the stane at him an' I didnae mean ter hit you, Uncle, honest."

Not sure he could hold out without an interpreter, Richard nevertheless plugged away. "I know the stone wasn't meant for me, Joe. Listen son, I don't like having to get rough with you. If you have problems, let's hear 'em. You know what they say about problems shared are problems halved. As it is I intend to have words with Uncle Eddie about Brian—"

"Thinks he's a hard man, 'e does."

"I know, but he's being hellish with everybody. It isn't just you, Joe. And as for you being queer, forget that right now. There's too much needling goes on around here and everyone gets unnecessarily up-tight about it. You ask young Hansa what I was saying to him about name-calling."

"He's a mate of Snapley, Hansa is."

"You just keep watching. Come on now, wipe your face. That's the rest of them lining up for tea. Just one small favour, Joe?"

"What?"

"Let's start each day with 'good mornings' and a bit more happy chat, okay?"

"Okay Uncle, sorry." A terminal sniff. They joined the others.

Eddie's good-night send-offs were special. Every boy got the personal touch, providing they were already in their beds. It was a little different each evening—perhaps an ear pull, a nose tweak or a playful punch on the chin. Or maybe he would tickle them, or pretend to throttle them, or with the flat of his hands on their chests, jiggle them up and down on the mattress, rounding the fun off by tucking them in for the night. It was good house-keeping, making the kids less likely to act up after lights out, and it was a procedure Richard was happy to emulate. Tonight was a hair-pull which produced squeals of delight from the younger ones, and amiable threats from the bigger boys.

The ceremonial having been completed, Richard wound up at Hansa's bedside where he knelt to tuck in hanging-out blankets. Pulling this boy's hair was next to impossible, but stroking his soft bristles had become a pleasant alternative. There was something enormously appealing in the way the boy had begun looking at him, and it took all of Richard's resolve not to take hold of the boy, and hug and kiss him. He dared only pinch his nose. "Want me to try again tonight, little kid?" he asked. Hansa nodded without shifting his gaze. Though Richard had raised the boy twice on several previous occasions, he had still soaked his bed.

"Okay then, see you around midnight."

"Yeh. G'night Uncle," Hansa whispered, turning to face the wall.

Richard reluctantly withdrew.

Eddie looked set to dance the gopak, spectacularly dressed as he was against the bitter weather. From simple tracksuit to black Russian hat, astrakhan jacket and thick, coarse-weave trousers tucked into calf-length boots—comic metamorphosis indeed. Richard was amused. He had taken to his whiskery colleague's somewhat naive off-beat personality, and was ever glad to act the side-kick.

The older children had been dispatched on a cross-country run earlier, an event they evidently enjoyed. The only time the kids could be trusted to run away and run back again, Eddie had said. The two men sat on the play-ground wall awaiting the return of the first of the runners at any moment. The dry, bright weather had continued into Sunday, though the wind had a sharp cutting edge. Louise was indoors looking after the youngest kids, but the rest were following the well-charted course they used fairly frequently.

"The record for this run is held by Hansa Luft who's won it three times on the trot—funny that, on the trot—and he's broke his own record every time," Eddie was saying, nuzzling into his fur. "Broke another record last night an' all. Didn't piddle the bed for the first time since I can't remember when."

"I know," Richard replied, blowing through cupped hands to keep them warm. "I got him up twice."

"Must be hocus-pocus, old lad. I tried all that. Didn't work for me. Hey up, it doesn't look like he's gonna be breaking any more records today. That's two hours past." He shot up from the wall as if bitten. "Jesus, that wall's cold, an' me with me electric knickers on an' all."

"Eddie," Richard began, questioningly, "there are a couple of things about this place I find puzzling. Isn't it under-manned? Are we really the only ones here at weekends?"

"That's right, except for the kitchen staff. Elizabeth joins hubby Charles at the East Lothian school after lunch Saturday. Ramsie has a hidy-hole cottage three or four miles up the loch-side. Used to take his birds there sometimes, but he's thinking of flogging it. Has another house in the village. Not stuck for a bob or two isn't our Ramsie. You've seen his Aston Martin? And Alastair, well, he leaves for Glasgow every Friday night. Which makes me the gaffer, lad. Just how I like it."

"But wouldn't the authorities take a dim view? Three staff to forty so-called delinquents?"

"What they don't know won't hurt 'em. This is a private school, remember. As long as it runs smooth, nobody bothers."

"It hasn't always run smoothly, apparently. When Charles telephoned asking us to come here, he said there'd been some kind of emergency. What happened?"

But Eddie wasn't listening. He was pointing at someone seen through the trees at the foot of the drive. "Here comes the Luft lad now. No, wait a minute, I don't think it's—bloody 'ell—that little swine made a liar out o' me. That's Steve McKimmie. Wait till I get my mitts on Hansa. I'll have his guts for garter meat."

Richard laughed. "That's my boy you're lambasting."

"And welcome. I want no more to do with that brat," he said, with a grin, turning to greet the arrival. "Well, congratulations, Steve. You're first in, a great win. Where's Luft?"

"Dunno, Uncle," was all the breathless boy could muster, flaking flat out on the yard, his chest heaving like raging seas.

"Catch your death o' cold down there, laddie. Inside, get yourself a shower and a good mb down, then ask Auntie Louise to give you a glass of milk and a bicky. That's five points well earned."

Steve hauled himself up again, and with bits of yard stuck to his bare back, he slouched away trailing his sweatshirt.

"Sturdy-looking kid, that one," Richard mused, watching his departure wistfully.

"Aye. Best runner we've got an' all, when he sets his mind to it. Never seen him take it serious till today. You didn't magic him an' all, did you?" Eddie remarked, stamping around to boost his circulation.

“By gum, I wouldn’t be surprised if we got some snow.”

Bringing up the rear after some little while came a whole gaggle of kids walking home together, until they saw Eddie watching them, whence they broke into toe-trailing trots. Last in was Brian, and still there was no sign of Hansa. Richard was especially anxious when the markers returned just before tea, and although Robert reported his passing the first check point, no one had seen anything of him since.

Eddie questioned them in the dining room. “Robert, was he in fine fettle when you saw him?”

“Yes, Uncle. Him and Brian, they was together.”

“Brian!”

“What?” Impertinently.

“Get over here, laddie.” Menacingly.

“What, Uncle?” He kept his distance.

“I’ll ‘what Uncle’ you straight up to bed after tea, you snivelling little creep. Hansa is supposed to be your pal. You were seen running with him. Where is he?”

“How’m I s’posed to know? He got a stitch. I run on and left him.”

“Some pal,” Eddie sneered.

“Was a race, weren’t it?” the boy grumbled.

Eddie moved as if to crack the boy’s skull, but turned from him, suggesting that Richard took his car out for a quick looksee. “He can’t have got far if he didn’t reach the second check-out, but you’d best hurry, it’s getting dark. Take a couple o’ the lads to show the way.”

“Me sir, me Uncle, me, me, please Uncle.” Hands shot up like a forest.

Richard chose Big Joe and Steve. He had to take Tommy as well, or was it the other way around? The youngster was already pulling him out the door!

“Keep your peepers peeled, boys,” Richard instructed, as he turned into the tiny main street of Kylerossie with its half-dozen or so assorted stores, thence along a high flat stretch above the disused golf course.

Pulling into a lay-by, he switched off the engine and suggested they split up to cover the area faster. Darkness was gathering and the dying wind heralded a change of weather. The sun was swallowed earlier than usual by cloud spreading from the west and occasional droplets of rain spurred their search. Through a wild tangle of bramble, through a bracken and gorse-ringed coppice, then into the clear again. Climbing to the rim of a bunker in which nature was re-establishing dominion, Richard surveyed the scene from the high vantage. He reckoned Tommy was too young to go it alone and sent him along with Steve. He kept them all in view until they vanished into thick woodland, and wondered if he’d end up having to look for them too. He dropped into and traversed the hard sand, keeping a straight course toward a rocky outcrop below. The cold clean air stung his nostrils, causing his eyes to water. He cursed the fact he’d forgotten his overcoat in his haste to get away, and he also began to have grave doubts about finding ‘his’ boy, a proverbial needle in a haystack of thousands of acres of wild countryside. A shout from Tommy and his heart lifted.

“Have you found something, Tommy?” he shouted, as the young lad ran to him, panting heavily. He was looking worried. “What is it, son?”

“Uncle, ah’m feart. Over there, funny noises in them trees.”

Richard had not heard ‘feart’ before but guessed right. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, Tommy. Where’s Stevie?”

“In them bushes with some rats.”

“Rats?”

“Yeh, mebbe some rats got him.”

Richard smiled. “I don’t think so, son. Come on, let’s look.”

“Okay, Uncle.” He was brave now he had a hand to hold.

The pair skirted the rocks and plunged into dense woodland, granted but a scant share of the fading light. They came upon Steve awaiting their arrival.

“Hi, Steve,” Richard said. “Where are the rats Tommy says he saw?”

“What rats? There was one squirrel, that’s aw. You’re seeing things, wee Tom-tom.”

“Don’t care,” said the little lad. “Jus’ sherrup an’ listen. There’s some funny noises, an’ I know cos’ I heard ’em.”

True enough. There were snuffly sounds coming from—where? Hard to determine. There, by that fallen tree? Richard headed for it, feeling a timid tug-back through Tommy.

In the vicinity of the decaying timber, now home to myriad lichen and fungoid forms, he at first saw nothing. Then a slight shift of bracken fronds not stirred by air currents. Could it be Hansa? Or some animal or bird?

He let go of Tommy’s hand, strode over the tree trunk and armed aside the ferns. There he crouched, uncontrollably shivering in dirt-scuffed white shorts and orange singlet, hands clasped behind his neck drawing his head to his raised knees—Hansa, a palpitating package of abject misery.

Unsure of how the boy would react, Richard gently drew him to his feet. Happily, the youngster didn’t resist, but allowed himself to be seated on the log beside Richard, who caught a mere glimpse of the boy’s sorry expression before the section of log they had chosen to sit upon collapsed under their weight. In a cloud of wood dust and insects, Richard was thrown on his back, unavoidably taking Hansa with him.

Funny? Not today apparently. Richard made no attempt to move right off, for the boy, lying on top of him, seemed to want to keep it that way. Their eyes met. Several charged seconds elapsed before Richard felt obliged to help himself and the boy up—because Steve was watching. Drawn by the ruckus, Big Joe appeared, and Richard urged them all towards the rocks where there was a little more daylight left.

Hansa was limping slightly, and Richard could see that his cheek was scratched, his nose had bled, his whole face a mass of congealed blood, sweat and filth, and his right eye in throes of indecision, to blacken or not to blacken?

“Good grief, Hansa, you look like you fought a whole war single-handedly. What happened, son?” Richard sat on the rock taking the standing boy between his knees.

Hansa was as close to tears as is possible to get without actually shedding some. He was clearly trying hard to keep his emotions under wraps, but his lower lip jutted and his chin quivered. A sorrier-looking sight Richard had rarely beheld. He could not resist drawing the lad closer, sitting him on his thigh and taking the mussed head to his breast. Tommy and Steve sat either side of them, looking on anxiously. Joe, sullen as ever, perched himself high on the same rocks, disinterestedly looking the other way.

“What happened, little kid. Can’t you tell me?” he quietly coaxed.

Understandably, the boy was too cold and choked up to talk. They’d return to the school, get him cleaned up and fed. Maybe then he would open up. Richard carried the boy to the car as rain began to fall more heavily.

Richard shot Hansa up the stair to clean up whilst he proceeded to the dining room, where everyone had just finished tea. He didn’t know Eddie had already sent Brian aloft to prepare for bed. Hardly were the two boys together when all hell was let loose, as one corner of the dining room ceiling attested. Acting as a huge baffle, it broadcasted sounds of a fierce struggle being enacted above their heads. Harsh profanities emanated from the bathroom as Richard took the stairs three at a time to quell the disturbance.

The hot shower was full on, filling the whole room with steam. Both boys were beneath it, squirming in the wet trying to beat the living daylights out of one another. Hansa, still in running strip, looked as if he was pulling Brian’s hair out by the roots. And Brian slithered around, unable to gain purchase to deliver sufficiently telling punches.

Dragging them apart, Richard disregarded their wetness and ordered them downstairs to face Uncle Eddie, who had really wanted Richard to sort them out himself. At the same time, he knew that the newcomer was not yet properly equipped to handle warring boys, especially ones like Brian, so he instructed Richard to take them into the gym, put the gloves on them, and let them beat the crap out of each other for as long as it took.

Richard's concern for the object of his affection found him mildly protesting. "But young Hansa is kind of beaten up already, Uncle. Don't you think it would be—?"

It didn't work. "They know the rules, Uncle. Here's the key to the sports equipment. You act referee and watch they fight right. I'll see them later."

Richard cursed his subservience as he tied the boys into huge boxing gloves, but his anxiety was speedily dispelled when the pair squared up to each other, and he saw that Hansa was still well able to take care of himself. They surely knew their stuff, bobbing and weaving and adroitly blocking each others punches to begin with. Though Brian was almost a year older, they were about evenly matched for size and weight, and Richard was strangely uplifted and vastly impressed at the way the two game lads tore into each other, exchanging blows cleanly, with no thought of violating boxing etiquette. He had imagined they might not want to fight in his presence, but as far as they were concerned, he wasn't there. He had never witnessed the like before. Two gutsy young lads bravely slugging it out without fear of consequence. Richard was filled with admiration as he pretended to referee, though he had no need. Indeed, the whole event turned into something of an emotional experience, for as he watched them dancing around, lunging, jabbing and swiping, with fists heavily encumbered, he was deeply moved. Even Hansa's red-faced look of impassioned fury was touchingly beautiful.

After about fifteen minutes the speed with which they assaulted each other slowed considerably, but the battle went on unabated, neither boy conceding an inch, both coming along about equal. A while later, it became obvious that tiredness was gaining ground, the punches fewer and far between, and that they had knocked all the anger out of each other. Richard, obliged to step in, took both lads by a shoulder, and said, "Come on now, boys, you don't really hate one another as much as all that do you? Let's call it a day, right?"

With their gloves hanging at their sides like lead weights, the boys looked at each other, then up at him, and agreed to shake hands.

Their wet clothes were sticking to them when he led them back into the main building, where they met a vociferous outburst from the other kids all wanting to know who won.

Eddie silenced them with a look, and Richard said, "It was a draw." He looked down upon the fighters. "Agree?" They did.

"Right," said Eddie, assuming command again. "Take them upstairs, Uncle, if you please. Hansa can get dressed and come down again and eat. Brian goes straight to bed."

"What for?" Brian demanded, his recalcitrance ever on tap.

"What for? Because I say so, laddie, and that's all the answer you get. Move out!" Eddie growled, ferociously.

In the bathroom again, Brian's presence was peripheral, for Richard's entire consciousness was focused on Hansa Luft. He was spectator to the way the boy's wet white shorts stuck to his backside in semi-transparency, accenting his small, well-formed buttocks. And though the odd ripple of carnal desire disturbed him a little, he savoured the strange brief joy that burst upon him when Hansa allowed him to peel the close-fitting nylon garment from him, perceiving as he went the short, fairish hairs standing erect from the goose-pimpled flesh of his long boy-legs. He wanted to hug his firm, sinewy little body, glistening, dirtied, battered though it was and kiss it all over. He wanted to turn the naked boy around and see the front of him, but he was shy and afraid, because a fearsomely unpleasant experience from the past

raked through his thoughts, as it did with frequency, and he was driven to feeling ashamed of the way his mind worked. He turned his attention to both boys again, forcing a more detached attitude upon himself.

“Right, let’s get a move on now,” he commanded, rather more curtly than intended.

When they were ready and he was newly aware of Brian’s existence, he was amazed to see he had dressed himself fully. He was actually descending the stair beside Hansa, who was looking at him peculiarly but thinking better of making comment. One had to admire the nerve of the boy as he walked into the midst of the others as though nothing had happened.

When Eddie saw him he erupted with such sudden powerful choler, he could have self-launched into earth-orbit. He literally fizzed with explosive anger, and grabbing Brian by an ear, dragged him along the corridor and into the office, leaving Richard and Louise looking at each other speculatively.

But not for long. Came Eddie’s voice. “Will you come to the office a moment please, Uncle?”

Richard complied and Eddie closed the door on the three of them. It was tawse-time for Brian, as witness the twin-tongued leather strap Eddie was flexing. The rule was that two staff members be present when such punishment was doled out, then duly entered in the behaviour book. Brian scuttled around the office, saying not a word, trying to break through the men as they closed on him. But Richard’s presence was doubly required, and beset with the task of holding the boy, he felt positively ill-at-ease, yet accepted that there would be times when such was necessity. He grabbed the unpleasant boy, jammed his head between his thighs and yanked his arms up and back, leaving the striking area well exposed. Eddie, clearly used to wielding the corrective, brought it into contact with Brian’s rear end three times.

Released and in a fever of excitement and hurt, he again darted about the room, this time not seeking exit for reasons best known to himself. In truth, the irrespressible youngster was stuck for ways to vent his spleen, which presently manifested in verbal abuse along with threats of telling his gang, his dad, his social worker.

“You can tell the queen, laddie, but of one thing you can be absolutely certain,” stormed Eddie, much ruffled, and of crimson visage as far as the whiskers permitted sight. “As long as you are here and as long as I am in charge and you deserve a thrashing, by god lad you’ll get one, and no power on earth will alter it. And did I hear you say you’d get your father and your social worker?” Then, in an aside, “This isn’t considered ethical, Uncle Richard, but this kid asks for everything you can fling at him.” He bore down on Brian again and grabbed a thumb and fingerful of cheek, tugging at it cruelly hard. “Don’t you know, you thick idiot, that your father and your social worker are the very people what dumped you here! Couldn’t wait to get shot because they hate your bloody stinking guts. But that’s where it gets just ducky for me, ’cos through you, little darling, I get to use me strap. Just one final question. Are you going to stay in bed now, or do I have to handcuff you to it? You actually have a choice, laddie. Which is it to be?”

“I’ll stay,” Brian whimpered. And he did.

Foreign to Richard was the plate of ‘stovies’ which had been saved for Hansa’s tea, and into which the boy now ploughed with a will. It seemed that this concoction of potatoes, onions and meaty leftovers was a firm favourite with the kids.

The others had embarked upon their various evening activities, but Richard chose to remain with Hansa, sitting beside him at the table watching him eat. He poured the boy’s tea and took a cup himself.

“Now then, my little kid, how about letting me in on what happened today?”

Hansa forked a piece of sausage and looked up at Richard with just the half-face smile his injuries allowed. “You always call me ‘little kid’,” he said, evidently finding the name curious.

“Well yes, I suppose I do. It’s not meant to be talking down to you, Hansa. It’s more like—well—it’s because I like you, okay?”

“Sure. Jus’ sounds funny.” He ate the sausage.

“Now, today’s problems?”

“It was Brian, Uncle.”

"I guessed—but I thought you and Brian were pals, so what caused the fight? You're not a pretty picture right now, y'know."

"We was pals and that's how I was running with him, but no more we're not. He kept on about the swimming an' that. About you giving him a row for the lassies, an' he said I was an arse'ole creeper and to stop sooking up to the staff, specially you, and how if I didnae he was gonna spread it around I was a pouf. An' I telt him ah wusnae, an' if that's what he thought to go get lost. I started to pull away an' he tripped me. That's how come the scratch, on a sticky-up tree root. Then he started the fight, an' I didnae wanna race no more."

"I see. Seems everyone around here is a fairy but Brian, but please don't upset yourself on that score, Hansa. Anyway, you got your own back, didn't you? I liked the way you handled yourself in the gym hut. You did great, d'yer know that?"

"I could have smashed his head in if ah'd have wanted to."

"I'm sure you could. But that's the way it goes. You lose some, you gain some. How's about me being your new pal?"

"That's silly, you're staff."

"Don't see what's silly about it. We can still be pals can't we?"

"Sure, if you want."

"We had a brilliant time at the swimming pool, didn't we?"

"Yeh." The boy looked up at him again, his face alight with pleasant recall.

"That's my boy." He rose, fondled the back of the lad's neck a moment, then made for his armchair, where he was straightway pounced upon by Tommy who landed on his lap with such unexpected force, it made him wince. Richard's eye chanced upon Big Joe, melancholy as ever. He was sitting sideways on an upright chair with his back to the wall, securely locked in a world of his own. Richard was concerned. There had to be a way in, but how?

Other than Joe, Richard had so far resisted association with the older boys in room three, not from choice, but from trepidation, a condition forced upon him by their magnificent, unbridled youthfulness and their extrovert behaviour. For reasons not fully understood, he found their composite masculinity daunting. He harboured the idea he'd somehow feel emasculated in their presence, figured anything he said would tumble out lisp-laced, reduce him to a mincing laughing stock, especially if some smart response to whatever they might do or say didn't readily trip from his lips. The thought of walking in when all six were together gave him pause. Until now, Eddie had always been there too. A crazy over-reaction? Probably, but awareness didn't change the reality. Oh sure, he'd tackled Big Joe, but anger had displaced his fear on that occasion. This was very different. A possible opening presented itself at bedtime.

He and Eddie were supervising the over-elevens between bathroom and dormitory, to see they carried out their ablutions in a quiet and orderly fashion, when Richard chanced to overhear the athletic Steve McKimmie complaining his back was hurting after his run that day.

"I'll massage your back for you if you want, Steve," he proposed, knowing he'd feel deflated if the boy declined. To his surprise and delight, he didn't.

"You know 'bout that stuff, Uncle, yeh?" Stevie responded, through a mouthful of toothbrush.

"Well, yeah, I reckon I do. I put my own back out when I was climbing once. This osteopath I knew worked miracles and I picked up the technique. Yer wanna try me?"

"Sure, when?"

"Right now, if you like. We've got time if you hurry."

Moments later, Richard entered room three with a bottle of almond oil. Big Joe was already asleep, or pretending to be, when the freshly-showered Steve came in with a towel around his loins. The others were still in the bathroom.

Richard directed the lad to lie face down on the bed with his head to one side. As the boy did, Richard whipped the towel away (an action Steve did not protest) and then draped it across the youngster's posterior, knelt astride him, and applied oil to a back still lightly bronzed from last summer's sun-tan—to skin flaw-free as spun silk. Rubbing briskly to generate heat to begin with, he next began kneading with the heels of his hands, working outwards from his spinal column.

“What's a nice feller like you doing in a place like this?” Richard asked as he worked, anxious to increase familiarity before the others returned.

“Shop-lifting, Uncle,” Steve mumbled, the pummelling juddering the words from his throat.

“Whadyer wanna do a silly thing like that for?”

“Jus' never figured on gettin' caught.”

“But you did get caught.”

“Yeah, but not till I knocked off loads o' gear what they never got back.”

“You proud of that, are you, Stevie?”

“Not really.”

“Then why, son?”

“I dunno. 'Cos the other kids was doin' it, I s'pose. I got running spikes, tracksuits, a sports bag. Stuff like that.”

“You like running, don't you? Ever do any when you were at home?” Richard was deeply tracking both sides of the boy's vertebrae with his thumbs, all the way from his pelvis to his neck, admiring his neat physique at the same time, all the way from his lean waist to his broad shoulders.

“Hey, that feels great, Uncle. You're good at massagin'," the lad enthused, then, “Yeah, I was into athletics at school, an' weight-lifting an' all that kind o' gumph. I won cups an' sniff.”

“You've got a well-developed body, Stevie. As a matter of fact, you're a very fine all-rounder. Were you taking bodybuilding seriously?”

“Och, no. Them guys what get massive muscles look stupid. It was jus' for keeping fit, to make me run good.”

“Y'know, Stevie, I'm not condoning your misdeeds, but maybe I'm glad.”

“What for?”

“It's a pity you didn't go more for the athletics instead of the shop-lifting, but if you had, I'd never have got to meet you, and... oh damn!”

The other four boys all shoved into the room at the same time, and when they saw what was going on, fell about, laughing and jeering.

Whilst Richard was still thinking how to handle the outburst, the boy himself took command.

“What's so funny, Selby?” he growled at Mark, who had come closest.

“You drownin' in the shower, was yer? That why Uncle's doin' the old artificial respiration bit, is it?”

“Go get taxidermed, Selby,” Stevie snorted.

“What?”

“Go see a taxidermist Get stuffed!”

“Yer got a great line o' patter goin' for yer, McKimmie! You wantin' a bit o' biff, are yer?”

In the middle of the disturbance, young Hansa appeared at Steve's bedside and stood pensively watching, but not for long. Mark rounded on him. “This ain't your room, yeller river. Beat it, we don't want no piss-beds in here, right?”

“That sure ain't very friendly, Mark. Cool it, will yer? Hansa isn't doing any harm,” Richard said, getting to his feet, aware he was lapsing into sloppier diction, sounding more like the kids.

At which point, Eddie marched in. “Okay, you blithering clodhoppers. Get into bed all of you, and cut the cackle. You, Luft, into your own room sharpish, laddie. Oh, Uncle, I didn't see you there. Problems?”

“Not really, Uncle. Steve was complaining of a sore back. He must have injured himself slightly, when he was running today. I was just giving him a shot of massage.” Richard felt guiltier than the kids as he wiped his oily hands on a tissue.

“Good man, good man. Prob’ly something an’ nothing though. Do anything, these hooligans will, for a bit of personal attention. Isn’t that right, Steven McKimmie? Contradict me if you dare.”

“Thanks, Uncle Richard, you did good,” said Steve, cocking his head perkily, delightfully, dismissing Eddie with a crafty *coup d’oeil*.

“See that, Uncle? No respect, no damned respect at all,” Eddie said with a grin; then to the boys again, “Five minutes to lights out, and any more of your blasted tomfoolery and I slipper the lot of yer. And you know and I know, I shall relish every gold-plated minute of it.”

That same evening Richard was lying in his bed unable to sleep. The room was too warm and the radiator temperature didn’t appear adjustable. There was more. Louise had taken a chill and was lying on her back loudly snoring. He toyed with the idea of giving her a dig to silence her bed-shaking snorts, but immediately dismissed the idea on grounds it would provoke the inevitable—cuddle me!

And then came another slightly intrusive sound, a light tapping on their door. Without waiting to be asked, a boy crept stealthily to his bedside, dropped to his knees, and whispered, “I cannae sleep, Uncle. It’s ma foot. It hurts sump’n rotten.” It was Hansa.

Richard whispered back. “You’re out of bounds, son, d’yer know that?”

“Aye, but I jus’ knowed yer wouldnae tell.”

“Right, I wouldn’t,” He was secretly thrilled by the close proximity of his favourite kid. “What’s wrong with your foot, Hansa?”

“It’s where I fell over on that sticky-up tree. I figured you could mebbe do sump’n to it like what you done to Steve’s back. Could you, Uncle?”

“I guess so, little kid. You just go through that door to our sitting room and I’ll be with you in a minute, okay?”

Donning his dressing gown, he joined Hansa, noting that he was wearing his football shorts only. Instructing the attractive little fellow to take a seat, he oiled his hands, and asked for the offending foot. “Hope you’re not ticklish, Hansa,” he said. “Sometimes, but I can make it so’s it don’t tickle.”

“Clever kid. How d’yer do that?”

“Ah jus’ think it, that’s aw, so’s it’s not gonna.”

Richard chuckled softly. “Okay, where does it hurt most?”

It was his ankle, he said, and Richard began to massage a faint bruising of the handsomely-arched foot, making a meal of it, because even this simple little operation made him feel good. “You’re a very likeable lad, Hansa,” he said at length, “and I’m pleased you came to me.”

“Figured you’d throw a maddie, then, ’cos you said we was pals, I figured you wouldnae.”

The remark warmed him. As he was finishing off, he impulsively took the big toe into his mouth, licked it, and pretended to chew on it.

“Yukky! Whadyer doin’ that for, Uncle?” the boy giggled, trying to pull away.

“Because it’s good enough to eat, sunshine. Better with a bit of salt though,” he laughed, wiping the oily residue from the boy’s skin. “There, how’s that feel?”

“Great, but my head’s bangin’ kinda rotten an’ all.”

“Is it, son? Must be all that aggro today, but there’s not much I can do about it right now, unless...” He felt an inner ecstatic charge. “Unless—hey, you wanna kip down with me for a while? It might help.”

He did... he did! Oh, wonder of wonders!

Richard climbed in, sans dressing coat, and Hansa, seeming to ape him, stripped off his shorts first.

The snoring went on unabated. Louise hadn't heard a thing and neither had Lee, as this new, but not altogether strange young body slid into bed beside him, the boy's cool nakedness imparting a soothing chill to his own overwarm nudity. Richard had slept naked since his army days because he found it more comfortable. Hansa sometimes slept that way because the pyjama store was not inexhaustible. They settled in back to back with their shoulder blades in fusion, more or less, and Richard, blissfully happy that the boy had sought his help, and content for now to be enjoying even this limited communion, was nonetheless aroused.

There occurred that very nearly insignificant seeming sensation, the click near the head of his penis at the precise point where the foreskin is joined to the glans, a kind of anticipatory switch-on. It nearly always stimulated him into solid erection, as then, but to no immediate purpose.

He lay awake for some considerable time, his thoughts dominated by the youngster there beside him. Oh, how he would have loved to... but no... no. Sleep consumed him at last, but it was fitful. Tenebrous ambiguities burgeoned, thumping his brain. God, was there to be no peace? What would Louise think if she discovered Hansa in his bed? She would actually be jealous, might create a scene, but he knew he could placate her with vague promises, once the storm had passed. What would Lee think? He would never know. Lee didn't simply fall asleep each night, he died. What would Elizabeth think, or Eddie? What if Hansa should wet the bed? What would his room-mates think if they discovered his bed empty? Would they raise the alarm?

Fade in: The derelict golf course was in almost total darkness and his beloved Hansa was lost somewhere amongst the clawing, wind-animated, leafless trees. He half-saw white shorts and an orange singlet, wet and sticking to the young body within them; half-saw because rain like needles stabbed at his face. He picked up the boy he had sought for days and his tears mingled with the rain, which wasn't rain. Dissolve: With crystal clarity, he was seeing that endearing spray-lashed look on Hansa's wondrous face, the look that had melted him that first morning he had made a positive approach. Dissolve: He was with him at the swimming pool, holding, hugging, feeling his abdominal firmness to the accompaniment of soaring, tingling excitements. Dissolve: He was peeling his wet white shorts and witnessing those fine, fairish erect little hairs on his legs, shining bronze-bright as though rear-lit. Dissolve: He saw that enchanting face of fury and that manful boxing stance. Cut to: Like a cheetah, the lissome, flaxen-haired Stevie did a hundred-yard dash across his mindways, busting a tape, and with eyes ablaze, was flinging his arms high and wide in acknowledgement of victory. And as he watched he wanted to ravage the vital stripling. Dissolve: Flat out on the bed, the vigorous youth's muscle groups submitted to an inventory check. Lovingly, and with lubricity, Richard's probing fingers (an erotic expeditionary force) sought them out, each and every one; the hefty shoulders, smooth-curving over beautifully defined trapezius and deltoid; a midsection in the grip of finely-chiselled abdominals so impressive in appearance as to provoke aphrodisiac sensations; and the ganglionic latissimus dorsi, like wings of sprung steel. Tracking, kneading, warming, with fingers of fire. The boy's oiled skin gleamed, shone erogenous through a shimmering, disorienting heat haze. (Where are you now, Hansa?) Dissolve: Oh Stevie, Stevie, would that I were you; raw, forthright, bracingly cleanlimbed and well-proportioned; set to grab life by the scruff and wring every last vestige of pleasure and meaning from it. I'm clay in your hands. Take my form, my feelings, my personality. Remodel them in thine own image. Make of me something antithetical to myself. I want to be like you. It was too hot. Far too hot. Fade out.

He was sweating profusely when he awoke, but was comforted in seconds by the now closer proximity of young Hansa, still there beside him. Richard was lying in the same position with his back to the boy. But Hansa had turned to face him, and somehow managed to get both of his arms right around Richard's middle. That dear little kid. A shame to wake him, to sever the connection. Two glowing lines in a circle of dots told him it was half past four. A series of gentle shakes and he unwillingly extricated

himself from Hansa's encircling grasp, managed to get out of bed and into his dressing gown. He carried the naked boy back to his own bed. Hansa stirred as he was put down.

"How's your head now, little kid?" Richard whispered.

"I think it's okay. What time is it, Uncle?" he asked, drowsily.

"Four-thirty, Hansa, and you're still dry. How about another trip to the toilet, for good luck?"

Hansa went away without a word, barely awake. Back, and in, and away. No one any the wiser. End of episode.

But not quite yet. Richard had purposely retained the discarded football shorts. He'd return them in the morning; after he had assuaged that disagreeable obsession of his (as he thought it); after he had enveloped his head in the sweet smelling fabric to boost visualisation of the lad he loved; after the little boy garment had functioned as a means of his attaining a secret climactic moment.

Richard was with the kids on the yard, so, by way of a change, Eddie invited Louise into his own quarters for their tea break.

It was the first time she had seen his room. “Nice place, Eddie,” she said. “Cosy and—oh!” Her foot had become entangled.

“Untidy? You can say it. Just kick that lot out of your way,” he said, indicating the pile of muddied football strip used the previous day. He strode over a low table to reach the tea makings on the floor, where a kettle plugged into a low socket. “Sit yourself down, luv. This won’t take long.”

“It looks as if you could do with a wife, Eddie,” she commented, making herself comfortable.

“You volunteering?”

“I could do worse. But have you anyone—I mean anyone else—in mind?”

“Not really. There’s this lass I know in Wakefield, but I won’t go into that. It’s nowt serious. Anyhow, I’m happy as a sandboy working here with this lot. Too busy to think about raising my own.” He turned, catching her unawares, connecting with her faintly downcast expression. He didn’t say anything right off, but then, “I think you could do with a husband, Louise,” a remark he instantly regretted.

“You mean it shows?”

“Oh, excuse me, sweetheart. I open my big fat trap sometimes and jump in with both feet I shouldn’t have said that. Fm sorry, Louise.”

“Don’t be. As a matter of fact you’re nearer the truth than you know. Please don’t misunderstand. I love my husband dearly, but it’s mostly a one-way ticket and has been for some while.”

“Do you want to talk about it?—but if you’d rather not—”

“He’s a terribly clever man, Eddie, and I cannot for the life of me fathom why he’s squandering his talents in a place like this.”

“Catches on quick, Louise. He’s doing a grand job.”

“That isn’t what I meant It’s his writing, or rather the lack of it. We’ve been together for nine years and in all that time he’s done nothing of real worth. He’s tried. I give him credit for that, but he’s always seemed so terribly disturbed. He used to suffer the most appalling nightmares. Moody, deeply depressed sometimes. Artistic temperament? I simply don’t know.”

“You poor old luv. I hope you don’t blame yourself because he isn’t writing.”

“Well, I sometimes wonder. Granted, he’s happier now. He loves it here and gets along well with most of the boys. The thing is—well—with Lee sleeping in our room, it’s not exactly as easy to talk to Richard as I’d like. We’re hardly ever alone long enough. Elizabeth said she’d find something else for Lee, but I don’t like to bother her.”

“Doesn’t have much time for Lee neither, does he?”

“No, Eddie, he doesn’t. That’s another thing I’ve never understood, especially now I’ve seen him with the other boys. He seems to interact with some of them as he should with his own son, but he has never given him the time of day. Utterly indifferent. There’s very little left between them.”

“That’s sad, ’cos Lee’s a real bobby-dazzler, an’ no mistake.”

“He’s fond of you, Eddie. Talks about you a lot.”

“He could bed down in here, if you think it would help,” Eddie suggested. “Plenty o’ space. We could stick a proper bed by the window there.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” she said, hoping she could. “You want your privacy too, Eddie.”

“No skin off my back, Louise. We get on pretty well. The lad would be no bother to me. Might make me keep my den a bit tidier. How about it?”

“I could ask.”

“You do that. Right, me luv. Here’s tea. You pour.”

Big Joe was sitting sideways on an upright chair, exactly as Richard had observed him just over a week ago. Concerned as he was, he had been unable to break through to the boy, and thus his problems—whatever they might be—were still his own. Even the hoped for ‘good mornings’ had not been forthcoming, and Richard had discussed his seemingly worsening condition with Eddie. It had been agreed they would jointly raise the matter with the Principal, when he visited the school later that week.

Richard’s relationship with young Hansa grew, though to his disappointment the boy had not come to him in the night any more.

Richard had broached the subject of his single nocturnal visit with Eddie, to forestall any possible misunderstanding, and to his surprise, he had been told simply to enter it in the behaviour book.

“Oh, but wait, Eddie. I don’t want this taken down and used in evidence against the kid. I don’t want him to end up on some head-shrinker’s couch.”

It was purely a formality, Eddie had said. Nothing to get his knickers in a twist about.

Richard had no yardstick against which to measure this with other regimes, but he greatly appreciated the indigenous aura of innocence which demanded that no one thought it peculiar, even if older boys should elect to park on a man’s lap—as many of them did, with whichever grown male should chose to sit. Ramsie sometimes joined them, and ‘Uncle Charles’ was always popular when he put in one of his infrequent appearances.

Thus the blue-jeaned Hansa was sitting on Richard’s knees watching television, when Big Joe asked permission to go to the toilet. The older boy was looking decidedly ill and Richard was almost moved to go with him, had not current pleasures held him to his chair. Hansa’s face had all but healed and he was back to his good-looking self once more. Further, he never associated with Brian, and would sit with Richard—whenever Tommy permitted!

He was reflecting upon advances made during the spent week, focusing particularly upon bedtimes which held special attractions. Each evening he would say his good-nights in Eddie’s way and in Eddie’s wake, except that Hansa’s bedside was always the last one he visited. In the dim light he was able to perceive that warm fixed look Hansa always gave him and he knew beyond doubt that the boy had actually grown to love him. He could feel it. Spoken words redundant. In the earlier part of the week he had planted a tentative peck on the boy’s forehead each evening, but this had changed. On about the fourth night he had brought his own lips into brief contact with the boy’s and now—at last—and without conscience—he could really kiss him, holding it, feeling an electric charge, savouring each blessed moment, being held into the kiss by Hansa’s strong young arms, wrapped around his neck to keep him there. Lip-locked with such intimate fervour, it became difficult to tear himself away, yet tear himself away he must, lest the other boys suspect favouritism. And again, smoothing the bedcovers, his hand had strayed to the point where he noticed, beneath them, that Hansa had an erection—and the pact was sealed.

And so it was as the pair of them sat there that evening. Pressing against the tight front of his Wranglers, the wee hard-on, evident as Richard rested his hand across Hansa’s lap. And to compound his pleasure, Stevie had attached himself too, and was right then sitting on the floor with his back to the chair and his head rested against the outside of Richard’s thigh. To demonstrate that Stevie’s presence was appreciated, the man ran his fingers through the lad’s hair.

Whilst enjoying the closeness of the youngsters, his mind began to wander, back-tracking to his own childhood. He had always liked boys, even as a boy himself. Amongst his earlier recollections had been a yearning for what seemed to him the most simple of desires—yet for the most part, they remained resolutely unattainable. In secondary school it was the twins he liked, the two handsome look-alikes who wore identical grey flannel long trousers. It was fairly rare then for boys of eleven to wear long trousers, and it was the trousers that sparked the longing—though quite why, he couldn’t begin to imagine.

He remembered standing alone in the playground seeking sight of them, and then watching them at play with other boys—wanting desperately to be a part of their game—wanting just to know them, to be their friend. Somehow, their trousers marked them out as tougher kids, special kids—but because he was shy and afraid of making an approach, all he could do was observe from afar and wonder just what proportion of male youth might be similarly achingly afflicted. These were feelings exactly parallel to those he had experienced over the big boys in room three, but he was making in-roads at last. It had taken him a lifetime to achieve what he had longed for all those years ago—close association with tough lads, lads who wanted to be with him—and his libido was alight.

Snapping back to the here and now, he adjusted his position to ease a dead leg, stroked Stevie's cheek to hold him there, and then returned his hand to its former position—across Hansa's lap.

His pleasure was suddenly demolished by a piercing shriek from somewhere upstairs.

“Would you mind, Uncle?” Eddie asked, yawning. Eddie wasn't easily diverted when tied to television.

“Can ah chum ye?” Hansa asked, hooking a thumb in his fly to ease the pressure.

After such an endearing expression? Of course you can, he thought as the pair of them hurried from the room.

Arriving at the boy's landing the first thing he clapped eyes upon was young Tommy, in pyjamas, holding both sides of his head and running amok, squealing “Ow—ow—ow!” over and over.

He scampered away along the corridor, plumping on to his own bed face down. Richard and Hansa followed him. The other smaller boys were sitting up in their beds also wondering what was happening.

“What is it, Tommy?” Richard asked, sitting beside the boy, running his fingers tenderly into his red curls. Hansa remained by the door.

The squeals had given way to anguished sobbing. Richard persisted. “Tommy, tell Uncle what's wrong, son. Is it your head?”

The little boy's distress-racked body squirmed around, his cries unabated. He seemed beyond control. Richard turned to Hansa with a feeling of utter helplessness. Hansa merely shrugged, himself beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Richard turned the wee boy over, raised the upper part of his body from the bed and embraced him, all the while pleading with him to open up. “Tommy, if you've got a pain somewhere please tell me where—otherwise I don't see what I can do, little pal.”

At last the little boy spoke, forcing the words out, almost choking on them. “It's Big Joe—Uncle—in the—bathroom—”

Richard laid the boy down again, asked Hansa to stay with him for a moment and tore back along the corridor to the bathroom.

And there was Big Joe. Stark naked. His clothing neatly piled against the far wall. Richard was forced to lean against the door post for support, feeling like he'd been sledge-hammered. He had to force himself to take stock.

Joe's bare feet were dangling in mid-air, almost eighteen inches from the floor. Ranging slowly upwards over the boy's body, he allowed his terrified gaze to take in the legs covered in dark hair, passing by fully-matured genitals, the normally flat, muscled abdomen—distended now, the broad chest and shoulders—dreadfully slumped. Then the head. Crazy angled, the face suffused with blood, purple, the tongue large and lolling, filling the entire cavity, eyes bulging, hair awry. The throat—with the necktie around it—gone—gone for good—wasted—suspended by the tie from the pipes high above the washbasins.

He must have climbed on to the sinks, secured the tie about his neck—and stepped off. But why—oh why? And why had he undressed himself totally first?

Reeling with shock, and unable to get his legs to walk straight, he tottered from the bathroom, his face a pallid mask, tingling in his extremities, nauseous, delirious. He called on Hansa, who came running.

“Go fetch Uncle Eddie will you son, please?” he managed to gasp.

“What’s wrong, Uncle?” Hansa asked, much concerned.

“I’ll tell you later, little kid. Just do as I ask.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

The boy sped away. Richard slumped to the floor and waited.

The national press got hold of the story. With typical media tenacity, they read more into it than was actually there. Reporters swooped like vultures, picking at the bones of interviewees, prying, needling, doing their best to ferret out information with which they might discredit and degrade the establishment—the institutionalised Joe McIntyre had taken his life because...

They were disappointed, and after the inquest, the accusing finger—to avoid atrophy—was forced to move on. The various authorities who sent their kids knew the school well enough by now, and Charles was sure the incident would blow over quickly enough.

Richard was angry. He had been the one who had actually found the boy, and the press had made much of a ‘famous writer’ being involved. So old pictures of him had been unearthed to tart up their stories—and his identity and location had become public knowledge.

The final, partially inaccurate, word came from the local rag:

‘EXPERIMENT’ LED TO HIS DEATH

Writer Discovered Body

A 15-year-old boy may have been experimenting when he hanged himself in the bathroom at a special school at Kylerossie, Inverness-shire where he was a pupil, the Procurator Fiscal said last Friday.

Dr Margarita Moore, presiding, recorded a verdict of Accidental Death on Joseph Francis McIntyre, the whereabouts of whose parents is unknown. The boy, who had been in the care of the local authority, was resident at the school in Kylerossie for two years.

The Principal, Mr Charles Hurst-Sanders, said that he had been a quiet boy, keeping himself to himself. He had never been a problem, neither had he seemed unduly miserable or depressed.

Writer Mr Jay Gaynor-Smith (pictured), currently at the school researching a new book, discovered the boy’s naked body hanging from overhead water pipes in a bathroom. His clothes were nearby. Police-constable Allan Ruthven, called to the scene, said there was no suspicion of foul play.

Dr Harold Judge said that Joseph died from asphyxia due to suspension. The Procurator Fiscal commented: There is no reason why he should take his life. I feel in this case he was experimenting as young men sometimes do.

Charles, still in residence following Joe's death, chaired a meeting one evening after the kids had been bedded down. He, Elizabeth, Ramsie, Alastair, Eddie, Richard and Louise were to discuss whom they should take to replace Big Joe. Amongst the documentation before them was a dossier on a certain Danny Newmains.

Eleven-years-old Danny had not been in care before, but the authorities considered it high time he was. At school—if he deigned to put in an appearance—he was lazy, abusive and violent. He had finally been ejected from every available school in his district. At the last one, a report ran, he had been ordered from the classroom for constant disruption. He had refused to go. The male teacher had attempted forcible removal. Danny had thrown a chair, smashing the man's spectacles and breaking his nose. And he wasn't the only casualty. It had evidently taken four men to get him out that day.

He was one of a large split family. Father had taken off and mother, because of an insatiable appetite for booze and bedmates, had been unable to cope. She had no interest in her numerous offspring and Danny had thus been able to advance his rebellious activities unhindered—to the point where he had become utterly refractory. No one could control him.

Charles thought him a likely prospect. The fee must have been good and Charles certainly wouldn't have the handling. To Richard's horror, it was decided that he, Richard, being new to the game, would gain valuable insight into the work if he were to take on the boy as his personal responsibility and break him in. 'Break him into little pieces', thought Richard, who now understood the school's reputed policy of 'taking the dregs'. Danny Newmains was a monster—no question. He was definitely seven feet tall—as impervious as a tank—had horns—breathed fire—and ate authoritative adults for breakfast!

And so it was with apprehension on the grandest scale that he awaited the arrival of the youth's transport a few days later.

A chauffeur-driven Daimler came to a stop in front of the building at a little after eleven one morning. In-back he spotted two social workers. Between them would be the great homed savage securely manacled.

But no. What emerged from the ostentatiousness of their transport was a demure-looking Miss Thompson, who couldn't have been more than nineteen, and a Mr Wallace, who could have been her father. And—a good-looking, quiet-seeming, normally-sized boy of incredibly downcast demeanour.

"This is Danny," said the fragile Miss Thompson, who was the caseworker. The older man was simply along for the ride, the watch-dog, though what he might have done in an emergency if it had previously taken four adults to restrain this kid, Richard could only conjecture.

Richard shook hands with Danny, who did not otherwise respond. He ushered the three of them into the budding and thence to the staff room. He introduced them to Eddie who took his leave saying he would look after the chauffeur and send a tray in for them.

Danny's escorts downed their tea as quickly as courtesy permitted, declined the invitation to stay for lunch and departed, Miss Thompson no doubt sighing with relief that she was rid of the intractable Newmains boy for the time being, at least.

Richard was alone with Danny.

A snap appraisal told him the reputed tough image was there all right, but surely it was no more than that—mere image. The boy looked sad and distant, his eyes fixed on the window furthest away from Richard. He wore a battered, but still serviceable black leather bomber jacket zipped halfway up. And trendy green baggy trousers, tight at the seat, with two-inch turn-ups, and back pockets which were nothing more than button-down flaps. He called his trousers 'flap-backs', and the brown, yellow-laced boots he called 'docs'. Inside the jacket a brown gingham check shirt with a largish round-tipped collar—a Ben Sherman—to complete the boy's later precise descriptions.

With Richard the clothing came first almost always. What a boy had chosen to wear was usually indicative of the kind of kid he was—in this instance the rugged, stalwart, ‘street’ kind—which was Richard’s first love. And Danny was ideally gift-wrapped. It therefore followed as instinct, of sorts, that he must like what was packaged therein, and this lad was a real stunner. He had exceptionally long fair hair parted in the middle—a centre-shed the boy called it. He had a confined sprinkling of faint freckles around his button nose, and there was a curious half-inch scar running upwards from the inside edge of one of his eyebrows, so that with his features in repose, he unconsciously evinced a somewhat wistful appearance. As to physique, he and Hansa might have come from the same mould, and Richard found it difficult to reconcile what he was seeing with the kid’s documentation.

A clean-up was first on the agenda and it was whilst the lad was showering that Richard noticed tattoo-like markings on each of the boy’s forearms. A closer look revealed his crudely lettered first name and a shield device bearing the initials YTB. On the other arm a small crucifix and larger outline letters DN. Expressing surprise, Richard asked him how he had come by them.

“My pal,” said the boy, sullenly—his first words.

“You mean your pal did them for you?”

A nod.

“How?”

“Indian ink an’ needle.”

“But why, son?” Richard interpreted his raised shoulders as meaning ‘I dunno’.

“But good lord, Danny, you’ll never get those off.”

This time he used his shoulders to say ‘who cares?’

“Well, I can see these are your initials, but what does YTB mean?”

“Young Tippy Bootboys.”

“Tippy?”

“Tiptree, the scheme where I stay—near Greenock.”

Richard came to learn that these were status symbols, the marks of belonging as a gang member, and further consolidation of the toughness image. Such markings were fairly common amongst disadvantaged kids, as social workers were fond of labelling them. Richard was developing a grudging respect for the misguided courage with which these largely self-motivated kids were charged. And the bravery necessary for the ritualistic withstanding of pain—to say nothing of the risk of infection—just to belong.

When the showering, hair-washing and bone-combing had been completed, Danny was handed clean underwear, and when he saw his own clothing was not forthcoming, he angrily demanded its return.

“Wear these for now, Danny. All your things will go to the laundry and when they’ve been cleaned, you’ll be able to wear them whenever you like, outside of school hours.”

“Ah want ma ain claes,” he said, vociferously.

“Nothing doing pal, and I think you heard me—you’ll have them later.”

“Ah want ma ain claes,” he repeated, rising a pitch and backing against the wall with the towel in front of him.

Richard was prepared for what he knew was coming, and though the struggle with the four adults loomed large, he was sure he could handle it. “Get these on and do it now Danny, please.”

“Nu.” He had his own way of saying ‘no’ with a sharply clipped ‘o’ sound.

Richard took the bull by the horns. Grabbing the lad by a handful of his long hair, he snatched the towel from him and marched him out of the bathroom. “Very well, sunshine—you’ll have to walk about like that.”

Danny struggled violently but the hold on him was sure and irremovable. He yelped loudly and it was obvious he could find no words to combat the surprising turn of event. It was equally clear that no grown-up had ever been so earnestly decisive. If his case history was to be believed, they had always coaxed,

wheedled, timidly suggested. Likewise, no grown-up could ever have exhibited such fearlessness before. They must have readily conceded and hovered pusillanimously—as adults seemed to do with increasing frequency these days.

Despite Richard's tenacity, Danny kept up a show of stubborn resistance all the way to room three, where he was roughly shoved on to Joe's former bed.

"We have it on authority, Danny boy, that it took four adults to shift your body once before—is that right?" Richard ranted. He'd run up his adrenalin-spiked temper again to be certain he could master whatever this youngster might throw back. "Well, is it—is it?" He wanted participation as he watched the boy shrink against the wall.

"Aye," Danny shouted, flinching from the anticipation of further attack.

"Well get this, son, and get it good. Here, it takes just one. Just me alone. Y'wanna know why? Because I can throw bigger and better tantrums than you can and I always win. I suggest you get that into your head right now, for your own good. Clear?" The fusillade had moderated somewhat, but he spoke close to the boy's ear. "I said, is that clear?"

The boy said "aye" again.

"So now, do you put these on, or do we go downstairs to meet the other boys—and girls—in your birthday suit?"

There was still fight left in the lad. "That's shorts," he roared. "Ah dinnae wear shorts. Ah'm no a wee 'un, ah'm eleven." He grabbed the grey shorts and flung them across the room.

"Okay son, in your own time," Richard said. With great deliberation he took a chair near to the door, and sat facing its back, Eddie-fashion. He glared at the boy with fake anger and the boy glared back (meaning it), and thus they stayed for some time. At length the lad's head dropped forward, he seemed to capitulate, and moments later he pulled on his underpants, retrieved the shorts and stepped into them. Now fully dressed, he sat on the edge of the bed sheepishly contemplating his bare knees.

"You see, my lad, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

Danny shrugged.

"And just so you won't think we're picking on you, all of the boys wear shorts to school, including the other five in this room, and they're older than you are. And another thing, maybe you'd like to know I reckon your own gear is great. What's your word for it—gallous? You'll soon have it all back, so quit beefing—right?"

Richard understood that it was more than obstinacy that had provoked Danny's resistance. The boy felt himself totally ill-fitted to meet the other kids, shorn of his protective armour. That leather jacket, his 'in gear' trousers and Doc Marten boots spoke volumes on his behalf, scribbling in a flash impression that would tell the other kids who and what he was. As things stood he was vulnerable to attack.

First, he fell foul of Elizabeth in the dining room where he refused to eat any of their 'pig-puke'. Some of the others, who ordinarily called the food pig-puke too, took exception, siding with Elizabeth for once. Not that Elizabeth needed reinforcement. She was some tough lady and was quite up to handling the likes of Danny unaided, as seen later when she actually had him doubling on the spot for disobedience—an eye-popping feat indeed. That the woman could single-handedly succeed where four men had previously failed, was little short of miraculous.

He was either cold-shouldered by the other kids or cruelly taunted—and his hair had to come off. Long hair was not tolerated at the school. Eddie and Richard were forced to hold the lad down whilst the invited village barber did his best.

The resentful youngster shunned Richard's concerned presence at his bedside that night, and it was clear the boy was feeling hurt, confused and alone—and that he wanted no one's intervention.

It was two o'clock. Danny, unable to sleep, became increasingly aware of the night sounds around him. There was an annoying far-away electrical hum from machinery somewhere in the building. The

central heating system clicked repeatedly. An occasional vehicle toiled up the nearby hill, and there was intermittent spattering of rain, breeze-blown against the windows.

But more unnerving were the barely discernible sounds within the very room where he lay; scuffling sounds, the creaking of mattresses and the most hushed of whispers. Lying on his stomach with his head to one side, he suspected conspiracy. He was sure his name was mentioned. Might be his imagination. All the noises here were different. He hardly dared breathe lest he miss something that might suggest flight. His skin crawled and his scalp bristled.

Then they were upon him before he could spring to his own defence. Three things happened quickly, simultaneously. Someone snapped the light on, but before he could see his attackers, a strong hand forced his neck deeper into the pillow so that he was unable to move his head. A clenched fist was held close to his face and the croaky voice of someone unseen ordered him to keep quiet or it would be shoved up his nose. Then he heard someone else say ‘okay—get the gag—quick.’

A rolled-up piece of cloth was stretched across his open mouth and tied behind his neck. A small-sized pair of swimming trunks were jammed over his head, fitting snugly, the cord pulled tightly and knotted. Now he couldn’t see. Neither could he breathe very well through the densely woven black nylon. And the stricture of the gag made swallowing difficult and caused rising panic.

Darkness and helplessness and the great empty chasm of the unknown, conjoined to jar him into a state of brain-splitting terror, as many strange hands grappled with him, holding him so securely that any attempted retaliation was impossible. Next, the great weight on his chest must be some other boy who sat facing his feet and began to fondle his bollocks.

“Hey, dig this for a plonker,” the boy loud-whispered. “It’s too fuckin’ yoooge for a kid what’s only eleven. Let’s chop a chunk off.”

“Aye, it’s twice as big as yours, Stu—we could do a transplant if you want.”

“You shut your rotten geggie, shit-face,” the Stu character responded.

“I say we circumcise him. Get the scissors.”

“This razor’ll have to do.”

“What razor?”

“Quiet—d’yer wanna get us caught?”

“What if this little bastard squeals?”

“So what? He’ll get more of the same. Anyway, he don’t even know who we are.”

“He knows your name’s Stu for a start.”

“Aw shurrrup, and give us that stuff.”

In his black void, Danny was firmly convinced by now that something dreadful was going to happen to him and he jerked convulsively as—

“Let me do it—hold him, for Christ’s sake.”

—as someone began liberally applying what felt like some sort of thick greasy substance, pasting it all around his genitals, and his imagination forced the fancy that it must be the antiseptic preparation for the horrible surgical operation they had spoken of. When they seemed satisfied he felt himself being lifted and carried from the room. He writhed and squirmed to no avail.

He was gently laid on his back on a cold tiled floor, and he guessed he must be in the bathroom—where they could more easily clean up the blood afterwards? The thought of that razor-sharp blade slicing into the flesh around his delicate parts made him sweat. If only someone would come and help him. If only he could die.

Now his ankles were being strapped together and someone rasped, “Okay now, haul away, easy”. There was some small consolation in that he was being handled carefully now, but it did little to stem the fear, as he felt the rope tightening around his ankles and his feet slowly rising from the floor—higher—above his head—and it dawned that he was being suspended from the overhead pipes in the bathroom.

Many hands lifted and assisted his progress until he was completely inverted and clear of the floor. Then the supportive hands were withdrawn, and to his extreme terror he was hanging alone—upside-down—in total darkness.

He heard them leaving the place. Blood pumped into his head and he figured he just had to black out, that would be best, just conk out and feel no pain. No such luck. Fear fogged his reasoning and it was some little while before he realised his hands were not tied. He tried to free his head but couldn't locate the knot. In vexation he tore at the trunks, but could neither rip them off nor shove his head through a leg-hole. He tried to swing upwards attempting to reach his feet, but the rope cut into his ankles creating a separate agony, and he dared not struggle too much in case something snapped and he was dashed head first to the tiled floor.

He whimpered inwardly and shuddered helplessly. How long before someone finds me, he thought. No one has any reason to come in here till morning. He was unable to make enough noise to carry beyond the bathroom. Even that effort caused him unendurable anguish. He was defeated. There was nothing he could do to help himself. There was nothing else left—but to hang.

Ever since Richard had arrived at the school, he had intended to have words with Gerald Gadd, the gardener/handyman, about doing something to cut down the heat in the bedroom. Because sleep was eluding him yet again, he thought to pass some time by having a look at the boys. He drew considerable satisfaction from touring the rooms late some nights, armed only with a torch, momentarily bathing each sleeping head in its creamy glow.

As he entered the dormitory corridor, the apron of light shining from beneath the bathroom door caught his eye. That light shouldn't have been left on, he thought, as he approached the door and opened it.

A shock wave hit him with almost tangible force, and the momentary mind's-eye image of Big Joe hanging there almost floored him. Forcing that horror aside and quickly pulling himself together, he was able to perceive that the rope holding this boy in position had been tied to a radiator.

"It's all right now, son, I'll have you free in a second," he breathed, grasping the inverted lad's middle with one arm whilst he untied the rope with his free hand. Gently lowering him, and propping him against a wall, he searched for the knot securing the trunks in vain.

"Jesus wept!" He picked him up again—sod this bloody boot polish—and hastily carried him to the staff bathroom where he was able to employ scissors to release his head. He was aghast at Danny's appearance—his distorted mouth from which bubbly saliva oozed—his blood-red face—his eyes screwed up against the light. The lad simply stood as if awaiting robotic programming.

Richard drew a bath of hot water and helped Danny into it. He asked him to stand the while he applied a soapy cloth to his, by now, not so private parts, cleaning tenderly to avoid further hurt to the boy—and couldn't help being struck by the immensity of that pendulous organ of his. He'd disciplined himself not to look the last time he had seen the boy unclothed. Swallowing hard, he handed him a freshly soaped cloth and suggested he finish off himself. The scummy blackness clung to the waterline, and three changes were necessary before he was finally rid of the stuff. Then, as the youngster dried off, Richard fetched the first-aid box and tended his ankle abrasions.

Swathed in a huge bath towel, Danny was shepherded into Richard's sitting room and plonked in an armchair by the fire. He knocked up a mug of hot chocolate and gave it to the silent boy, then lit a cigarette and sat himself, facing the lad.

"Feel a bit better now, Danny?"

The boy shrugged characteristically, telling him nothing.

"How d'yer get yourself in that mess? Any idea who did it?"

"Nu." The short 'o' sound again. He was watching the smoke curling from Richard's cigarette with a wistfulness not the result of his eyebrow scar.

“Smoke, do you?” Richard asked.

A slow nod.

“Not allowed, I think you know that—but I reckon we can buck the rules for one night, eh?”

The boy sucked the first drag deeply into his lungs. After a while he spoke. “Ah amnae stayin’ in this dump an’ you an’ nubdy’s gonna make me,” he mumbled.

“I know how you feel, Danny, but we’ll find out tomorrow who did this to you, then everything will be okay—you’ll see.”

“Ah dinnae care. It’s a stinkin’ dump and ah amnae stayin’, that’s aw.”

“You know, son, all new places and experiences are a bit strange at first. I’m fairly new here myself, and even I found it hard going to begin with. You’ll soon get used to it.”

“Nu, ah wullnae, ’cos ah amnae bloody stayin’ long enough to find oot.”

“I see,” Richard quietly responded. “May I ask where you are thinking of going?”

“Ah jus’ wanna go h-hame.” The word stuck and tears welled, and Richard was surprised at the disclosure that the boy could be at once both antagonistic tearaway and crybaby.

“That bad is it, son? On top of everything else you’re homesick. I know about that because I was only eleven when I went to my first scout camp. I felt terrible to begin with. But it soon passes, my young friend, especially if you’ve got somebody on your side.”

Richard sat on the boy’s chair arm and put a hand on his shoulder. “Stick around, kid. Let’s you and me be pals and see this thing through together. I’ll have a bet with you. I’ll bet that by tomorrow night you’ll have a whole stack of new friends. How much?”

The boy didn’t reply, merely took another drag.

“How about kipping down with me tonight?” Hopefully.

“Ah ain’t goin’ back in there again.” Resentfully.

“So does that mean ‘yes’?”

Another idiosyncratic shrug.

A pause. He had to press for an answer, and grasping the boy by his shoulders, he looked him squarely in the face. “Yes?”

The boy managed an almost imperceptible nod and fixed Richard with a wild-eyed expression that laid bare the boy’s inner conflict: Who was this guy with his pied piper way of making him do things? No one had ever cared before whether he did right or wrong—or whether he lived or died. Yet here was someone who shoved him around one minute and soft-soaped him the next. He just couldn’t figure it out.

Louise stirred when they entered the bedroom, wanting to know what was going on.

“It’s our new boy, Danny, my love. He’s had a bit of trouble with some of the other kids. He’s staying in here with me tonight, that’s all.”

A brief grunt of disapproval and she turned over.

It transpired that Richard and this new boy with the prodigious genitalia (it wasn’t easy to banish the thought of it) ended up in bed together—not touching. Even though Danny was silently sobbing, Richard resisted the strong temptation to take the boy in his arms, afraid of provoking an adverse reaction. Danny wasn’t the only one hurting inside that night.

The children were seated for breakfast, and Eddie, who had been wised up to the events of the previous night, was clearly going to enjoy a field day. He stood confidently before them all, hands in track suit pockets, rocking backwards and forwards on his feet. He asked Danny to join him.

Eddie rested a hand on the boy’s head. “You all know who this is I hope. For those of simple mind I’ll tell you. It’s Danny Newmains and he’s our new boy. As a new boy he is entitled to certain civilities—which he didn’t get! He’s supposed to be looked after, people will be nice to him and make him feel welcome in our midst.” He paused for effect, left Danny standing out front, and paraded between the

tables with his thumbs thrust deeply into his armpits. “In the middle of the night, a group of nasty little heathens took it upon themselves to rough Danny up a bit. They gave him a really good going over, and if Uncle Richard had not found him nearly done in, we might have had another major tragedy on our hands. He was treated callously, brutally and degradingly and I want to know who did it—and I want to know why—and I want to know now.”

Mrs Twiddie wheeled in the breakfast trolley with its steaming porridge, sausages and bacon, and toast, their enticing aromas quickly permeating the atmosphere.

“Thank you, Mrs Twiddie,” Eddie said. “Would you mind waiting for just one moment please, my luv?”

She nodded and half-backed from the room.

He turned to the assembled youngsters again and continued. “I am waiting, and I shall wait for exactly two minutes.” He took off his timepiece dramatically, laid it on a table, and then sat down to watch the sweep hand.

Eddie’s calm was something to behold as he apparently ignored the ensuing disturbance. When he wanted quiet, he knew he could get it. There was whispering, shuffling and arguing. There were heated accusations and positively torrid denials—but no one came forward.

Eddie stood and made a pronouncement. “Fifteen seconds!”

The hubbub began to the away as zero hour approached, and it was in absolute silence that he was able to state, “Time’s up. Serve one portion of breakfast to young Danny here, if you please, Auntie Louise. Then Mrs Twiddie can remove the trolley. Now, kiddie-winkies, I shall ask exactly the same question again at lunch time—everybody out!”

With loud scrapings of chairs and much grunting and grumbling, the kids filed out again, glaring at Eddie with looks that would have killed a lesser mortal—leaving Danny to enjoy his first breakfast in solitary splendour.

By lunch-time the kids were ravenous and the culprits confessed. They had been the other five boys in Danny’s room.

“Well, well—the Famous Five,” Eddie retorted. “Get out here, all of you.”

They all came forward, but not too closely. “Go on,” he ordered.

“We always do it,” growled Mark Selby, as spokesman.

“I’ll correct you—you don’t always do it.” It was a shot in the dark, but it had the desired effect

“We always do the baws blackin’ bit with new kids.”

“Better—now we’re getting somewhere. Why then were you not content with a simple black-balling this time?”

“It was Stu’s idea to do the other.”

“Aye, but they all wanted in,” Stuart Robertson complained.

“And where did you get the rope?” Eddie asked.

Mark: “It was a clothesline from out the back. Nicked it. Sorry, Uncle,” Mark said.

The five transgressors stood before Eddie surrendering to a fearsome tongue-lashing, and as Richard looked on in a manner of detached approbation, he was sorry that his golden boy, Stevie, had been involved, amazed that Brian hadn’t been—and happy that Hansa was in the dear.

Following his rapid-fire tirade Eddie quieted for his summation. “And so, if word of such barbarism ever reaches my ear again, I shall string the lot of you up like so many sides of beef in a meat market—and forget where I put you! Now—as far as initiation ceremonies go—I will allow the black-balling to new boys.” (The girls tittered and were silenced with a glare.) “After all, there’s a certain tradition—but only providing I never get to hear about it. Right—no privileges for two weeks—back to your seats—serve the soup.”

Very neat, Richard thought. Eddie relished confrontations with the kids and his flamboyant histrionics were hugely entertaining. Perhaps the more sagacious of their charges would even consider him amusing too—in retrospect, of course.

It was at playtime that Danny found himself surrounded by his room-mates who had appreciated his not snitching. In truth, though he might have guessed, he hadn't been sure who his attackers were, and he sure wasn't about to say so now.

Richard was happy to see him accepted by his peers, as he had predicted, and he was satisfied that Danny would settle in much more readily as a result. He was also happy that Charles had given him the lad on a plate.

During the next few weeks Richard became more and more committed to the kids, the school and his position in it.

For Louise it was a different story. To her this was never more than a job, and one she cared little for. She couldn't warm to any of the kids and desperately wanted her own home to run again.

Coincident with this desire of hers came news that Ramsie was selling his loch-side cottage. So, in deference to his wife's wishes, and born of a new compassion for her through his growing equanimity, Richard bought the place and wife and son moved in.

Louise agreed to stay on as a part-timer, driving to and from each working day, and another part-time lady was advertised for.

Richard continued to sleep in and their former lounge was transformed into a single bed-sitter, the connecting door sealed and their bedroom similarly readied for the newcomer. Richard 'went home' only on his days off and his environment became almost totally male-oriented—to his great satisfaction.

Pressing Eddie into divulging the reason for the emergency Charles had mentioned, Richard was told that almost from the moment the school first opened, it had been filled to capacity. This prompted Charles to seek larger premises, but the new building in East Lothian (where Richard and Louise had been interviewed) became Pinewoods II rather than a replacement, meaning they needed a headmaster and matron for the Highlands branch. Mr and Mrs Greenhouse had been in residence for a little under a year. They turned out to be self-styled 'enlightened progressives', going against the regime established by the Principal because they thought it too repressive. They let the kids do pretty much as they wanted, even being allowed to go into the village without staff cover. Turned loose too soon, they started doing all the things which had got them sent to the school to begin with—shop-lifting, housebreaking, fighting with local kids and being disrespectful to older inhabitants. Mrs Freeman (the other teacher at the school) had had a brick thrown through one of her house windows. She, Alastair and Eddie had been on the point of resigning. Eddie could have handled the kids if left alone, but he had been pushed so far into the background, his efforts were largely ineffectual. Though he had reported what was going on, it wasn't until the mayhem hit the papers, that action was taken. The adverse publicity swung it. The Greenhouses were dismissed for failing to abide by the terms of their contract, and Charles inserted an open letter of apology in the local press to placate ill-feeling. Elizabeth returned, bringing Ramsie Eldred with her as acting-headmaster until new people could be found. Thus soundly backed-up, Eddie had re-established order before Richard and Louise had arrived on the scene.

Lee had jumped at the chance to 'sleep with Uncle Eddie', as he had innocently put it, and had done so for a couple of weeks before he and his mother moved out.

However, his parents were in for a surprise at the end of their son's second week away. That Saturday afternoon, Eddie arranged a football match, the Pinewoods eleven taking on lads from Raigman, Lee's own school. Which side Lee should play for was never in doubt. He would be a part of Eddie's team. Praise was heaped upon him when he scored the game's only goal, and their hero was astride Eddie's shoulders when the triumphant team surged into the building.

Lee, still in begrimed strip, caught his father's sleeve as he was entering the dining room with his own group of kids. "Hey, dad, we won. I got a goal."

"Congratulations," Richard replied, with forced enthusiasm.

Shucking off his back-slapping mates, the boy went on, "Daddy, okay to sleep with Uncle Eddie tonight?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Lee. You sleep at the cottage now."

"Da-ad!" An intonation carrying equal measures of pleading and non-acceptance.

“Don’t dad me. Your place is with your mother.”

“She won’t mind.”

“Go and ask her then. She’s in the staff room—and get yourself cleaned up.” Watching his son’s departure, his usual indifference was shaken. What registered was a scruffy-looking, tough little son-of-a-gun he’d never seen before. Where now that namby-pamby with the slightly disproportionately large posterior he’d always thought ugly? The boy was shaping up. Richard shrugged mentally and switched his attention to the others.

That night in Eddie’s room, in darkness, Eddie and Lee discussed the game from their respective beds. “That was a neat bit of play this aft, lad,” Eddie said. “Get a few more years on yer and you’ll be a right little belter, you mark my words.”

“Scotty helped. Scotty was good as well,” said the boy, modestly, turning on his side to face Eddie across the room.

“Aye, that’s right, but you could have slammed it in from where you was. What I mean is, you wasn’t taking no chances, so you passed it to Scotty.”

“Yeah, but what if Scotty didn’t boot it back when I got nearer?”

“You’re right, laddie. Scotty was good too. Would you like to be a footballer when you grow up?”

“Dunno yet.”

“What d’yer reckon your pals at Raigman are gonna say on Monday? I bet they’ll be sore ’cos you took the game away from them.”

“They won’t mind—well, mebbe a bit. I might get scragged.”

“If that happens, you just come and tell your Uncle Eddie all about it,” said the man, laughing.

“Uncle Eddie—”

“What, lad?”

“It don’t matter.” He turned on his back again.

“Yes it does. What was you gonna say, Lee?”

“No. It’s okay, really.”

“I don’t believe that,” Eddie slowly chanted.

Silence seemed to hang on the air in charged festoons.

At length, Lee whispered, “Can I bunk in with you, d’yer think? D’yer think it would be okay?”

Coming out of the blue, the proposition caught Eddie by surprise. Another pause. “Aye, lad, it’ll be fine. Come on, if that’s what you want.”

The pyjama-clad pair settled in side by side. Eddie whispered, “This is cosy, isn’t it, Lee? Do you kip down with your dad sometimes?”

“Huh, no—my dad doesn’t like me much.”

“Oh, I’m sure he does, laddie. Just doesn’t show it, that’s all. Some people don’t. I bet you love him a lot, don’t you?”

“S’pose so, I dunno,” Lee said, snuggling in closer.

The revelation wasn’t entirely unexpected. This youngster was, in some ways, little different from others at the school. A boy needs a father, and Eddie sympathised. “Well, I’ll tell you,” Eddie said, “he’s a good man, is your daddy, and I’ll bet, real deep down, he loves you a lot because you’re a real bright little feller-me-lad, you are. Here, cuddle up. I’ll tell you a story, ’cos you need cheered up a bit. Do you like stories?” He put an arm around the lad, drawing him close.

Lee giggled. “Sometimes.”

“Right. Let me think. Oh yes, this is a true story—about me. When I was just a little whipper-snapper younger than you are—’bout six I suppose—I stole my grandad’s false teeth. Whadyer think of that?”

“That’s silly, Uncle,” Lee said, still giggling.

“You’re right,” said Eddie. “But I was just a stupid kid at the time.”

“What did you want them for?”

“Well, you know when you lose one of your tiny first teeth and you put it under your pillow and the tooth fairy gives you sixpence. Well, I figured I’d get rich quick if I stuck grandad’s false teeth under my pillow. Thirty-two gnashers there was. That’s eighty pence in new money—think of that.”

“Did you get it, Uncle?”

“No. I thought I was being a real smart little kiddie, and all I got was whacked on the backside and sent to bed early.”

“Anyway, there isn’t things like tooth fairies, I know that.”

“So do I now, but I didn’t then. Another time my mum made strawberry jelly and put it aside to set. We didn’t have ’fridges then. I liked it when it was warm and runny, so I drank half of it and then topped it up again with water. D’yer know what? My mum doesn’t know to this day why that jelly didn’t set!”

“I like you, Uncle Eddie. You know some funny stuff,” the boy said, through a yawn.

They went on talking for quite a while and when Lee dropped off to sleep, it was with an arm across Eddie’s chest. Richard’s presence in the building precluded the housemaster’s hoped for further advances.

When Chantry Beilis appeared, she did so from the next village seven miles south. Despite her jet black Milly-Molly-Mandy hairdo, she looked in her mid-fifties—though in common with fellow spinsters she would not discuss age. She was spindly bordering on rickety and sought to hide it by always wearing very full, floor-length flowered gowns. She rattled and jangled when she moved due to a surfeit of beads, bangles, brooches and rings, and always exuded the heavy odour of some indefinable exotic perfume.

Elizabeth had taken her on for a trial period because she held a certificate in residential child care and had ‘simply oodles of experience, my dear’.

She was a raving eccentric and an avidly practising vegetarian, being up to her bushier than ordinarily feminine eyebrows in *cuisine de lapin*, wheatgerm and blackstrap molasses, comfrey tea and ginseng, royal jelly and seeds, and bran-enriched everything.

“In fact,” Alastair had said over a drink one evening, “she’s got so much bloody fibre in her diet, when she goes to the bog she shits haystacks.”

And she was a mystic, into astrology, palmistry, tarot and tea-leaves.

The girls’ behaviour improved quite markedly after her arrival. She seemed to have mesmerised the lot of them, for they admired her embellishments and clung to her gowns whenever she put in an appearance.

“They’ll be flinging flowers down for her to walk on next,” Eddie commented. “But just wait till the novelty wears off—as it surely will.”

Her influence had not inveigled the boys beyond a handful of the youngest—for which the men were truly thankful. Richard’s personal little circle—Hansa, and all six boys in Danny’s room—drew closer to him as time went on. He called them ‘his gang’ and he was secretly pleased when they took up slagging her pitilessly.

Mark Selby was the most audacious. He didn’t care one jot for authority which he loved to challenge whenever possible. Although he had met his match in Eddie, he still liked to chance his arm. At fourteen he was a bom ringleader, and though neither strength nor command were flaunted, boys gravitated towards him, readily accepting his dominance. The girls were attracted too—for different reasons. Mark had about him an exciting mystique of sexy unavailability. They thought him handsome too, something Richard could not quite understand, any more than he had ever understood women swooning over the likes of Gable, Sharif, Redford, et al, though it had to be admitted, the boy did have a certain rugged charm beneath that shock of unruly wiry black hair. Richard liked him for his lively wit and his gritty character. He was watching him in action. One of the tables had been converted for ping-pong, and Mark and Angie were enthusiastically bashing hell out of a defenceless white sphere of celluloid.

Angie was driven to hitching up his pants with ever increasing frequency, using the heel of the hand not wielding the bat. Angie, (hard 'g') actually Angus Butler, 13, was the one Richard had rarely spoken to, but admired from afar, noting that no matter what this likeable tyke wore, he always looked scruffy—yet had that curiously perfect shape upon which everything hung just right. There were boys like that. Even oversize trousers looked good on him, or football shorts with one leg dipping lower than the other, or socks, one up one down. Boys could be academically brilliant or physically beautiful but if they wore ill-fitting gear—baggybum trousers were a particular abhorrence—Richard was less likely to take notice. Angie was one shining exception.

Stuart Robertson, 15, was fearless and even reckless. He was built like a fortress and had to be reminded that his 'playful punches' to the solar plexus could be damaging. His uncontrolled aggression had landed him at Pinewoods Hall—because he had to be taught to keep his hands to himself. On Richard's one to seven scale, Stu came seventh. Richard preferred his boys less bulky. The lad was in the midst of a darts toumie with Kelvin.

Kelvin Campbell, 13, had the most expressive eyebrows Richard had ever seen. They mirrored Kel's every emotion. He had a wonderfully sculpted 'angelic choirboy' face with large Bambi-eyes, perfect teeth and hall lips that seemed to cry out 'kiss me'. They were almost always naturally slightly parted—which had nothing to do with adenoids. His upper lip was more arch than Cupid's bow and in profile it matched the curve of his nose. His lovely broad smile was at odds—with mouth closed—making his cheeks dimple parenthetically, and his already breaking voice had a delightfully endearing huskiness. He was a quiet boy whose neatly parted hair allowed breakaway strands to stray into his line of sight. He was a skinny kid too, but Richard considered his long, slender body so highly sensual and his many other qualities so awe-inspiring, that he had unwittingly hoisted him on a pedestal and by so doing had made him less approachable. Richard thought him the nicest looking boy in the building too, all of which made it difficult for him to accept that Kelvin was maladjusted or delinquent in any way. The reason for his being there would be in his case file, but Richard had not asked to see any of their files because he wanted the freedom to form his own opinions.

And there was Steven McKimmie, 14, the sporty one, the one Richard felt positively nympholeptic about, and the one with whom he was gaining the closest rapport—other than Danny and Hansa. He was supple, agile, alert, fine-featured and fresh-complexioned, with shortish spiky hair that always gleamed like spun gold on his round head—a head that demanded stroking, though whether forwards or backwards remained a puzzle, since his hair sprouted every which way, like a spider plant. His steady blue eyes and the deep lie of his eyebrows suggested disdain and imperiousness. He was, in fact, a perfect specimen of young boyhood whose all-knowing look could be positively unnerving. It was as if he had been imbued with an alien intelligence, as if deep inside he was laughing at the stupidity he saw in the world around him—which wasn't the case. At least, Richard didn't think it was. One could never be sure about Stevie. But it was elevating and a distinct honour to be allowed to touch him—to massage that perfect young body, and he wondered if any other kind of contact would ever be granted him.

He spotted Steve with Danny in a quieter corner, sitting cross-legged on the floor, playing a game which involved tossing a small stone in the air, then picking up a second whilst the first was still airborne, catching it in the same hand, and so on, up to 'five stones'—the name of the game.

Tommy was king on Richard's throne at that moment, being read to from Rupert Bear's annual crop of adventures. Less interested, Hansa leaned over the chair back awaiting his call to the dartboard. The surrounding hullabaloo made reading aloud a bit of a trial, but dark evenings must needs be filled, and this was tournie night—for valuable points. It had always surprised Richard that mere points—intangibles, after all—could provide sufficient inducement for kids to do well, but it was so. They were much sought after, and the youngsters took pride in fighting to be tops each week. Eddie was acting blanket referee.

Richard's gaze wandered. There was one other boy to whom he was secretly very attracted. Scott Srakane, 9, whose dark, rubber-like skin fascinated and excited him—every part of it! Richard had been moved to make comment one time in the showers. The chocolate-covered cutie (the only non-white in the school) had slipped on some soap and landed on his little bum with a yell, badly jarring his whole body. He had helped the boy up, capping his consoling remarks with, "You got real nice dark brown skin there, wee Scotty, d'yer know that?" Scotty's response, "You can have it if you like", had taken him by surprise. Mostly quiet, but with a mischievous streak, Scotty was popular with the other boys, who were unconcerned about his colour. He had been at Pinewoods for four years. Surely he could never have been exposed to prejudice. Richard guessed he must nurse a secret longing to be just like the others. Though Richard had little to do with the boys in room five, he was always aware of the desirable dark boy's presence. He with his not overly negroid nose and his Pepsodent smile; he with his long slender neck emerging from, and in the grip of, the sphincter-like neckband of his bright horizontal-striped tee-shirt; he in his tight camel-coloured cord jeans with the velvety nap which had a way of catching the light in a manner that Richard found unaccountably erotic. These were bewilderments inducing super-concupiscence. God, but you're a wonderful kid, he was thinking. Indisputable R-fodder! There he is, my pre-pubescent black beauty, gleefully snakes-and-laddering with a trio of lollipop-licking cubs looking as if they've got ants in their pants.

Okay, Sigmund, it's your party. Shall I ever survive these tall seas of erogenous incitement?

Acknowledging that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and that the boys might not seem as appealing to others, Richard still found it beyond his comprehension why anyone in his right mind could have even considered washing any one of these bright youngsters out of his hair. To him, their company was so very, very desirable. Certainly some of them were behaviourally tarnished, but all they needed, surely, was inspiration and motivation blended with a little love and understanding. He counted himself fortunate indeed to have found himself in the midst of so many 'cracking wee guys'.

Tommy elbowed him in the ribs. "Uncle, you're s'posed to be reading me 'bout Rupert."

The rapport between Richard and his gang was not without the occasional setback, as had occurred that very morning.

Each Friday after breakfast, Elizabeth called an assembly. It took place in the all-purpose room, everyone being present except the domestic staff. There was a hymn and a prayer; announcements were made; the points award scheme honours presented. The tables were pushed around the perimeter of the room and all the chairs placed side by side in a huge rectangle.

It was customary for certain kids to save their favourite staff member a seat next to them. Hansa, sitting directly across the room, saw Richard entering, patted the vacant chair beside him and shouted "Uncle—uncle."

Just inside the door, Danny was similarly indicating the empty chair he had saved. Since it was more convenient to sit next to Danny, he gave what he thought was an appropriate gesture of thanks to Hansa, and sat down.

Nevertheless, Hansa felt himself badly slighted, as his sudden eruption from his seat clearly showed. He careered wildly and erratically from the room with a howl—colliding with Elizabeth who was almost thrown off her feet. Her severe shout of "Come back here boy," went unheeded by the fast disappearing youngster.

"I'll see what that was all about, matron," Richard informed her, knowing full well what it was about.

In a fit of pique Hansa was lying face down on his bed when Richard entered the dorm. "I ought to thrash you to within an inch of your life, you jealous little sod," he gasped, winded from his gallop up the stairs.

"Do it then," Hansa challenged. "Do it! Do it!" He turned on Richard, more angry than he had ever seen him.

Richard's first impulse had been to whack away at the boy's backside which was conveniently uppermost. Instead he rested a hand on it. Hansa slid towards the wall dislodging the hand, burying his face in the pillow again. Richard grabbed the boy roughly and turned him over. "I know how you feel, little kid, and I know what you think, but I only sat next to Danny because it was easier. I couldn't be in two places at once—and I still love you Hansa, honest I do."

"Not since Danny came," he raged, wildly inflamed, trying to draw away again.

"All the more since Danny came. Sure I like Danny—and Mark and Stevie and Kelvin and Angie and Stu, but you're my special little kid and you ought to know that." He took the lad's chin to force his attention. "Come on now, son, you really don't have any need to go flying off the handle. You're my boy and you always will be, a promise—okay? Let's get back to assembly. You know what matron's like."

"Ah dinnae care."

"Yes you do—and even if you don't, I do. I don't want to see you in trouble with matron." He took the boy in a warm embrace and added *sotto voce*, "Come along now, son, let's go shall we?" He pulled the slightly less combustible boy from the bed, threw a loving headlock on him, and had to drag him from the room, for he made no attempt to walk on his own until they reached the steps.

They stopped. "What happened to your legs, Hansa?"

The boy looked up at him. A smile spread across his face. "Got stuck, I guess," he said. He placed an arm around Richard's middle, and thus was equilibrium restored.

Enmity was beginning to develop against Miss Chantry (she refused to be known as Auntie Chantry), for the other house staff found it hard to accept her posturing. When she discovered they'd had no formal training she constantly flaunted her certificate, and her supposed professionalism.

She was taking the kids' meal, so the men were free to let rip that teatime. Alastair, reading a book and contributing to the conversation at the same time, was saying, "She had the bare-arsed effrontery to crash geography this morning."

"You mean she entered the classroom and interrupted a lesson?" Ramsie wanted to know.

"Aye, to find out how Mimsy was feeling, period pains in the night, or some such female hassle." He glanced up briefly and flicked a page.

"And how was she? Mimsy, I mean."

"Was as right as she'll ever be—touch o' the old borogoves up the jacksie!"

"Borogoves?" Eddie questioned.

"All mimsy were the borogoves and the mome raths outgrabe, Eddie," Richard informed him.

"Why not?" said Eddie, still bewildered.

"She can cut that out right now. I'll have no barging into lessons," Ramsie said, still serious. "If it happens again I'd like to be informed immediately. Getting any interference in your department, Eddie?"

"Best when she's suspicious by her absence."

"Conspicuous," Alastair interjected, reaching for the teapot.

"Yes, that too," said Eddie innocently.

Richard wanted his two penn'orth but wished he hadn't bothered for he knew he sounded like a gossipy old crone. "She makes snide remarks whenever boys sit with me watching television. 'Don't you think the boys are too big to be sitting on your lap?' she says. The bitch."

"I'll tell you this, Richard," Ramsie said, "I don't suppose there can be any other profession where a fellow is more vulnerable, or more likely to have the queer ticket slapped on him than this one. You have to watch your step."

"Are you suggesting the kids should be discouraged?"

"Not at all, old chap. If physical contact is what the kids want, they should have it. Probably never experienced the loving touch of a father or mother. Nothing wrong with surrogacy lending a helping hand."

I'm simply suggesting you keep an eye on our dearly beloved ectomorphic biddy. She's deprived, the poor cow. Envy, jealousy and calumny are all useful tools for the likes of her. But fear not, the seeds of dissension are being sown. I am reliably informed that she may yet seal her own fate. The last thing Elizabeth will tolerate is an undermining of her authority, and that's exactly what Chantry is doing, changing the rules and so forth." He sat back and ran a hand through his hair. "Take heart, men, it can't go on."

"I say we hide her tarot cards then. She might see what's coming!" Alastair concluded.

Eight

It was to have been one of Eddie's quiet evenings watching a 'good film' on television, but the weather was playing a hand. It was blowing a gale outside and the rain flung itself at the windows like so many handfuls of tacks. The transmitter was evidently suffering, for the picture, when there was one, wobbled and broke up.

"Damn and blast," Eddie cursed, with an imploring look at Richard, as if he could fix it. "This is one of the best musicals ever made and look at it."

Then Chantry returned from her meal sparking a little flurry of excitement amongst her followers, angering Eddie even more.

"Right you girls," he said, "sit back down, all of you—and shut up!"

Chantry glared at him as she took the staff armchair next to Richard, who found himself wishing it was Louise. Better the devil you know, he thought. Tommy, sitting in the chair with him, was glared at too.

She looked from the boy to Richard and suddenly said, "I'd fancy you as a Gemini."

"You mean you wouldn't fancy me if I wasn't a Gemini?" Though he jested, he wondered how she could have known.

"Am I right?" she pressed.

"You are."

She was jubilant. "As I thought. Two people rolled into one—the twins, you know. I fancy there's a hidden side to your nature that no one else knows anything about."

"And I fancy that might be true of almost anyone."

"Ah yes, but—"

Uncle Eddie leaned forward and through an artificial smile said, "Miss Chantry, my dear—we are all trying to watch *Hello Frisco Hello*.

"Looks like Goodbye Frisco to me. It's not worth the trouble," she snorted. She embarked on a whispered conversation with girls at her side—the air hanging heavy with her jungle effluvium.

Tommy whispered too. "I don't like her Uncle—she's mingin'."

"Not now, son."

"Well she is—she ponks like dead dandelions."

Speculating on how Tommy could know what dead dandelions smell like, he held him closer as if to crush him into silence. Taking full advantage, the boy shoved his hand inside Richard's shirt and began pinching and pulling his abdominal flesh. "Nice tummy, Uncle," he said.

"Yes okay kid, cool it," Richard breathed. What would this seemingly sexually precocious wee charmer get up to next? he thought—at the same moment becoming aware that someone was staring at him. He could feel it.

His eyes chanced upon Hansa who was sitting in the same chair and adopting the same attitude as had Big Joe that fateful evening. The sight induced a recurrence of the dead image, and Richard cursed his over-retentive brain as a chill raked through him again. The boy was looking at him with fixed longing and when their eyes met he made no move to avert his gaze. There was something about that look that made Richard feel uneasy, but what? Then it hit him, squarely, and with absolute certainty. He suddenly knew how and why Big Joe had died! He also knew he might have been able to prevent it, and determined there and then that as long as he was associated with young boys, not one would ever go the same way. Richard wanted Hansa to join him but Chantry's odious presence prevented it. Instead he winked, and tried to make his returned glances ones of tenderness and understanding.

Some of the other boys, not into Alice Faye, had been permitted to play games—providing they kept quiet. The Scrabble board was full of 'rong spellt werdz', and at another table one kid had succeeded in monopolizing everything possible, yet somehow their game went on. Danny and Mark were huddled over

a chess board. Ever since the younger boy's initiation, the two of them had become great pals, even though Mark was three years older. He had admitted that he'd been the one who had actually plastered Danny's balls with the boot polish, and for some obscure reason the admission had gone partway to cementing their relationship. Richard had the feeling that their whispered discussion had nothing whatever to do with chess, and he wished he was a party to it. The storm continued to pound the building.

Back in his room, in bed, Richard found it hard to sleep again, but it wasn't the storm and it wasn't the heat. Some instinct told him that Hansa would come through his door at any moment. It was almost as if he willed the door to open and the boy to appear—and open it did—and appear he did.

"Hansa?" he whispered, feigning surprise and flicking the bedside lamp on.

So that Chantry would not hear, Hansa closed the door quietly behind him and stepped further into the room. "It's me Uncle, I'm feart," he breathed.

"I don't go for that one, Hansa," Richard replied, kindly. "There's no need to invent excuses for coming to see me, y'know."

Hansa remained where he was, head down, tracing the carpet pattern with a big toe. Both hands were tucked half inside the waistband of his football shorts.

"Don't stand there, son, come over here—come on," Richard whispered. How the hell does the boy always manage to appear so irritatingly captivating? he thought.

A blinding lightning flash flooded the room. There was a resounding crack and the sound of splintering wood. A deafening, deep-throated rumble directly overhead caused a window to vibrate.

Richard leapt out of bed unconcerned about his nakedness. Hansa had seen him that way before. He draped an arm around the boy's shoulder and stood with him at the window. "What on earth was that?" he said, trying to peer into the darkness of the wooded area beyond the playground. "A tree branch must have been struck, I guess—or maybe a whole tree. I can't see anything, can you?"

They continued to stand there, but the diminishing brightness of succeeding flashes revealed nothing. Dismissing the storm and its effects, he sat down on the side of the bed, drawing Hansa towards him. He stood the boy between his legs grasping him by his white nylon-covered hips.

"Now son, tell me what it is you're afraid of."

"Dunno," Hansa murmured, without looking directly at him.

"I can't believe it's the storm. D'yer have a pain somewhere?"

The boy shook his head slowly, lowering it at the same time.

"You haven't wet the bed and nobody's chasing you—right?"

This time his head shake crossed with a nod.

Following a brief silence, Richard placed his hands either side of Hansa's face, attempting eye-to-eye contact which the boy still resisted. "So why did you come?"

Shyly, Hansa stammered, "I dunno—ah jus' did—ah jus'—wanted—to, that's aw."

"Bless you, my little Hansa. I don't think you really know, but I do. I've wanted you to come ever since that first night when Auntie Louise was snoring her head off—remember?" Hansa didn't reply, and Richard took him in a loving embrace. The boy reciprocated by burying his face in Richard's neck and throwing his arms around him. His whole body trembled involuntarily. The lad was trapped in a mesh of emotions he couldn't understand.

Richard gently eased the close-fitting little shorts down over the boy's hips. It was clear Hansa didn't find this surprising—that he wanted it to happen. His wee hard-on sprang out as the elastic slid by—coming smartly to attention—an act that would have struck them as funny if at that moment it had not been so earnestly serious. Richard fingered and then kissed the ring of indentations implanted on the boy's skin by the triple elasticated waistband of his shorts, then drew back the sheet and lowered him into the bed, slithering in beside him. The boy lay on his back and Richard propped himself on one elbow, leaned half over him, and for one warm contemplative moment absorbed the youngster's gaze of melting affection.

Hansa reached up, linked hands behind Richard's head, and slowly drew him down. Richard's senses swam as he searched the boy's eyes, at first seen clearly then lost to focus, as their lips joined, filling him with winged elation.

There was a uniquely sensual enchantment in little Hansa's kiss, for his were lips with a kind of prehensile quality—seeming to have independent life and grip, and a spare moistness that promoted breathtaking adhesion.

Richard would have been happy just to stick there, to remain captive. Ripples of pleasure and desire raked through him. Here, at last, and stunningly real, he had one vibrant small body within his grasp—spawning sensations based on the simplest of premise; the clean soapy smell and smoothness of his showered skin; the sleek, spiky softness of his hair—hair that seemed to hold the fragrance and freshness of all outdoors; the incredible silverfrost beauty with which young boys are imbued. With a heightened touch sense, Richard's fingers ranged gently and fondly around the boy's solid shoulders, his firm pectorals, his strong rib-cage and his taut, flat little abdomen.

Cracklingly alert, the boy snuggled in closer, conveying feelings of bewilderment, excitement and expectancy. His whole frame had not ceased to shake. It did so still, sometimes convulsively—and Richard guessed that Hansa still had no clue as to the cause of his confusion. Though Richard wasn't disposed to enter into it lightly, he knew the time was right, the time was now. Little worries began to creep into his brain, but he forced them aside, aware that only by so doing could he go through with this—for the first time in his life.

Threading his left arm between the pillow and the boy's neck, he took the small erect penis between the fingers of his right hand and started gently stroking. He was scared. His throat was dry. Was this right or wrong? Right, it seemed, for the boy was readily succumbing to his touch, finning his cheek beneath the man's left armpit.

Richard whispered, "Do you know what I am doing, little son?"

He felt Hansa shake his head.

"You mean no one, not even yourself, ever did anything like this before?"

Another shake of the head.

Richard went on to explain what it was called, what would happen, and why.

There was no sound. Even the elements had stilled. It was as if worlds and universes had slowed in humbled homage. They had created their very own private corner of the cosmos in which radiance and rapture, and serenity, and a sublime secureness engulfed them, and bonded them, and sanctioned and sanctified their oneness. It was as if those tender, dream-like moments were fused in time—granted their own perpetuity.

Hansa's body suddenly stiffened and at last the small muscular spasms in his groin signalled the emission of—nothing—yet the boy was experiencing his first orgasmic sensations, his whole body and mind seeming to shatter into millions of glittering, incandescent particles of ecstasy—soaring, thrillingly airborne for a while in rarefied sky space—then converging again as in a movie explosion reversed.

A pause.

And as the cosmic moment passed, the boy let go the breath he had held for an age and relaxed deeply into the bed, transfixed but happy, fulfilled, at peace.

Richard felt good, had held his own erection from the beginning, but no other action was necessary—he had no pressing desire to satisfy himself further. It was enough for now that he could shower this tough little lad with his attention and affection—enough that the boy considered him a worthy associate—enough that he was able to hold on to him and draw from him a kind of love he had never known before.

Richard ventured to speak at length, in whispers so hushed, his words would have been incomprehensible even beyond the bed where they lay. "You sure felt that, didn't you, little Hansa?" he

said, propping himself on an elbow again and looking at the boy searchingly. “Real good, yes? I bet you feel a whole lot more relaxed now.”

Hansa had not uttered a sound throughout. He didn’t now—he just reached up and drew Richard’s head close to his own again.

“You’re a very special boy, Hansa,” Richard said. “I wonder if you can understand—I can hardly understand it myself—that of all the human beings I ever met in my life, there has never been anyone as loving as you are. Does it sound weird—does it sound like lies? It isn’t, little son. I bet you think that grown-up people can exist in total isolation if necessary—and that they can survive quite happily whether someone loves them or not. They can’t—I can’t. I know it sounds nutty, but you see, I need this love you have for me just as much as I know you need mine. And you have it, Hansa, my lad, you surely have it.”

He resumed his tender explorations, this time nuzzling into the little boy’s hair, face, throat and shoulders with his nose. And then he took his handsome face in both hands, and with his thumbs gently traced along the line of his eyebrows, the recesses of his eyes, his lips, and the sides of his nose—punctuating his words with silent little kisses—reflecting upon the boy’s name. “Hansa Luft, Hansa Luft. It’s music to my ears, Hansa Luft. I thought it real nutty when I first heard it, but now I can’t ever hear it—or see you around without feeling a surge of pleasure. I figure maybe your big old pal has finally flipped. What say you?”

Hansa still said nothing. He didn’t really have to. His actions said everything. He settled himself on top of Richard, rested a hand on his shoulder and buried his face in the pillow, emitting a pleasurable little sigh. Richard wrapped his arms around his young friend and lapsed into thought.

Suddenly he was floundering in a sea of conflict. The repose he imagined he deserved was being eaten into by the worry societal conditioning had imposed upon him. Why did it have to be that way? What he had done was harmless, even therapeutic—and yet if anyone should find out, he would be branded child molester, sex fiend.

Harrogate flashed fleet across his mental screen. Harrogate, in Yorkshire, where he’d sustained a powerful mental knock of such magnitude, the scars remained.

Though he knew instinctively, and beyond all doubt, that Hansa would never utter one word, bad vibes still plagued him. What he had done was against the law, and even if the boy himself were to openly and adamantly insist that what had happened to him had been his wish, his free and personal choice, such declaration would alter nothing. In its awful, awesome narrow-mindedness, society would still regard man-boy relationships as strictly taboo. He was an adult, they would say. He had seduced the boy. He should know better. Lock the pervert up where he can do no further harm. Whatever the boy had to say about it they would choose not to hear.

Richard suspected that such relationships proliferated. They had to. Surely he could not have cornered the market. It appeared, however, that because they were so explosively emotive, no one ever dared speak of them, or admit to having experienced them. He further suspected that even researchers whose job it purportedly was to delve into the arguably more obscure recesses of human behaviour, were also denied enlightenment. As far as he knew, the truth never saw the light of day.

How could something so beautiful be deemed so treacherous? If a child gave himself to you, he could not be denied—he simply could not. Or could he? Was it possible he had paved the way for a life of homosexuality for the lad? No! Absolutely not. Homosexuals were bom that way, they weren’t made. You wouldn’t get a hetero male in bed with another in a month of Sundays!

The human spirit must be set free. Society must allow us to embrace and enjoy fierce loyalties and tendernesses and sensations that come from loving whom we will and not whom we must. Or else it must allow that some small remnant of animal instinct still remains—and that if human intuition in harness with animal instinct govern an act be right, let no man say one nay.

Damn it, I refuse to allow this aggravating conjecture to drag me down. This is a golden moment. It may never be repeated. I must exact all I can from it.

He banished all threatening unpleasantnesses, allowing his roving hands free reign once more. They had lain face to face for some considerable time, were sticky with sweat where their bodies joined. But Richard was reluctant to roll the youngster aside, such was their contentment. A little later, both man and boy fell into a relaxed and blessed sleep.

Curiously, on Saturday morning, both Mark Selby and Danny Newmains decided to have a headache 'which hurt every time they got out of bed'. Elizabeth transferred them to the sick room and called the doctor who could find nothing amiss and recommended simply a day of rest. If it was an act it was a good one, but though neither Eddie nor most everyone else suspected an ulterior motive, Richard could not banish the feeling that the chess board confab had some significance. It was more than coincidence that this should occur on the day the whole school went out, and he felt he should guard against the possibility they might abscond.

Absconding was the last thing on their minds that day, and as soon as the coast was clear they sprang from their beds with whoops of joy. They would have the entire school to themselves for the whole afternoon—though they needed no more than the room they were in. There would be someone in the kitchen but that was too far from the sick-room to concern them—and the domestic staff never encroached unless needed.

Mark was first across the room, knocking Danny back on his bed before he could fully rise. And in an affected manner said, "And how's the head feel now, my little man?"

"Feels like it's dropping off," Danny said. "Might need sew'd back on. Mebbe you could fix it, 'cos you're Dr Frankenstein—big an' ugly anyway."

"And you're a cheeky wee bastard, d'yer know that?"

"Yeh—like what you are." Giggling, he allowed Mark to straddle his chest and rain playful punches on his chin. "An' you're a wallop in' great bampot an' stuff like that—see!" When he could take no more, he exerted a mighty heave and dislodged the older boy who toppled to the floor, taking Danny with him.

"Nobody calls me a bampot and lives to tell about it," Mark yelled, dragging Danny into a wrestling bout. Grappling fiercely, they slid all over the polished sick-room floor, involving blankets and bedside mats in the skirmish.

The wiry little Danny moved with greater agility and, as others had learned, took some containing. But Mark's weight was enough to enable him to slap on the double dynamite of simultaneous body-scissors and headlock, forcing half-strangled yelps from the little lad.

"Submit?" Mark yelled.

In dual constriction Danny could hardly draw a breath but speedily managed a triple "yes", sounding like a squashed balloon.

Mark relaxed the pressure but continued to hold Danny between his legs, and thus they stayed for a while, cooling off. At length Mark found the courage to start the ball rolling the way he wanted. "You're a great little guy, Danny—y'know?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm terrific!" Danny laughed.

There was a silence. Mark hadn't expected it would be easy. "No, I mean it. I guess I'm kinda stuck on yer, yer wee fucker. An' I'm sorry I helped the other guys put you through that—well—you know. Must 'ave put the shits up yer like crazy."

"So it did, but it weren't the end o' the world—well, nearly. But's okay, Markie boy. I forgive yer. Thousands wouldn't." Danny liked the fuss the older boy made of him, and grinning shyly, he turned to look directly at him. "Anyhow, I wouldnae let jus' any ole buddy black my baws, y'know. 'Ceptin' fer you.' Mark's legs were still wrapped around Danny's middle. He tightened his grip, tousled the boy's cropped hair, and said, "I knew you was one o' the boys when I saw your ten-hole docs an' all yer other flash gear. Didn't know I see yer gettin' out that old banger you come here in, did yer?"

"That was a Daimler."

"Yeh—a Daimler banger."

There was another longish silence, broken by Mark anxious to press his case. Out of the blue, he asked, “D’yer ever toss yersel’ aff?”

“S’pose so.”

“How d’yer mean? Do yer or don’t yer?”

“Just never talked about it, that’s aw,” Danny replied warily. He was a little abashed and not entirely sure he knew what Mark meant.

“Yer never talked about it an’ I bet yer never done it neither.”

“You’re a liar,” Danny flared, not wanting to appear the fool.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

Another awkward pause.

Mark: “When you do it, do yer come?”

“What’s that?”

“Oh Jesus Christ!” In exasperation Mark untangled his legs and dragged himself free. Rising to his feet, he said, “You don’t know what the fuck I’m on about, do yer?”

“Ah dae!” Danny was hotly emphatic.

Mark wandered over to the window, trying to see through the frosted glass. This was becoming more protracted than he had intended and he felt positively dry-throated. “D’yer ever let anybody else do it to yer?”

“Nu.”

“Would you let me?”

“What for?”

“Because I’d like to.” He turned towards Danny again. “And you’d like me to an’ aw—so stop acting the dumb bastard.”

“Was that what you was meaning when you said we could have some fun if we got the place to us selves?”

“Aye. It’s just ’cos I like yer Danny.” Imploringly.

“I like you an’ aw, Markie, but it ain’t right, is it?”

“What ain’t right?”

“For two guys to—like each other—to—play with each other.”

“Course it is, Danny. It’s okay so long as you don’t get caught, an’ anyway, it’s not queer at our age. It’s only if yer keep goin’ when yer grewed up. I read it in a book.”

“I’m too scared,” Danny mumbled timidly, hauling himself to his feet, using them to straighten mats.

“How?” Mark wanted to know. “There’s fuck all to be scared of, and besides, you and me is mates. I wouldn’t hurt you, Danny, I wouldn’t hurt you now, you know that. Please—let me—go on, whip yer trousers aff.”

“You an’ aw?”

“Sure.”

They both shed their pyjamas and stood six feet apart in silent awe of each other’s nudity—the shift from the shower room investing their nakedness with new significance.

Playfully prodding the neat abdominal corrugations all around the youngster’s navel, Mark said, “You’re a tough wee son-of-a-seacow, ain’t yer, Dan? Where d’yer get all them musklies?”

“Ouch! Hey, quit that. It hurts, Markie,” squealed Danny, jumping back. “I tell’t yer once. Karate’s what’s done it. Some right bastard for a Sensei we had. He was a hard man an’ a right nutter. All the kids was scared of him an’ kinda shagged feelin’ after trainin’ nights. But, see, I stuck it, ’cos I didnae want no other kids to be tougher than me, so’s I wouldnae get fucked about—right?”

“Is karate what’s made yer prick big an’ all?”

“That’s stupid, Mark. I dunno, do I? Didnae ken it was, till I come here an’ see all you guys.”

“Yer mean you never saw nub’dy else’s till yer come here?”

“Nu.”

“Well, it’s the greatest, an’ I wish I had one like an elephant’s like what yours is.”

“Sherrup, Markie,” said Danny, with a tinge of bashfulness. “There’s sod all wrong with yours, ’cept you got some kinda hairs an’ I huvnae. Well, I got some. They’re jus’ start’n.”

“Okay, lemme see. C’mon, lemme count ’em.” Mark started tickling again, mirthfully forcing his squirming young pal to the floor, trying to keep his knees clear as he pretended to tally up the hair growth. “Oh wow, brutal! You got three.”

“You’re a liar,” shrilled Danny, thrashing around wildly. “I got four—an’ geroff, will yer—yer big hairy ape loony.” He was in fits of laughter.

Sobering again, Mark hauled the younger boy to his feet. “What’s brill about yours is it keeps nearly as long when it’s floppy same as when it’s on the bonk. My one shrinks up.”

“It’s not shrunk up now, Markie.”

“I know. It’s tryna tell me sump’n.” He suddenly grabbed Danny in a fierce embrace so that they were standing cocks touching. The young lad’s penis responded with a questing twitch. “Dan, I jus’ gotta do this, ’cos you’re a fantastic wee guy,” Mark went on, sounding a little aggressive. A hand slid downwards, contacted and wrapped itself around Danny’s now rapidly stiffening cock. He held it parallel to his own for a moment—both of them in one hand—and began stroking, but immediately abandoned the idea. Not good. Disparate heights. No lubrication. Next, Mark eased his young companion towards a bed and settled him on the edge of it, releasing his own weapon, but holding Danny’s even more securely captive. Seated side by side, Mark’s spare hand found its way around the little boy’s lean mid-section, his fingers enjoying the satin feel of his skin.

That firm grip on his prick felt great, but Danny still had doubts. “What yer gonna do to it, Markie?” he asked, a shade tremulously.

“Jus’ gonna rub yer up an’ doon. It doesnae hurt, Danny, promise,” he breathed, starting in as stated.

Danny flinched a little when a stray finger brushed against one of his bollocks, for they were sensitive. “Oh wow, Markie, that’s some kinda terrific feelin’. Does sump’n else happen?”

“You kiddin’?”

“Well, I dinnae ken, do I?” he said, sore. “You’re s’posed to be the big boss man aroon’ here.”

“Sorry, Danny, I forgot Sure sump’n else happens. Sump’n good. You’ll see. You do the same to me if yer want We can see who comes first.”

Manipulating his big pal’s cock with his left hand was a bit awkward, but he did his best, finding himself more fond of Mark by the minute. He liked him because he was bigger and it was good snuggling in. He liked his jokey face and the hairs on his legs. He even liked being bulbed by him because he knew Mark never meant it and they’d keep being pals even if one of them should hurt the other. That was what being pals was.

Danny liked it a lot whenever boys older than himself played with him, or friendly-wrestled him, but this was something new and wonderful, the more so for being completely unexpected.

The sublime afternoon was about to be interrupted. Richard had executed a quick turnabout to be sure the boys had not run off. They had not even heard his approach, and when the door burst open suddenly, they were fleetingly caught in the act. It was difficult to decide which of them was the more embarrassed.

“Jesus wept!” exclaimed Mark, slapping his hands over his hard-on.

“Uncle Richard!” gasped Danny. He scrambled into the bed.

Remaining in the doorway, Richard recovered quickly. “Hi boys. I had to come back for something, so I thought I’d look in and see how you are. I see you’re managing to keep yourselves—um—entertained.”

“You gonna tell Matron?” Mark asked, colouring up.

Richard coughed and sniffed. "I don't see why not. Let's see, how should I tell it? I suppose I could say the doctor failed to diagnose the real cause of your problems which looks to me like wanker's cramp! He was right when he prescribed rest." He smiled, and the boys glanced at each other perplexed.

"You mean you won't tell?"

"Nothing to tell, and anyway, boys will be boys. See you later at tea. Enjoy yourselves."

A longish period of quiet followed Richard's departure, a silence broken at last by Mark who breathed, "Christ al-bloody-mighty. What d'yer make of that?"

"How d'yer mean?"

"Getting found out by a staff and not being reported."

"Uncle Richard won't tell if he says he won't. He's a great old guy, is Uncle Richard. He's my best friend 'ceptin' for you, Markie, so jus' dinnae worry about it," said Danny, jumping into Mark's bed.

His uneasiness allayed, Mark grabbed Danny in a close bear-hug again, rejoicing in the sweet smell and cuddliness of his smaller body. "Yer wanna keep goin', Danny?"

"Yeah!" said the younger boy, enthusiastically. "But my chopper's gone all squidgy now."

"I'll soon fix that. Let's get out of bed again."

They took up their former positions, working towards climax with increased ardour. Soon, Danny was conscious of a tickly pulsing which seemed to spring from some place deep inside, growing, at first completely enveloping him, then, centring in his groin, it gathered itself all together and exploded in a sequence of mind-blowing spasmodic thrusts. In a starburst of scintillating euphoria, he was experiencing his first ejaculation. His body went rigid and he suddenly felt thrillingly light-headed. The impact on him was tremendous. He let go of Marie's cock when his own emitted what Mark later told him he called a 'pearler'—a small bubble of semen—his very first secretion.

"Wo-ho, Markie, that feels fuckin' great. I never got that before—well—mebbe a coupla times when I was sleepin', jus' a wee bit, not like that. It didnae hurt, but it was a terrific feelin'. You never told me I'd get that funny terrific feelin'. Wow!"

"How the fuck could I? Told yer it'd be good, but I cannae describe it, can I? You'll get it again if you mb it up some more right now."

"You do it, Markie. I like the way you grab it, like it's in some kinda trap."

Mark obliged, satisfying his young pal with a very fractionally diminished, but equally breathtaking repeat. "Anyway, you come first, so you won."

"Not my fault. I couldnae get yours right, but I'll do it now—if you want me to."

"Course I do, yer little beauty." He took Danny's hand and moulded it around his penis the way he liked it—with thumb and first finger tightly engaging his frenulum—and the process started all over again.

At tea that evening, the Chantry influence was evident in the dining room. The children's diet was all wrong, she had kept insisting, and though the kitchen staff resented her meddling with the menu, they had grudgingly come up with a cheese salad—which almost all of the kids hated. They still thought it was pukey even when smothered in salad cream. She was supervising the meal and finding it difficult to keep the peace.

The men were enjoying their own meals in the staff room when the war broke. Eddie glanced resignedly at Richard and began to rise from the table. Richard waved him down again, saying he'd go. He knew that Eddie's appearance in the dining room would be enough to restore order. He wanted to find out if his could do the same.

Entering the room, he found chairs knocked over, tables askew, cutlery scattered—and an excitable cheering throng surrounding something unseen. Miss Chantry was vainly trying to shove youngsters back to their seats, shouting, "Sit down at once, all of you." Failing to make herself heard above the din.

Richard bellowed, “Stand!” And to his surprise and satisfaction, they all turned statue (as programmed), and silence fell upon the room. Quietly, he added, “Back to your seats, kids. Now, please.” The little crowd obediently dispersed. The cause of the disturbance was Hansa, kneeling astride a flat out Brian, whose face and hair were plastered with salad cream. “Outside, you two boys, move!” he ordered, appending, “Cany on, Miss Chantry, thank you.”

She glowered at him with unconcealed dislike. “I could have managed without your interference, Uncle,” she humphed.

“Of course you could, my dear.” He was already beyond the door.

He shoved the boys into an empty classroom and asked, “Who started it?”

Angrily, they each blamed the other.

“It would have to be you two again, wouldn’t it? Okay, what was it about this time?”

They both shouted together. Richard shut them up and told Brian to speak first.

“He said the grub was puke, an’ I said it wusnae. Miss Chantry, she knows what’s good.”

“He’s a liar,” Hansa yelled. “I never said it was puke, jus’ said I didnae like it, an’ he can have mine if he likes it so good. An’ I shoved my plate over an’ it smashed into his, an’ I didn’t mean to make it smash, an’ he kicks me under the table—”

“I didnae!”

“Liar! He’s Miss Chantry’s pet, he is. She gives me a row and lets him off, so I got that yellin’ stuff and stuck it over him, an’ he started a fight.”

“You know what I should do with you two now, don’t you?” Richard said.

“Yeah,” Brian snarled. “Boxing. I dinnae care. I’ll batter his head in.”

“You wish,” Hansa responded, about to lay into the unpleasant lad again.

“But there’ll be no more battering today,” Richard went on, holding them apart. “And since you cannot be trusted in each other’s company, Hansa will take an early bed tonight, and Brian tomorrow.” This provoked cries of indignation which he silenced with an Eddie-type glare. He ordered Brian to get cleaned up, and Hansa to stand outside the dining room door until tea was finished. Rancorously, they obeyed, and Richard returned to his own meal feeling badly for having been forced to chastise his own boy.

Kelvin Campbell was incredulous, his high-arched eyebrows registering astonishment in harness with concern. “You cannae do that to him, Mark. He’ll do his nut. He’ll crack his tiny crunch. An’ anyway, it’ll be too embarrassin’.”

“For him mebbe, not for us. It’ll be a giggle for us,” Mark Selby replied confidently, stepping into his pyjama trousers.

“Seriously, Mark, we can’t do that to the poor sod. It ain’t fair.”

“Want we should do it to you then, kid?”

“Hell, no! Promise yer willnae—please, Mark.”

“Okay, but quit beefin’ an’—hey, fill me in, Kel—you gonna stuff all them Maltesers on yer tod, yer gutsy pig?” He made to snatch the box from his room-mate, but accidentally knocked it out of his grasp, upsetting its contents which rolled all over the dormitory floor, many of them disappearing beneath the divans.

Ignoring his pal’s look of dismay, Mark dropped to all fours and started to recover them, audaciously stuffing every second chocolate into his mouth. “I’m famished. That stinkin’ rabbit stuff’s garbage.” He tossed a sweet at Kelvin. “Here, I reckon I can spare jus’ one,” he said, impudently. “Catch!”

Blind fury made Kelvin miss. He grunted something unintelligible, leapt on to Marie’s bare back and locked both arms around his neck in a wicked stranglehold. “You rotten rat-face. I’m gonna kick yer stinkin’ guts in for that.”

“That’s not my guts, it’s my neck, yer doonk,” Mark croaked, endeavouring to ease the pressure on his larynx. “And you’re throttlin’ me, fer cri’sake.”

“You never give me any o’ yours when you got sweeties.”

“That’s ’cos yer never ask.” In one greased lightning blur, Mark suddenly erupted, flung Kelvin on his back, sat astride his chest, and forced his arms above his head at the same time. Now close-up face to face, he delivered a vicious head-butt, bringing his own forehead into contact with Kelvin’s with a sharp crack. Precipitating an ‘ouch’ from the flat-out boy. “Now, what was that you called me, yer wee bastard?”

“I ain’t so wee, an’ I’m no’ a bastard,” Kelvin grumbled. There was a short pause, then Kelvin smiled. “I jus’ said you look like the creature from the black—no, I mean I said you was the good-lookin’est guy in the whole school, an’ I cannae figure how the lassies could keep their mitts off, that’s aw,” Kelvin whispered, his instant flare-up quelled.

“Didnae sound like that to me.”

“That’s ’cos you ain’t got yer ears on straight.”

“You ain’t gonna have your head on straight when I’ve fixed it for yer.”

Nothing happened for a moment. They continued to regard each other closely, the one looking the other directly in the eyes. Mark’s expression not seriously aggressive. In contrast, and like a faulty electrical connection, transitory smiles flitted across Kelvin’s handsome features. At length, “So what yer gonna do to me?” the younger boy asked, breathily.

“Nuthin’.”

“So why don’t yer let me go?”

“’Cos I’m shit-scared you’re gonna kick my guts in, har har.” “I wouldnae do that, Mark,” he quietly responded.

“As if you could. Anyway, why are you looking at me all funny?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you was. One minute you was flashin’ me smiles an’ next you looked like you was gonna greet. You got sump’n on yer mind, have yer?”

“Course I haven’t.”

“Don’t lie, Kel,” Mark said, a shade sympathetically. “You can’t kid me.”

“I’m jus’ a bit worried, that’s aw.”

“What about?”

“I cannae tell yer, Mark, honest. Please let me go.”

“Okay, Kel. Have it your own way.”

Young Danny breezed into the room fresh from his shower, dripping wet and stark naked, except for the towel with which he was rubbing his hair. “Hey, what gives? I hope you ain’t—”

He was stopped in his tracks by a strident command coming from the far end of the corridor outside the dormitories: “Daniel Newmains, get your body out here, right now!”

“Yeah, I know,” he murmured, half to himself. “How many times have I told you...?” He winked and withdrew, and covering his loins with the towel, he padded towards the severe-looking housemaster who, unbeknown to him, had been supervising operations from his chair at the head of the corridor.

“Hi, Uncle Eddie, I didnae see you there,” he muttered, grinning sheepishly.

“I know you didn’t, laddie. That was the idea.” Eddie rose, all six feet two of him, and glowered down upon the not too greatly disturbed boy. “How many times have I told you not to leave the bathroom until you’re properly dried?”

“Dunno, Uncle.”

“Let me remind you. Ninety-nine all told. If you make the round hundred I’ll have to think very seriously about taking steps.”

"Yessir," Danny mumbled.

"And another thing, lad. Cover yourself properly before you come parading out here."

"What for, Uncle? We're all boys, so it doesnae matter 'cos we're all the same."

"If the Great Uncle of Pinewoods Hall says it matters, it matters. I'll have no bollocky-starker antics in my corridor. Have I made myself clear, laddie?"

"Yeh, sure. Very clear, Uncle." He looked up at the heavily-bearded man with smiling eyes.

"Am I right in detecting a note of impudence, young feller-me-lad?"

"I think so, Uncle."

"Then get invisible before I start to employ my slipper."

The boy scuttled away.

Back in the room, Danny was in time to witness Mark hauling Kelvin to his feet again. "Hope you wusnae bashin' my pal, Kelv," he said.

"You gone bonkers, or what? Didn't you see who was at the bottom o' the pile? He was bashing me."

"Oh well, that's okay then." He crushed a chocolate underfoot. "Hey, there's Maltesers all over the deck!"

"Do tell," Kelvin said, drily.

"My fault, Danny. I knocked 'em out his hand," Mark said, resuming retrieval. "I'm sorry, Kel. I'll make it up to yer out me next pocket money, right?"

"You better," Kelvin replied good-naturedly. Then, "What's with Uncle Eddie, Dan?"

"I flashed in front of him. He threw a flakey, that's aw."

"So would anybody," Mark put in. "If it gets any longer, we could practice knots!"

"Yeh, funny. That'll be a laff day."

"Is Stu still in the shower?"

"Aye. Him an' Steve an' Angie."

"Quick then, before he gets back. Tonight's the night. We're gonna get Stu after lights out, okay?"

"Yer mean you're really gonna put that thing on him? Geez, Mark, we'll all be dead meat. We cannae hold him down. He's a battleship."

"If all five of us cannae sort him, we ain't the men we figured we was. I filled Steve an' Angie in already. We can do it. Besides, you know how he's always mouthin' off about how he wished he didnae have such a wee tiddler an' how he wished it was as big as yours. We'll be doin' him a favour 'cos we'll show him how to make it bigger."

"S'pose it don't come off?"

"Give the nurses in the hopsickle a wee thrill, right?"

"Where'd yer get the idea, Markie?"

"Ah cannae mind. Sum'dy tell't me that's what the lassies did to wee apprentice guys what started workin' in the factory, that's all I know. So we all stay awake till he gets to kip, which means he'll be dead stupid when we get him. Won't know what's hit him, right?"

"S'pose Uncle Eddie comes round?"

"Be serious will yer? He never comes round after lights out."

"Uncle Richard sometimes does," Kelvin said. "Where is he anyway? It's not his day off."

"Down the pub with Mr Lowe. Uncle Eddie gave him the night off, so he'll be pissed when he gets back," Mark said. "He wullnae be round tonight."

"Wanna bet?" said Danny, flicking his towel at Mark's backside as he reached under a bed for runaway sweets. "Uncle Richard never gets scunnered. An' even if he does come round, he wouldnae say nuthin'. He likes us."

"Likes you," snorted Mark, handing the chocolate box to Kelvin. "You're his pet. An' you still didnae tell us what happened that time you was in his bed. Bet he raped yer."

“Wrong, big head. I’m not his pet. He likes all of us in here, an’ if you dinnae know that by now, you’re jus’ a big dodo-brain.” Then he added, laughing, “An’ anyway, I raped him!”

“Yeah, from the other side o’ the room,” Mark retorted. “That’s the only way them what’s got barge-poles can do it, ye ken?”

“Right, you asked for it, wanker. Get ’em up,” said Danny, throwing his towel on the bed. And leaving himself totally exposed, he assumed a menacing boxing stance with fists up ready for action. Energetically bobbing and weaving like the livewire he was, (his dangler was thrashing around like a spouting hosepipe let loose), his punches were effectively parried by Mark for a while, but when several of them began to strike home, his chum thought it time to take him in hand—literally. Grabbing his pal by his big prick, he led him like a bull on a rope towards his bed.

“Ow ow owee, that hurts!” Danny squealed, wriggling a little but knowing he’d risk injury if he resisted. “An’ that makes you a cheater ’cos yer didnae fight back proper.”

“Jus’ tryna cool you off, kid. Or else you’ll get Uncle Eddie droppin’ on us like a ton o’ bricks, an’ that’s jus’ what we’re not wantin’ tonight,” Mark said, letting go and chesting him on to his bed. “Into yer pit sharpish—right?”

Kelvin was already in bed when the other three boys entered the dormitory.

“Get a good spray did yer, Willy-nilly?” Marie asked Stuart Robertson.

“Yeah, why?” Stu grunted.

“Just askin’.”

“Well don’t ask, and quit callin’ me Willy-nilly, unless yer wantin’ a doin’. You should know better than to mess with me, man.” He spotted the crushed Malteser on the carpet. “See that,” he added, “I’m gonna rip your head off an’ do that to it.”

“Oh please, Stu, have mercy. I’m too wee to die,” whined Mark, sliding between his own bedcovers.

Eddie appeared in the doorway. “Cut the cackle you lot, or else I’ll have you all standing hands on heads out there for an hour—looking at me!” he growled. “Two minutes to lights out.” He left to sort out the boys in the other four dorms.

Richard walked into the smoky public bar of The Highlander Hotel, and searched through the fog and the knots of fairly raucous locals, spotting Alastair sitting in a quieter corner with the obligatory book. He managed to catch his eye and signalled ‘ready for another?’ A wave and a nod. Alastair drank Tartan Bitter by the gallon—an eighth at a time. Richard himself, having acquired a taste for the finer malts, ordered a double Bruichladdich, no water, and pushed his way through the throng.

“Oh—cheers Richard. What brings you out from under your rock?”

“I didn’t know I’d been under one.”

“This is the first bash at out-of-school socialising you’ve done since you came here.”

“Well yes, I suppose it is. How about you now? Not going home this weekend?”

“Mrs Freeman’s invited me to tea. She’s turfing out old books—thought I might be interested. I usually go home to escape the brats—and here, she’s got four.”

“You really don’t like kids do you?”

“No Richard, I really don’t”

“Then what in heaven’s name are you doing in a school?”

“I told you—the money.”

“But it’s paltry.”

“You’re telling me—but what else do I know?”

“Quite a bit, I would have thought, judging from the amount of literature you soak up.”

“Aye, but knowing and doing are two different things. I’ll admit to being a bit of a lazy old fart, Richard. It suits me only having a class of twelve of the little sods to put up with. Pity the poor fuckers who have to face forty wee snot-noses five days a week.”

Several drinks later, Richard spotted something that made his flesh crawl. Was it his imagination reacting to the whisky and the suffocating circumjacence, or was it true? He had to force himself to look round again. It was muggy in the bar and the man was standing with his back to him, faintly reflected in the tinted mirrors behind the displayed bottles. He gave unconscious utterance to a gasped exclamation.

“Good god!”

“What’s that, Richard?”

Which jerked him back to his senses. “Thought I saw a ghost, Alastair, that’s all.”

“You mean Uncle Eddie walked in?”

They laughed, though Richard without mirth. Another tentative glance. Hellfire! It had to be him. What in god’s name was he doing here? He shifted his position, presenting his back more positively to the bar. The elation he had brought in with him was draining away.

He felt the hand on his shoulder. “I see’d yer in the mirror,” said an oily voice. “I couldn’t believe it, could I? You could ’ave knocked me down wiv a fewer.” The hand was thrust at him.

He took it, stammering, “I—I don’t think I know—”

“Gawd blimey, yer don’t mean to say you ferget yer old pal? An’ ’ere’s me, remembering you so clear, like it was yesterday—which it weren’t. Wondered where you’d hid yerself—Mr Jay Gaynor-Smiff.”

“Oh, of course, you’re—” He pretended to search his brain for a name. “Lenny—”

“Lenny Herbertson. Now you remember, I knew you would,” he rejoined with a sneer.

“So—anything I can do for you?” Richard was flustered in Alastair’s presence.

“Well, me old mate, I fink it would do bofe of us some good to talk abart old times. That’s ’ow I sees it.” He glanced at Alastair, obviously wanting to say more but restraining himself.

“Of course, but not now. You can see I’m—erm—this is Mr Lowe, a friend of mine. And Alastair, this is—”

“Yes, I know. Lenny Herbertson. Charmed,” said Alastair flatly, avoiding shaking hands. He rose from his chair and picked up his book. “I’ve had enough anyhow, Richard. I’ll just vanish if you want to chat.”

“No Alastair, really I—”

“It’s okay, old chap. See you back at the school.”

He shuffled away and Lenny took his seat.

Richard glared at him, and, not knowing what else to do, asked him to have a drink. He needed another himself now. When they were in hand, he leaned across the table, and said, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Lenny took his time replying. He drank, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and slurred, “An’ I took you for a bright boy. How do you get off arskin’ shtoopid questions like that, when yer knows what the answer is already? You know what I’m doin’ ’ere, so don’t come the higgerant bastard.”

“Okay fine. I know why you’re here. Try this for a more sensible question, accepting that you’re the smart one. How in god’s name did you ever find me?”

With slow deliberation calculated to annoy—and succeeding—Lenny drew a much-folded newspaper from a pocket inside the dirty fish-tail paika he was wearing, held it high, and allowed it to flap open at the picture.

Richard looked at himself, stroked his brow despairingly and closed his eyes. He dropped his head, and without looking up, said, “All right then—what is it you want?”

“A decent bed for starters, me old cock. I been sleepin’ rough an’ that ain’t goin’ down well, me bein’ used to better fings. What wouldn’t I give fer a proper bed to kip dam on. Know any good hotels?”

“This one’s okay. How long?”

“Ah well, that depends, don’t it? On how quick we can come to some sort of understanding. If it’s quick I won’t hardly need to unpack, now will I?”

“Right, we can’t talk here, so check in for one night. I’ll come and see you in your room after breakfast. And whatever it is you want had better be reasonable or I shall be forced to make a statement to the police. Understand that, do you?”

“Oh Dicky baby, you don’ ’arf amaze me,” Lenny went on. “When you gonna get it froo your fick skull you ain’t in no position to be freatening me wiv der law. Specially now. Now you’ve added anower one to your little collection.” He tapped the newspaper which was lying on the table. “But I can wait till tomorrer. Er—you wouldn’t be plannin’ on scarperin’ again now, would yer?”

“Don’t be an idiot Where would I go?”

“Yer done one end o’ the country to the ower already mate. You might be finkin’ of skippin’ art altogewer.”

Richard gave the man a couple of tenners and rose to leave.

“Till tomorrer then,” Lenny said. “Sleep well Dicky baby, wiv all them luvierly little boys at the school—won’t yer?”

All was still and quiet in room three. The lads had all dropped off, except Mark, who was half inclined to do the same. His other half, always ready for a bit of a lark, compelled him to rise. He took from his locker an empty salad cream bottle lifted from the dining room, a small jar of Vaseline filched from the sick room, and a length of slender electrical sleeving he’d found—plastic tubing used for insulating bare wire. He gave his ‘partners in crime’ a shake. They hauled themselves out of bed, some of them reluctantly. Then, as one body, they closed on the unsuspecting, sleeping Stuart Robertson.

Their plan for holding Stu down had been worked out beforehand. With one deft swipe, Mark whipped the covering from him, and they all pounced. Mark sat on his chest facing his bollocks, Kelvin on his thighs to keep his knees down, Stevie took his feet, and Danny and Angie one arm each.

Though he squirmed around a little, Stu was helpless, and feeling a little woozy from his rude awakening, he groaned, “What the fuck d’yer think you’re doin’, you load o’ perverts? Lemme go—right?”

“Keep it hush, Stu. You’re gonna enjoy this, an’ it’s for your own good,” Mark whispered, starting to grease the battleship’s tiddler, which was already beginning to stiffen. Stu’s perky little pecker was easily triggered into fast erection by close-quarters contact with his room-mates—even when taken off-guard it seemed. Mark inserted Stu’s penis inside the neck of the bottle—together with the tubing—carefully screwing it around and around until the complete appendage was firmly secured inside. Then he sucked the remaining air out, created a vacuum, and withdrew the sleeving. Stu’s erection was held tight, growing larger even as they watched. Mark played with the big lad’s balls a while to keep the excitement going, and then they released him.

Only then did Stu see what they had done to him. He gave the bottle a hard yank, but strong suction prevented its removal. The act hurt him and he was thrown into instant panic.

“Jesus, Mark, I s’pose you think this is funny. Well, it isnae! It’s painin’ me, an’ I cannae get the fuckin’ thing off,” he lamented, looking more sheepish than the others had ever seen him.

They were all quietly sniggering at their room-mate’s distress.

“You wanted a big dick, didn’t yer?” Mark laughed. “Yer got one!”

“Aw c’mon, guys,” he pleaded, shame-faced. “Whadyer have to do this to me for? Yer gotta do sump’n to get it off. I cannae walk around with this on, an me dick’s got a jaggy feelin’ round the top, an’—aw Christ, it’s goin’ all purple. Please, guys—”

“It’ll come off when it goes down,” Mark said, without conviction.

“How the heck’s it gonna go down with no air in?”

“I dunno. I s’pose we could break the botde.”

“No fear,” said Stu, alarmed. “You’d cut my dick off.”

“Okay, let’s shove this tube back so’s we can blow air in,” Mark said. They were all beginning to feel a little uneasy at sight of Stu’s shaft which had taken on a distinctly unhealthy looking hue. He tried to force the tube in, but the hardness of the penile tissue was pressing against the neck of the bottle so tightly, it wouldn’t go.

“Get back in bed an’ relax,” Mark suggested. “That should make it go down.”

“Relax? You’re jokin’. How the fuck am I s’posed to relax?” He turned angry. “You’re a rotten load o’ sadists, and you’re gonna get busted, all o’ yer, yer rotten cunts.” He began flailing his arms around wildly, and the boys jumped clear—except Stevie who found himself on the receiving end of a stinging back-hander that caused a nose-bleed.

Stu plumped to his bed. His actions had caused the bottle to swing sideways against his body, causing a stab of pain. He gazed down at himself despairingly and said, “Aw, Christ” again. The stricken battleship was turning appropriately grey.

Richard returned at that moment, badly shaken. He trudged up the stairs and was on the point of entering the staff quarters when he heard the commotion. Though a little ‘under the influence’, he stepped into their midst, swaying a little. Focusing, he spotted Stevie’s bloody nose first, but Stu hadn’t been quick enough to hide himself.

“What’s that, for heaven’s sake?” Richard asked.

Stu didn’t reply, just tried to keep himself covered.

Mark spoke first. “We was jus’ havin’ a bit o’ fun, Uncle. We—I—stuck that thing on him, an’ we cannae get it off.”

“All right, into your beds you lot, right now,” Richard ordered, the drama having suspended his intoxication. He sat beside the stricken lad. “Let me see it, Stu. I won’t hurt you. Nothing to worry about.” But clapping eyes on the greatly enlarged, protesting phallus, he was faintly disturbed himself. “Good

lord, lads, you don't wanna get into doing this sort of thing. You could do each other serious injury." He pulled on the bottle gently, but there was no give. After a moment's thought, he said, "Hang on, feller. I'll be back in a minute."

Richard returned with a teaspoon, and carefully pressing its handle between the hard erection and the bottle neck, he gradually eased it further inside. Air seeped in and Richard was enabled to withdraw Stu's appendage bit by steady bit until it was all out. Several tiny ruptured blood vessels imparted a freckled appearance and the blackened penis would likely retain its present size for a while longer, but it seemed otherwise unharmed.

The poor lad was looking disconcertingly sorry for himself and Richard was moved to console him. He told him the blood would soon drain away, and that he shouldn't worry about it. "Please don't feel ashamed and embarrassed because of me, Stu. I won't breathe a word. And if you're unhappy about anything in the morning, you come and see me about it—okay, feller?"

"Yeh—thanks, Uncle," he murmured, sullenly.

Mark sprang from his bed and offered Stu his hand. "Sorry, Stu, I didnae know it would be that bad. Pals?"

Stu shook his hand without real feeling and mumbled, "Sure."

Then Mark confessed. "It was all my fault, Uncle. The other guys didnae want in. You gonna belt me?"

"No, Mark. Just forget it—but please don't do anything like that again." He turned to Stevie. "What happened to your face, Stevie?"

"Accident, Uncle."

"Come through to my room then, son. Let's get you cleaned up. We don't want blood on the sheets, do we?"

Richard followed his underpanted, barefooted golden boy along the corridor, feeling distinctly homy—a feeling honed to a sharp-edged craving by the alcohol he'd imbibed.

Entering the staff quarters in darkness, they were surprised by the sinister-seeming materialisation of a dressing-gowned la belle Beilis floating (feetless?) 'twixt bathroom and bedroom.

Snippily, she said, "The boys are not allowed through here."

"Thank you, Mrs Danvers. I'll make a note," Richard said flatly, gently shoving Stevie onward.

Stevie was told to sit, and keep his head well back. Richard applied a dampened cloth to the boy's face, gently wiping it clean. The seepage had ceased.

"Have I got a keeker, Uncle?"

"What's that?"

"A keeker, a black eye."

"No, Stevie, just a red nose. You'll survive." The incident in the bar had been forgotten, but was coming to the fore again, as was his feeling of intoxication. He needed to be comforted. He'd sent Hansa to an early bed, was disturbed in case he'd fouled their relationship. He couldn't call on him. Would Stevie fulfil his immediate need? Stevie's eyes flashed beneath his deep eyebrows, his look a little unnerving—unrevealing. Richard was lingering a little over the mopping-up, his mind awash with idiotic fantasies. The boy was sitting with his knees invitingly apart displaying a crotch bump that invoked towering salaciousness. He wanted to touch his burnished torso; to stroke his warm, lustrous skin; to bury his nose in the lad's muscle-encircled navel and venture groinwards; to kiss and kiss again the insides of his sturdy thighs; to explore the tendon, ligament and cartilage that powered his down-covered, runner's legs. Did the boy revel inside a body such as his? How wondrous to be the proud possessor of a midriff that stayed flat without being pulled in. How wondrous it must feel to stand before a mirror and marvel at that sheer physical perfection. How Richard wished he'd had the self-awareness at Stevie's age, to mould his own body as he had. Take him! Take him!

He helped the boy to his feet and flung his arms around him, drawing his head alongside his own. “Oh, Stevie—” he breathed.

“Hey, what yer doin’, Uncle?” Stevie said, attempting to free himself.

“You’re a good lad, Stevie. I think you’re wonderful—that’s what I think.”

“You’re drunk, Uncle Richard.”

“No, no, I love you, son.”

“That’s jus’ the booze talkin’. Go to bed, Uncle, will yer? You’ll be okay tomorrer.” He succeeded in pulling loose and left the room.

In shock, Richard flopped into the chair vacated by Stevie. What had he done? All that maudlin behaviour, that despicable fawning lavished on a boy who clearly didn’t want to know. Could he have caused offence? Could he have scared that terrific youngster away for good? Suddenly he felt at once utterly destitute, stupid and angry—an irritating amalgam that made him want to go out and kick over a mountain. Blast!

Sadly, he took his nympholepsy to his lonely, boy-less bed, having no other recourse but to honour a beloved monolith.

His first sight of Hansa next morning was in the playground before school. Their eyes met across the yard, but to his dismay the boy dropped his gaze, stuck his hands in his grey shorts pockets and walked further away. A simple gesture, but for Richard a devastating one. He felt the ground fall from beneath his feet. He was hanging in empty space, in a vortex of fear and anxiety. Had he destroyed Hansa’s love for him too? Worse—would the boy now open his mouth and tell the world of his sin? His vulnerability hit him with a force that dizzied his reason for a second. He couldn’t afford to be at loggerheads with (oh no, let it not be true) with Hansa of all people. It was a cold morning made bleak by the lad’s evident rejection of him. Shedding his disquiet, he walked purposefully towards the boy who had cornered himself by the wall, seemed to be studying his fingernails, looked undeniably impenetrable.

“Hi, Hansa. You okay, are you?” he said, disgusted by the note of artificiality in his own voice.

“You gave me a row, an’ it wusnae my fault,” grumbled the lad, not looking up.

“That’s true, son, but—” He was lost for words. “Look, Hansa, I know it’s hard, but try to see it from my point of view. If you think about it carefully, I’m sure you’ll understand I really had no choice. You were both fighting and I couldn’t—erm—oh, god—in all honesty, little kid, I couldn’t punish Brian alone. What would Miss Chantry have said?”

“I dinnae care ’bout that skinny cow, an’ anyway, it was him what started it.”

“I know, I believe you, but—”

“An’ I dinnae care no more, ’cos you don’t like me, an’ I don’t—”

“Stop, son. Please don’t say any more. Of course I like you, I always will. How many times do I have to say it? Nothing, nothing at all, will ever—”

He was interrupted by the sound of a window being raised behind him, followed by Elizabeth calling, “Uncle Richard, it’s gone nine o’clock.”

“Very good, Matron, thank you,” he replied, and in an undertone, “We’ll talk later, son. Please believe what I said to you, please,” then, “Stand!”

Pleading—with a small boy? Ludicrous. But hell, there are too many negatives, piling one on another, he thought. Am I all through? Is my new world disintegrating—falling about my ears? Damn!

Smelling like she’d just fought a Flit-gun, Chantry waylaid Richard as he was setting out to keep his dreaded rendezvous with Lenny.

“You were inebriated last evening, Richard,” she said.

“Guilty,” said Richard, intending to walk on.

She caught his arm. “I thought so. You called me Mrs Danvers. Who, might I ask, is she?”

“Read Daphne Du Maurier.”

“What sort of answer is that?”

“It’s a long story and I’m in a hurry, so if you’ll excuse me—”

She hadn’t finished yet. “Why was that half-naked boy in your room last night?”

“That half-naked boy had a nose-bleed. I was attending to it,” he said, irritated.

“That’s why we have a sick-room, Richard.”

“Y’know, Miss Beilis, you really are a mine of information. I should never have lashed out on that full set of Britannica.”

“There’s no call for facetiousness, young man.” (Young man—wow!) “I want you to know I take strong exception to hordes of boys—” (Hordes of boys—wow again!) “—invading our premises, and I shall report it. In any event, they should be made to wear their pyjamas.”

“Madam—you do what you think best.” He stalked away.

Lenny got straight down to business. “Yeah—ta muchly Dicky baby—I had me a very good night,” he said. “An’ I’m sure you did—know what I mean? What defenceless little fucker did you buggerize last night then?”

“Stop that right now, Herbertson,” Richard snapped. He felt himself reddening, hoped like hell it didn’t show—or that if it did it would be interpreted as anger.

Lenny executed a feeble mocking salute. “Sorry sir. Free bags full sir. I’ll be a good boy sir.”

“Right, now, what is it you want?”

“Ave a pew.”

“I’ll stand.”

“Suit yerself. Simple question that. Wants a simple answer—right? Got any fags mate? I’m fresh out. Felt lousy this momin’—wuz me head—you know, after all that free booze by kind permission of you know ’oo.” He patted his person, produced a bookmatch and lit the proffered cigarette.

“Okay—now that simple answer.”

“Two farsand smackeronies to leave Scotland. That’s dirt cheap. I usually charge more to leave countries. Got that off the telly.” He took a lungful and blew the smoke in Richard’s direction.

Richard lit up himself trying to evince outward calm. “By Christ, you must be a bloody half-wit. Where the hell do you think I’m going to get two thousand, just like that?”

Lenny ignored him. He walked to his bedside cabinet, produced a half-consumed bottle of black rum and plonked it on the table. Richard watched him with mounting exasperation as he lurched into the bathroom, came back with a tumbler, gave it to Richard. “Have a drink. Only got one glass. Won’t stand on ceremony. I’ll have mine straight from the bottle.”

Richard noticed a smear of toothpaste on the rim and pushed it aside. “I don’t. Not this early anyway, and as I said, two thousand is not on.”

Lenny took a swig, winced and groaned something about ‘the hair of the dog’, shuddered, then changed tack. “That’s a real tidy pile o’ bricks up there on the ’ill. The school y’know. I like old buildings. Wouldn’t fink that abart me, would yer? I like it ’ere. I been givin’ the village the old eyeball. It got me finkin’. I sez to meself, why not ’ang abart a bit, Lenny, I sez. But like, if I done that I’d ’ave to ’ave me a job, see? Fought I might see if there’s any jobs goin’ at the school—janitor or sunnink.”

“There isn’t.” Richard was alarmed. “I want you away from here—well away—for good and all time.”

“Like I sez, I ain’t got no readies. ’Ow can I go away wiv no readies?”

“Presumably the same way you got here.”

Ignoring him, Lenny went on, “Free farsand don’t seem like it’s arskin’ too much, not when it’s a matter of life an’ deaf—for bofe of us—right?”

“Three thousand now? You really have got the most amazing bloody nerve. You know damn fine I had nothing to do with that nasty business in Harrogate and yet—”

“I don’t know nuffin’ o’ the sort, mate. I only ’ave your say-so that it was the uwer guy what done it—an’ he’s done the old invisible man act, ’e ’as.”

“He was convicted—for something *he* did.”

“Don’t give a fart. I got you, Dicky baby, an’ that’s just bleedin’ dandy wiv me. An’ there’s this uwer little matter what you seem to ’ave forgot—I got sunnink else on yer now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. That Francis Joseph MacTripe gink what was found ’ung. You done it. You mebbe don’t know you done it, but I know you done it.”

“I don’t suppose you read the paper? The verdict was accidental death. Herbertson, you’re a fool.”

“You fink so, do yer? What if they was to put this wiv the uwer—put two an’ two togewer like? They might start finkin’ different.”

Richard was feeling cornered. After some consideration he said, “Right, it’s one thousand today and one thousand on the first of each month for the next three months. Even a moron like you will figure that’s more than your own demand. You’ll take it that way or no way, and if you ever try pestering me again, I’ll have to think seriously about getting rid of you once and for all.”

“Bump me off, d’yer mean? You? Aw, come off it, cock-rot, you ain’t the type. And you enjoying yerself like what you are, you wouldn’t want to chance yer aim—right?”

“You accuse me of rape and homicide and you say I’m not the type. That’s cock-eyed reasoning if ever I heard it.”

“That was just kids.”

“Never mind, garbage disposal isn’t difficult. There are other means. Such things can be arranged—”

“What—Rent-a-Dent Incorporated, you meanin’? Skulls Bashed In. Lasting Results. That yer idea, is it?” Lenny roared with laughter and half-choked as he gulped from his bottle. He grimaced, clapped his chest to clear wind and then sat back grinning widely and despicably.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nuffin’ Dicky baby, ruffin’ at all. I accepts yer offer, but one fink bovvers me and that is, ’ow the ’ell do I collect me mumfly instalment if not right ’ere?”

“I post it.”

“Where to? I ain’t got no address.”

“You’ll have enough money to get an address. When you do, you write me, and that will be your last contact with me. Is that clear?”

“You’re a right gent, and if you don’t crap out you’ll never see me again, seein’ as I’m a man of honour is what I am.”

“News to me, but see you stay that way.”

The feeling of unease he thought he’d dispatched returned again when, several days later, he took delivery of an envelope addressed to him in a childish scrawl. Inside was a piece of beige, brown-printed letterhead bearing the inscription High Furze Leisure Properties Ltd, Culcabeag Caravan Site, Skoon, Inverness-shire. The juvenile legend continued below:

Hallo Richard—Here is my hadress like you siad, If you just put number 8 culkabeg it will Find me, i decided to stay here for a wile corse i like it. an i got out of your villidge like you siad. as crissmass is coming up and it will be a Expensive time i wonderd if you wood see your way cleer to send my january Money Erly. and wishing you all the best as this leves me, dont disapoint me, your ffind Lenny Herbertson.

The double-crossing bastard was still around. Skoon—where the hell was that? Christ! It was where Chantry Beilis lived, several miles up the valley. It was less than a dot on the map. Their paths were certain to cross, sooner or later. Sooner, with his luck. A two-pronged threat. What in god's name had he ever done to deserve this?

Lenny Herbertson was twenty-five now. He had been fifteen the first time they had met. It had all begun so innocently...

Early in 1963 Richard's publisher chose a hotel in Harrogate as the venue for the publicity launch of their new season's books. It was an all expenses paid shindig (thus, well attended) with authors, literary critics and trade dignitaries flown in from all over.

Richard was there because his *Deimos Scion* was high on the list. At dinner he found himself in the company of a major buyer and two non-fiction writers. One of these was a dapper little fellow by the name of Damian Van Dorn who had contributed an addition to a successful sociological series. He had worked with and studied the behaviour patterns of delinquent youth over a number of years. Richard wanted to know more, and because of his unrewarded predilection for juvenile toughguys, voraciously attached himself to the man. Despite his nom-de-plume, Van Dorn was as English as they come. His sparse, wrap-around hair framed a polished dome on three of its sides, making him appear older than his thirty years. He was gaudily dressed in a light fawn three-piece suit, a white carnation, a pink silk shirt and a purple velvet bow tie. He smelled of musk. And of alcohol. The wine waiter was at his elbow constantly. He spoke loudly, punctuating with 'hies'.

The meal was over, and Richard—typically self-deprecating—was trying to satisfy Van Dorn's interest in his book. "If this one sells, it will be Mack Lander's artwork that sells it, my friend."

"Who's Mack Lander, old buddy?"

"Artist—specialises in futuristic imagery. Superb stuff. He did the dust jacket—makes me look bloody good. But never mind that. You promised me a copy of yours."

"My what, buddy boy?"

"Your book, you drunken bastard." (They'd become 'life-long friends' by this time.)

"Hear that, Charles? You're a drunken bastard. Richard says so." Charles Ranger was the oddly introvert buyer who had been sitting in virtual silence throughout their meal. He, and Cara Christian, a ruddied, much-travelled authoress, had left the table.

"Van Dorn—"

"Mmm?"

"Charles isn't there."

"Was he ever?"

"Don't be churlish."

"Whatever thou sayest, sire. A goodly flagon shall be thine." He waved his arms histrionically, shot up suddenly and overturned his chair. Then, swaying dangerously, he looked around for a waiter. "I think they put the anchors on the brandy, but follow me, I know where they've hidden the bar."

"They haven't hidden the bar, and I think you'd better follow me."

Richard took the man's elbow, steering him safely around engraved glass partitioning, potted palms and other potential hazards. He spotted Karl Schwartz, the publicity director, eyeing them from across the room, evincing disapproval.

Without commenting, Richard succeeded in manoeuvring Van Dorn on to a bar stool, taking a position to his right.

"I refuse to mix my drinks, innkeeper," blustered Van Dorn as if the barman had been arguing with him. "Make it a double brandy for me and my friend will have—" He waved an upturned palm at Richard leaving him to finish the sentence.

"I'll have the same, thank you," unable to curb a smile. "You know, you really are some sort of a nut, Van Dorn. You started on whisky cocktails, then sherry. You moved on to wine in assorted colours—by

the barrel, for Christ's sake, then beer and now brandy. If that isn't mixing drinks, I'd like to know what is."

"Simple. Drixing minks is when two sorts o' booze goes in one glass at the same time, which makes me innocent, yer honour."

Even before the drinks had been served, Van Dorn was off the stool again, weaving away in search of the toilet.

Karl saw his chance and approached Richard, who mouthed a couple of peanuts from mid-air and turned to receive him.

"I just popped over to apologise," Karl said.

"What on earth for?"

"Landing you with Van Dorn."

"Oh, he's all right."

"The trouble with Van Dorn is he never knows where to draw the line. There's something very unpleasant about that man, Richard."

"Drink problem, do you mean?"

"Perhaps—I'm not certain. More, I think. To be frank, I was against inviting him. Just watch yourself, will you?"

"Don't worry, Karl. I can handle him. I'll string him along a little while longer, then I'll put him to bed and sing him some Brahms."

"Good man. Watch it—here he comes."

Deliberately loudly, Richard said, "...and Karl—do you have a spare copy of my book? I want to present one to my friend here."

"Why certainly, I think I can find one. Hullo, Van Dorn." Karl left.

When he was out of range, Van Dorn mumbled, "A right shit that Schwartz, Richard. A right stuck-up prick. Foreigner, y'know. All foreigners are bastards."

"Just drink your drinkies, Van Dorn," coaxed Richard, hoping he hadn't been overheard.

"Just like that Cara cunt at our table," Van Dorn rabbited on. "She was a right stuck-up prick. Did you see how she kept hiding in her hair when I was talking? She was a bastard. All women are bastards."

"Well now, in two great swipes you've annihilated all foreigners and all women. And for your next act—"

Karl returned, handed Richard the book, squeezed his shoulder and left again without a word.

"Prick," Van Dorn said again, flapping his arms and spilling his drink.

Richard righted the glass.

"Don't sweat over that one, buddy boy. It's empty."

"It is now," laughed Richard, striving to keep the party buoyant. "Just one more brandy for Mr Van Dorn please, barman."

"Yessir," mumbled the barman, eyeing Van Dorn suspiciously as he dabbed at the wet surface.

Richard autographed the book and gave it to Van Dorn. "There you are—your very own personally inscribed copy of my latest—erm—masterpiece."

"Ta Richard. You're a gentleman—and my friend."

"Okay—so now where's yours."

"My what, old buddy boy?" He propped his chin on a hand, but it slipped.

"Good god, I may yet give up. Your book, blast it all!"

"Sure old boy, sure. Leave us not get excited, yes? People ain't exactly gonna be trampling each other to death to get copies. I can't even remember what the damn thing's called. You can have six."

"One will do."

Later, in Van Dorn's room, Richard said, "So this is your current epic. And you wrote it all by yourself."

"Wrote that?" came from Van Dorn, sounding incredulous. "You don't write that kind of book, old buddy boy. It writes itself. That junk's been done over and over—yonks of times. Solutions to the world's problems. People write and people talk, but do people actually ever *do*? Lemme tell yer. Most emphasil—most ensaphi—no! All you need is a hook, Richard, on which you hang everything everyone else ever said about the subject. Take a look at the back. The list of references. Long as yer arm."

"You're not telling me you had nothing to do with this?"

"Of course not, old buddy. I had to come up with the bits of narrative that holds the references together. A man has to make a buck or two, as you well know. Just between you and me, as we're friends, it's about ten percent me and ninety percent old Uncle Tom Cobleigh an' all."

"Surely not." He flicked the pages. "I'll just read this and judge for myself."

"Judge away all night, dear friend, but I'm going for a drive."

Richard was astonished. "A drive! You're in no fit state to drive, Van Dorn. You'd get done."

"Don't care. I want a drive," Van Dorn said, petulantly.

Maybe Karl had been right, Richard thought. There was something vaguely disturbing about this character. At first, he'd imagined they had much in common, but doubt was creeping in. Should he simply return to his own room and forget him? Maybe not. Maybe he should stick with him a little longer. He wanted to compare notes, to reach some kind of understanding on what made both of them tick. A forlorn hope perhaps? He tried to get Van Dorn to stay put, so they could talk, but to no avail.

"Okay then," Richard assented. "I say we avoid creating a scene by slipping down the back stairway, and next I say that, as you're too drunk to drive, you can lord it and I'll be your chauffeur. How's that suit?"

"Oh goody, I'll see the Yorkshire countryside."

"You won't. It's dark outside."

When Richard stepped into the cool night air, he drew a deep breath, observing with curiosity the fleeting scent of acetic acid which assailed his nostrils whenever he'd had a skinful. He felt more intoxicated than he actually was and put it down to a sort of psychological blanket effect produced by the company he was keeping. But he could still handle a car.

Richard made for his own, but Van Dorn insisted on taking his spanking new red Rover—complete with an allusion to a bus ticket. They pulled out of the car park and headed north, Richard appreciating the vehicle's scent of newness. He would satisfy his companion's need by simply poodling around the quieter roads for half-an-hour or so. Perhaps a quick nightcap in a country pub, and that would be that.

Van Dorn hadn't stopped talking. "I like you, Ricardo, and where the hell have you been hiding all my life?"

"Hardly hiding, Van Dorn," Richard went on. "But tell me, your stated hatred of all foreigners and women can't really be as all-embracing as you made it sound, can it?"

"It can, and is."

"What about your wife?"

"Divorced, three hundred years ago. God—that pan! The face that sank a thousand ships."

"So why did you marry her?"

"Likely pissed old boy, or else chloroformed. You know women. Stop at nothing to get a bit o' bustle in bed. I told yer, all women are bastards."

"Terrific. Well hell, who do you like?"

"You, old buddy boy."

"I meant before (his evening.)"

"I'll tell you 'cos you're my old buddy boy. But I never told a single soul in what I laughingly call my whole life before, get it? So if I tell you, you gotta take an oath of—"

"What the hell—" Richard suddenly exclaimed, wrenching at the wheel, causing the car to swerve dangerously. He regained his composure immediately.

Van Dorn was saying, "You've had too much to drink, Richard. You better let me drive."

"Too much to drink nothing," he ranted angrily. "I nearly ran down two bloody little boys just then. Thumbing a lift. Stuck right in the middle of the carriageway."

"Stop and give them a lift then," said Van Dorn, struggling to a more upright position and squinting back into the night.

"Give them a lift—are you kidding? If I stopped and got my hands on the buggers, I'd wring their bloody necks. That really gave me a jarring. How the hell I missed them I don't know."

"Stop the car, back it up, and give them a lift," snarled Van Dorn, with such aggressive emphasis that Richard felt obliged to come to a halt.

"Christ, Van Dorn—what's gotten into you?"

"Just do as I say. This happens to be my car, remember?"

"Oh yes—so it is. Do pardon me," returned Richard, bitterly. He threw the vehicle into reverse, screwed around to see through the rear window, and backed up till he was alongside the boys.

Van Dorn rolled his window down, quickly sized them up and said, "Hullo, boys. Where are you headed?"

"Ripon," said the older of the pair. He was around fifteen and his younger companion perhaps nine or ten.

"What a coincidence—that's where we're going. Now if you, big boy, would like to get in the back, the little lad can sit here up front with me."

During this Richard stared straight ahead, seething. So, they were going to Ripon, were they? Bloody marvellous. And what in God's name had caused Van Dorn's abrupt change of manner?

Van Dorn rasped, "Okay, buddy boy, you may go. Ripon it is and spare not the horsepower."

As Richard pulled away again he half-turned, addressing both boys. "You lads ought to be more careful. You could easily have been run down just then. There are no street lights here, y'know. I didn't see you till the very last second."

Van Dorn: "He didn't see you because he's had too much to drink. And you know what they do with drunken drivers, don't you?"

"For Christ's sake—" Richard protested.

Van Dorn continued addressing the boys as though uninterrupted. "Actually I lied. This guy is not my chauffeur as I led you to believe. He's famous he is. An author no less. You know what an author is, don't you?" he asked, specifically of the small boy he was holding.

"No," said the boy.

"An author writes books. This author writes books that are made into famous films. I'll bet you've seen *Grizzly!* and—erm—*Millennium*. What else, buddy boy?"

"I'd prefer to do my own PR, if you don't mind."

"Oh, you're far too modest, old buddy boy. A very shy man is what we have here, boys. But he does what I tell him and you can't knock that." He addressed his lap-mate again. "Did you see any of buddy boy's movies?"

"I saw *Grizzly!* on telly once," interjected the boy in-back.

"It hasn't been on telly," snapped Buddy Boy, kicking himself for sounding peevish.

"You just drive, my man. I'll entertain the kiddies." He embraced the young boy somewhat roughly. "You're a nice cuddly little man, aren't you? What's your name?"

"Don't tell him, Johnny," came from the other boy.

“Ah—Johnny is it? Real boyish name for a real nice little boy—with nice strong little boy’s legs,” Van Dorn went on, feeling the lad’s legs through his trousers.

“Are you drunk, mister?” Johnny asked, just a trifle timidly.

“My state of crapulence, be it good or bad, is no concern of yours, my little cherub. But tell me this—my inquisitiveness brooking no bounds. You getting this dialogue, buddy boy? Look good in print, I shouldn’t wonder. Tell me now, what are two boys like yourselves doing exactly, wandering around the streets unattended at this hour?”

“None of your business, mister,” said the older boy.

“Ah, but you see it is my business. As honoured guests in my motorcar, you are obliged to answer all my questions. Everyone must.”

“’Cept us,” the older boy said.

“Oh, I can see you boys are not used to doing as you’re told. Why else, I ask myself, would you be accepting lifts in strange cars? Perhaps you take sweets from strangers as well. Would you like a sweet too? Here, have a buttered brazil.” He produced a packet from the glove compartment, slung it in the back seat without looking round. “I’ll tell you what I think. I think you’re fugitives, done a bunk from some kid’s home or approved school around here someplace. Am I correct?”

“Fuck you, Jack,” the oldest boy said. “You stop this car right now, mister. We’ll walk—right?”

“Nothing doing. I’m beginning to enjoy this. I knew I would.” Van Dorn was suddenly tugging at the zipper on the young boy’s jeans.

And Johnny was yelling, “Geroff, yer lousy loony—Lenny—Lenny!” His struggling made it even easier for Van Dorn to shove the trousers down around the boy’s ankles.

Richard was decidedly uneasy. “Van Dorn, for Christ’s sake, man—what are you doing?” he asked, slowing the car.

“Keep the car moving, buddy boy, and pull off the main road into a nice quiet little side lane just as soon as you can.”

Van Dorn was taken by surprise when an arm suddenly snaked around his neck dragging him firmly back into his seat. It was Lenny who, at the same time, ordered Richard to stop the car.

Richard would have complied readily had not Van Dorn’s next action filled him with astonishment. Despite the stranglehold and his fight for air, he again reached the glove compartment from which he produced a gun, flourishing it for all to see. Then he stuck it into the little boy’s guts. “Now—you let go, Lenny—phew—you’re tough. And you, buddy boy, find that quiet spot like right now. And leave us not argue. It’s irritating and this gun might go off—bang!—see, and poor Johnny’s innards would be splattered all over my nice new car. Wouldn’t do, would it?”

“You let me go,” shrilled the little boy, proving he wasn’t stuck for an expletive or two. But his protests turned to shrieks of pain when the man screwed the short gun barrel into his intestines with a viciousness that made them all wince.

“Don’t use that language on me, you snivelling little shit,” Van Dorn snarled—and a charged silence fell upon the occupants of the vehicle as Richard turned into a side road.

They had driven perhaps a couple of miles further when Van Dorn, who had been studying the lie of the land, ordered Richard to stop. By then Johnny had been stripped from the waist down, and Van Dorn scrambled out first, dragging the lad with him. Then he rammed the muzzle into Johnny’s temple and commanded the others to follow—slowly.

A clammy hint of mist enshrouded the wooded stretch, and their exhalations were plainly visible in the cold dampness. It was quite dark, and quiet, save for the click of cooling metal from the car bonnet.

Van Dorn, whose alcoholic intoxication was held in check by the sadistic excitement he had generated, told Richard to open the boot and dig out some pieces of strong cord he would find there.

Richard's brain was numbed by the sudden horrific turn of event. How did one respond in the face of such alien behaviour? He must do something, but what?

Still snarling detestable directives, Van Dorn rasped, "Tie friend Lenny to that tree, buddy boy, like sharpish!"

Richard was reluctantly acceding when Lenny gritted, "I'm warning you mate, if anyfink 'appens to the little kid, we'll get yer. You'll get yer head kicked in, you will, shitbag."

"This hasn't got anything to do with me," Richard complained, with bitterness.

"Prove it then. Clobber the Weed in' bastard."

"There's a gun at Johnny's head, for Christ's sake—or hadn't you noticed?" Richard snapped, angry because Lenny wasn't comprehending.

"Hurry it up man, I'm getting impatient," came from Van Dorn.

Richard tried appealing to him. "Look Van Dorn, no real harm has been done so far. You had your fun—okay? For god's sake, man, think what you are doing and stop this—now—before it's too late. Please."

"Leave the speeches to Shakespeare, my man. Just walk ahead of me," he grunted, indicating the direction with a wave of the gun. He grabbed Johnny by his jacket collar, and leaving Lenny hugging the oak in near blackness, the trio plunged more deeply into the woodland as their eyes became more accustomed.

Very frightened by now, the boy tried pleading with Van Dorn too. "Mister, I'm sorry I swore at you. Please lemme go. Til go home I will, straight back home, an' I won't tell. I wouldn't tell, cross me heart I wouldn't. I'm just freezin' cold. Please mister."

"You see, you can be nice when you want to, but what you don't understand, ye of the sudden charming manners, is that nothing can stop me now."

"You're mad, mister," Johnny squealed. "Lemme go you."

"You were a cheeky young whelp a moment ago and now you're a craven young whelp and all the portents are right. I love you like this, pretty child of mine."

In petrified bewilderment Richard whispered, "What are you going to do, Van Dorn?"

"Oh really, buddy boy. You can't be serious. I mean, you weren't exactly bom yesterday—right? I mean, just look at this kid. Isn't he just screaming out loud 'ravage me, sacrifice me, devour me'? Believe this or believe it not, there is nothing, no indulgence in this whole wide world, more exalted, more warmly satisfying, more ecstatically sublime, than a little spot of paederasty on a cold dark night." The boy was whimpering pitifully as the last remaining shreds of clothing were ripped from his body. "Now look—and assimilate. The shape of this body. It isn't too daik, you can see it. Small, young, fresh, firm, virgin—passionate mustard. Feel him—like this, come on and feel him. Come on, Richard, feel him all over."

He clamped a hand on one of the boy's small buttocks, actually sinking his fingernails deeply into the flesh, causing a spurt of blood. Then grasping the boy's opposite upper arm he raised the lad from the ground. The youngster screamed with pain, his cries caught and consumed by the cold night air. Van Dorn was thrusting the small white naked figure towards him. "Here, feel him, tear him to shreds, love him, the bastard, love him. Feel him."

"Oh god, Van Dorn," Richard said, "you've got to stop, or you'll regret this night for the rest of your life. I'll help you, but you've got to let the boy go. Please, give him to me."

Richard moved closer and tried to take the lad whose arms were reaching towards him. "Please mister, I didn't do noffin'—please help me," he cried.

"Come on now, Van Dorn. Give Johnny to me. You don't ready want to hurt him any more, you don't —"

In an instant and with startling ferocity Van Dorn flung himself impossibly high into the air, dropping the boy as he did so. The boy fell in a crumpled heap and tried, unsuccessfully, to crawl away.

Simultaneously, and literally fizzing with fury, the man lashed out, getting all of his weight behind the sledgehammer blow he unleashed to Richard's head.

There came sudden concussive cracking sounds within him and needle points of searing light whirled around giddyingly as his hold on reality rapidly receded. He fell in a heap where he had been standing. And where he fell he stayed, seeing and hearing no more.

Richard awoke with a start and sat up abruptly. He was soaked in sweat and, temporarily disoriented, he fumbled for a hankie to wipe himself dry. What had caused him to snap out with such suddenness? Why was he sweating so profusely? He'd been dreaming. No, he'd experienced a full-blown nightmare! Whatever it had been about had filled him with fear and he sank beneath the blankets again, hardly daring to breathe.

Though he couldn't recall any detail, he knew that Lenny's reappearance had sparked it off, flooding his thoughts yet again with the dread events of the past. But there was more. He trembled, remembering his drunken mauling of Steve... and Hansa's chilly indifference. Would they spread the word and would the other boys give him the cold-shoulder as well?

He suddenly became aware that someone was there—in the room—with him! He sat up again and turned on the lamp. A surge of relief—and pleasure. It was Hansa—but he was looking anxious.

"Hi, son. You okay, are you?" Richard asked tentatively, still uncertain about their relationship.

Hansa ignored the question. "You was groaning—an' growling like a dog. I didn't know what to do."

"I was dreaming, I think. Did you just get here?"

"Yeh—good job, Uncle—right?"

"Too true, Hansa. You gonna get in?"

A frisson of excitement rippled through him as the boy readily settled in, snuggling close. "Jesus, little Hansa," he said, "you mean all the world to me. This morning, on the yard, I thought I'd lost you forever."

"Och, yer didnae mean it. An' I didnae mean it neither. Wus in a moody, I guess. Sorry, Uncle."

"So am I, son, so am I." Richard ran his hands all over the boy's naked body, as fragments of his nightmare began to filter through. 'Growling like a dog', Hansa had said, and that was it! In his dream he'd alternated between being himself and being an Alsatian! As the latter he'd been able to shove his muzzle unashamedly between the legs of two boys who were otherwise indistinct and without identity. Crotch-close, he'd enjoyed the feel of their well-worn, tight-fitting Wrangler jeans and the mind-blowing scents which emanated from an area of their anatomy that seemed especially formed as the perfect receptacle for an Alsatian's snout. Somehow the boys had angered him and, as himself again, he'd brutally killed them both—so they wouldn't be able to tell. In retrospect they just had to have been Steve and Hansa—because he thought he'd destroyed them in reality. No wonder he'd been in a sweat!

Finding refuge in Hansa's embrace, he assured himself that nothing would be allowed to jeopardise their relationship—or any of the relationships that had become part of his new life. Richard hugged the boy rapaciously, drawing massive solace from their closeness. Hansa, without being aware, released waves of such potency and persuasion, they reinforced his reason for 'being'. A reason so strong as to be worth defending, even if it meant...

At dinner, Alastair slid a book face-down towards Richard. "Did you ever read that one?" he asked.

Richard turned it over. It was *Hell Phase* by Jay Gaynor-Smith. He chuckled. "Where on earth did you dig that one up? My first y'know. Circa 1947. Been out of print for ages."

"One of the books Mrs Freeman gave me. Wondered if you could recommend it" His eyes smiled over his spectacles.

"Well now, compared to your usual reading, it's a souffle. The last page is good."

"I'll give it a whirl, if you'll bang your autograph on it. Refresh my memory, Richard. Was it filmed?"

"In a manner of speaking. They changed the title, most of the characters—and the plot. And gave me a lot o' lettuce for the privilege. Could I quibble? Not on your nellie. Not when it's your first. They called the flick *Millennium*."

"Och aye, that was good."

"It paid the rent for a couple of weeks."

Eddie breezed in rubbing his hands. "Just busted up that den of antiquity in room three," he said.

"He means iniquity," Alastair volunteered.

"I thought they were a long time changing. So up I goes and there they all are, sitting around admiring each other's private property."

"Filthy little sods," Alastair mumbled without looking up.

The standard conditioned reaction, Richard thought, as he asked who was involved. Evidently they all were.

"I just wonder if we should split that lot up," Eddie mused.

"What good would that do?" Richard wanted to know. "Whether the lads are all together in room three, or in six separate far-flung corners of the universe, it will not stop them tossing off if they've a mind to do it—which, I presume, is what you found them doing. As a matter of fact—this'll give you a giggle—an acquaintance of mine once mentioned a kid's home where the powers actually condoned it. There was one particular inmate, a young lad about ten I was told, who was allowed to masturbate quite openly—on the floor, the dining room table, wherever, whenever—in full view of everyone else."

Eddie didn't believe it

"It's perfectly true. Now, whilst I don't exactly advocate the likes of that, I see no real harm in surreptitious sex-play. We've all done it."

"Oh. Have we? Really." Eddie said.

"Well I most certainly have—and did—when I went to school, and as far as public schools go, it is well documented fact. I remember my mates coming into my house—and me to theirs—and all of us slogging each other off, as we called it then and—cough—"

Mrs Twiddie shuffled in with a tray of mixed grills.

When she had departed he went on. "And we used to do it in class under the desks. Can you believe this—we sometimes did it even when the master was present. How the hell we got away with it I've no idea. In fact, it became a standing joke to clench the fist and beat a rapid staccato against the under-side of the desks, mock-wanking—not when the master was present. We weren't comprehensive then, I hasten to add. We used to consider ourselves filthy little sods, just as you said, Alastair." Alastair was showing no interest. "But in a strange sort of way the prevailing winds blew a certain pride too—macho pride it would be called nowadays I suppose—and we felt bigger and better and wiser than all the ninnies who either didn't do it or were ignorant of it." He was wondering where the urge to become outspoken had sprung from.

"Not normal," Alastair grunted.

"It's not normal not to, and that's where kids score in my book. Their innocence and relative lack of inhibition is nothing short of pure joy. Our Big Joe seemed to have been by-passed for some reason. I say 'seemed' because I don't know whether he masturbated or not. How could I? Though if the room's full of 'em, I don't see how he could have missed out."

"Kept himself to himself, as you know," said Eddie.

"So I'll stick to my supposition. If he had discovered the release for himself, it's my view he would still have been with us—and I consider myself to have failed him for not realising where his problem was based."

"I don't see what you're driving at, Richard," Eddie said. "Are you saying that Big Joe committed suicide because he didn't know about masturbation? That's ridiculous."

"No, that isn't what I'm saying, quite. But one thing is important here, Eddie. Big Joe did not commit suicide—the verdict was accidental death, remember?"

"That's just it. I never understood what that judge woman meant when she said he was experimenting."

“It was the thrill of danger, Eddie. Or excitement generated by pain. Near-strangulation or suffocation, whipping and so on. Gets sexualised in some people. Don’t ask me how.”

“And it’s disgusting,” Alastair put in.

“But again, well documented. How often do we read about kids hanging themselves in young offender’s institutions? It isn’t always suicide. A boy seeks solace in sex—and it sometimes goes wrong.”

“I never even gave such things a thought,” Eddie admitted. “But now that you mention it, there was something peculiar which I’d forgotten about. We found Big Joe trussed up funny in the hut about a year back.” He described the event and concluded, “I was all set to punish the whole school, but Joe insisted it had nothing to do with anyone in the school. He said he didn’t know who did it—and that was all we could get out of him. You know what he was like. If he didn’t want to talk, no power on earth could make him. Did he somehow tie himself up, d’yer think?”

“Probably,” Richard said, glancing towards Alastair, who was still eating and reading—apparently oblivious. Damn the man. Why hadn’t he stuck his oar in? He would have to be pushed. “What are your views, Alastair?” he asked, pointedly.

Alastair took his time answering, toying with the food on his plate in two-fold annoyance: the realisation that these were tinned mushrooms; the reluctance to enter into a discussion right then. Without looking up and sounding disconcertingly detached he mumbled, “About what?”

Forced into specifics and somewhat taken aback, Richard was undeterred. He threw in, “Masturbation?”

“An aberration,” Alastair replied, flatly.

“Oh come now, Alastair, you surprise me. That’s archaic. Everyone now accepts—”

Alastair cut in. “You know as well as I do that society’s acceptance or rejection has nothing to do with it. Today’s society is too led, and paranoid about almost every bloody thing—all too ready to accept the flavour of the month without thinking for themselves. Whatever they end up selecting doesn’t make it right—or wrong. Take an example...” His eyes darted as if seeking inspiration from thin air. “Take smoking. You only have to look at old movies to see how civilised society once wholeheartedly embraced the habit. Even in elitist circles where—for women especially—a cigarette in a long holder was considered the very pinnacle of poshitude. Nowadays smokers are becoming a persecuted minority group. You see? What society accepts today it might just as readily reject tomorrow.”

“That’s hardly a fair comparison. Smoking is not a physiological necessity.”

“Try telling that to a 40-a-day man” Alastair continued. “Look, Richard, what I’m trying to say is that bashing one’s bishop and all that other fetishist gubbins is ersatz sex-play forced on one by so-called civilisation. Was it Kinsey who unearthed evidence which showed that the higher one climbed the evolutionary ladder the greater the prevalence? According to him the educated, highly cultured classes need to indulge themselves more. It would seem that the more tautly tuned the old brain box, the more one is likely to search for new ways of gratification.”

“You make it sound like a disease.”

“Well, so it is. But you won’t get rid of it now any more than you’ll get rid of sliced bread—or tinned mushrooms!”

“So what are you saying exactly? That you agree there’s a need?”

“Aye, but it’s a pathological condition, my friend, and folks can give it all the green light they like, it won’t alter the fact. It’s all cheap substitute for the real thing—which admittedly is not always as easily come by as it might be. If homo sapiens still stood alongside all his fellows in nature’s scheme of things and had remained pretty basic, by God, he would have been able to stick it in whenever the urge bit, and with whomsoever he chose. Have you read Desmond Morris? He reckons animals only get masturbatory when deprived of normal sexual contact, like when in captivity. Can you imagine a centipede tossing off? Hey, d’yer reckon it’s got one between each pair of legs? Hippo high on bondage! New uses for rhino’s

horn! Boa constrictor gets knotted for kicks! Funny eh? Therefore, in conclusion, an aberration. In my humble opinion of course.” He smiled and clattered the knife and fork to his plate expressing dual finality. He suddenly changed tack. “Oh, by the way, I meant to tell you, Richard—I saw that friend of yours again today.”

“Who’s that, Alastair?”

“I dunno, that Lenny something-or-other—the scruffy guy in the bar the other evening.”

“Oh Christ! He’s no friend, I assure you. Where was he?”

“In the grounds, talking to Gerry Gadd.”

A bolt of mental agony shot through him. “Talking to Gerry? About what?”

“Haven’t a clue, wasn’t close enough. To judge from that look on your face, Richard, I’d say he’s a bit of a thorn in the side. Who is he?”

“A bloody sponger Alastair—a parasite.” Richard trotted out his cover story. “He discovered my ‘fame’ several years back and came to me with some sob stuff—about his mother. It’s too implausible to repeat but I fell for it at the time. I thought I’d dispatched him with a cheque. Seems I was wrong.”

“If you keep on being a soft touch, you’ll never get rid. He’s a type, and types never change.”

“I’ll have to think of a way of disposing of him once and for all.”

“Try murder. You must have written the perfect crime into one of your epics.”

“No, Alastair, that I haven’t done. Maybe if I got stuck into Agatha Christie and Ngaio—”

“At the same time? Not physically possible, lad,” Eddie said.

“How do you know?” Richard poured coffee and spooned sugar that looked like sand into it “I meant to ask you, Eddie—Louise is having a long weekend, as you know, and as the cottage will be empty I wondered... I’d rather like to take some of the boys there tomorrow night. I thought maybe we’d rise early on Saturday and go on a day-long hill-walking expedition.”

“Oh well, I don’t know about that,” Eddie said.

“Just an idea.” Richard’s heart fell.

Then, after a moment, Eddie said, “Eeh, I don’t know though. Why not? I suppose it’d be aw’right. I don’t know what Elizabeth would think—we never did anything like it afore.” He ruminated a moment longer, then thumped the table. “Hang what Elizabeth thinks. Do it. After all, I am supposed to be the guy makes decisions about the kid’s out-of-school activities. You could go straight after the evening meal.”

Heart restored, Richard said, “Fine. I’d like to take the six little aberrants from room three—and Hansa, of course.”

“That’s seven. Pick two more and me an’ Chantry’ll sort the rest.”

He chose Tommy Bums and Scott Srakane and the matter was settled.

Louise and Lee left for London early on Friday morning, beating a heavy snowfall by a hair’s-breadth. It snowed heavily almost all day, and Richard fretted because he feared his proposed cottage trip might have to be cancelled. As it was, they were unable to leave that evening as had been planned.

Saturday dawned and the boys were raring to go. Each one was kitted out with a rucksack containing a mini-Thermos of hot soup, a pack of sandwiches, potato crisps, a Mackintosh Red and a bar of Kendal mint cake. They were all wearing their wannest jumpers, their parka jackets with the fur-fringed hoods, and their hiking boots. And some of them topped-off with their own woollen bobbles in the colours of various football teams they ‘supported’. Thus the little party set forth, with Richard looking his brood over proudly as they all crunched excitedly down the driveway.

They would complete a circle around Loch Rossie, sometimes at water level and sometimes at great heights where hundred-foot crags dropped sheer into the water and kept them from the shoreline. It would be a challenge, for an arduous trek of some twelve miles lay ahead. The village nestled in the fold of the valley, backed on one side by heavily timbered rising slopes. On the other, the hillside upon which the

school and other buildings nestled. Beyond, Loch Rossie stuck out its long tongue, licking northwards for several miles 'twixt twin tall sawtooth ridges. Snow had fallen to a depth of four inches or so the previous day, and though it was dry when they left, it remained cold, grey and threatening. They speedily cleared the main street, then heading north they passed close by the cluster of dwellings along the water's edge, surmounted a stile, and headed for parts remote. They would encounter no human habitation until they reached the opposite bank of this ribbon of a loch—where they would find Richard's cottage.

As the elevation increased they trudged along merrily, here across solid rock blown free of snow, and there through snow drifted a foot or more deep. Striding out confidently, Stuart, Kelvin and Stevie led the field, with Tommy half-running behind them. Richard feared that the smaller boys would not be able to maintain the fast pace for long. Scott, whose hand he held, was already breathing heavily and dragging a little. Just ahead of Richard—in line abreast where the terrain permitted—were Hansa, Danny and Mark. Angie trundled along in the rear.

After a while, wee Scott complained of the cold.

“Bet you wish you was back in Africa—right, black boy?” Mark shouted over his shoulder.

“Where's Africa?” mumbled Scott.

“Slightly south of here,” said Mark, and those within hearing laughed.

“You don't come from Africa, do you, Scott?” Richard asked.

Before Scott could respond, Mark did. “Nub'dy kens where he comes from, Uncle. Matron sez they found him in a bag someplace.”

“A handbag?” exclaimed Richard, thinking Wilde. “Don't tell me it was at Victoria Station—the Brighton line?”

“Dinnae ken,” replied Mark.

“An' anyway, I'm not a black boy, Mark Selby,” retorted the little lad.

“No, you're green.”

“An' you're sky blue pink with yeller dots on.” At which point Scott reiterated his complaint and Mark said he could have a lend of his scarf. He swathed the little boy's entire head, leaving only the smallest strip so he could see where he was going. “I'm a brown boy, I am,” he said, which came out as a muffled, plaintive sounding squeak.

“Yeh, I know yer are, wee sprite. I was only kiddin'. You know I love yer like a brother—right?” said Mark. He took charge of Scott with a display of affection that stirred Richard's emotions. Throwing an arm around Scott's shoulders, Mark added, “C'mon kid, I'll look after yer.”

Soon, the boys in the lead began to sing ‘I love to go a' wanderin', along the mountain track' and most of the others

joined in at ‘and as I go I love to sing, my knapsack on my back.’

The lusty sound of the boy's voices carried on the cold air took another swipe at Richard's emotions. For as long as he could remember boy's voices had always moved him deeply. He had never much cared for the sweet clarity of the trained boy treble, preferring the rugged masculine sound of many untamed voices singing as close to unison as could be mustered. He listened a while, enraptured, and then joined in himself. He was less certain of the words when their vocal repertoire later embraced the currently popular tunes, ‘Long-Haired Lover from Liverpool’ and ‘My Ding-a-Ling’—which both charted at number one that month. They hooted, highly amused at the innuendo in the Chuck Berry lyric.

Occasional flurries of snow accompanied the high-spirited procession, and as they went, the youngsters' enthusiasm for nature's grandeur filled them with awe. City boys all, they had never before experienced life in wild places. “Wow, this is dead brill, Uncle,” Stevie enthused. (The boy had not been alienated by Richard's drunken behaviour!) “We jus' gotta do it again. Know what I reckon? We should mebbe go camping out—all of us, I mean—someplace where nub'dy ever was before. It'd be great. Could we, Uncle?”

“I don’t see why not, Stevie. Peihaps during the summer holidays—”

“Yeah!” the others chorused.

Darkness had fallen by the time they reached the cottage, and though they were still mostly in fine spirits, their energy was at a low ebb and their calf muscles ached. The two younger boys were very tired and had been given what they called ‘co-carries’ and ‘shudderys’—respectively, piggybacks and shoulder carries—by their more stalwart chums. Richard arrived with Scotty’s corduroy-clad legs wrapped around his neck, and was himself doubly comforted by the warmth and feel of the soft, velvety nap against his cheeks, and by the way the little lad clung to him.

The snow still swirled around, though with less severity, as they approached the cottage. The sight of it brought a round of overlapping exclamatory remarks from some of the kids—remarks like, “At last, I thought we’d never make it”, and “Geez, Uncle, is this where you stay?”, and “Who’s gonna light the fire?” and “What a terrific place yer got”, and “Hey, footprints—somebody came snooping today”.

It was bright enough to see that the newly fallen snow revealed that someone had been there. A single set of footprints led to the door, then the adjacent window—thence they made a complete circle of the building and returned to the roadway, where tyre tracks led off towards the village. Whoever had visited had not gained access. Richard telephoned the school and was told by Eddie that no one had been out from there. So the mystery remained, for it was rare indeed for anyone to wander so far from the beaten track in winter.

When they finally turned in, (Tommy and Scott had been settled earlier in the big double bed) Richard declined the use of Lee’s bed in favour of a sleeping bag, which he placed in line with the others on the sitting room carpet. With Hansa pressing in on him from one side and Danny from the other, they told spooky stories, sparked by whoever the mystery visitor might have been, until one by one they dropped off to sleep, leaving Richard feeling both protector and protected.

Richard was already awake when Hansa opened his eyes next morning.

“G’morning, little kid. Did you have a good sleep?” he asked, bringing his arms out from his warm cocoon and wrapping them around the youngster.

“Yes, Uncle—what time is it?”

“Just after nine, son. Everyone seems to have slept well, but me. I ache all over.” He considered his body too angular, for every bone had seemed to stick out and find contact with the hard floor. His hips and shoulders were distinctly sore.

“You should have gone in your own bed, Uncle.”

“I know—but I was afraid I might miss something.”

“Like what?”

“It’s just a saying.” He yawned.

“Did we get snowed in—I hope?” the boy went on, extricating himself from Richard’s grasp and stiffening in a cat stretch. He crawled from his sleeping bag and went to the window to find out. “Hey, it snowed a lot more,” he shouted, happily, causing the others to stir, “but I dinnae think it’s gonna be enough to make us stay here. Boo. That means we have to go back to school today.”

After they had breakfasted, they gathered their things together and started out. Sporadic snow-fighting slowed their journey and it was approaching Sunday lunch by the time the vital-looking throng trudged up the driveway and spilled into the schoolyard, to be greeted by most of the others eager to know what they’d thought of their hill-walking expedition. Eddie and Chantry were in attendance.

“Well, I don’t have to ask you lot if you had a good time. I can see you did,” Eddie said, pushing into the excited gathering. “How was it? Well-behaved, were they?”

“It was tremendous, Eddie. They were like little angels and I could have kissed the lot of ’em. How were things here?”

Overlaid on Eddie’s reply was the voice of Chantry, calling from the other end of the yard. “Girls, girls! What about our snowman?” The girls dutifully returned to her. “Barbara Yates—you disgusting little creature. The carrot is for the snowman’s *nose*, dear.”

“Oh, Richard,” Chantry said as he passed close by. “I picked up the strangest little man this morning, and I thought you’d like to know. There he was standing at the bus stop and of course there are no buses on Sunday, so I pulled up to tell him so. He said he was new to the area and could I suggest a church in the village. I recommended St Pauls when he told me his religion and gave him a lift in. He said he was a friend of yours.”

“He’s no friend of mine, Chantry, if he’s who I think he is—but how come he told you he was? He couldn’t have known you worked here.”

“Oh I told him so. We got chatting—as you do—and I said I ran the girl’s department here. Then he said he knew you—and how very good you are with the boys—and I said you weren’t half-bad considering you are a non-professional.”

“So I’m good with the boys am I?” Richard said flatly. “What else did he have to say?”

“Oh just this and that—you know.” She seemed evasive.

“No, I don’t know,” he snapped, wondering if the man had told her anything more. “So you dropped him at St Pauls and—”

“Yes, but I don’t think he went inside. I watched him in my rear view mirror, you see. He asked me where you stayed and I told him you lived in at the school most of the time, but that you had a cottage beside Loch Rossie. Seems a very shifty sort of person to me. Not the sort of person I’d imagine you consorting with, Richard. Oh Mimsy darling, don’t stand there scratching your posterior like that—it’s hardly ladylike, my dear.” Mimsy belched, Chantry clucked and Richard walked away, knowing that Lenny had been the snooper at the cottage. That man was everywhere!

A snowball whistled past his ears, hitting Chantry on the side of her head, displacing her woollen hat. She turned, crossly, set to admonish her assailant—who was nowhere in evidence.

As Richard passed close by Hansa, he said, “Did you miss me on purpose?” The look on the boy’s face told him all he needed to know. That’s my boy, he said to himself as he entered the building.

Tuesday mid-morning, and all the children were in class, when by chance Richard looked out of the flat window and saw to his horror that Lenny was back—talking with Gerry again in the grounds by the tree the lightning had felled.

Lenny repeatedly looked up at the building as they conversed, and shortly thereafter the two men made off in the direction of the rear of the school.

Afraid to face Lenny, but intensely curious to learn why he had latched himself on to Gerry, Richard left the flat and tore down the stairs just as Louise and Lee were returning from their long weekend. “Oh, hi—erm—I’ll see you in a minute,” he said, and disappeared through the back door, leaving his family wide-eyed as they continued on up.

Richard remained where he was—outside the rear entrance—as the two men, with their backs to him, approached Gerry’s car. He watched as Lenny began to look the vehicle over, and it became obvious that he was there was for one of two reasons. Either he was going to do the car up for Gerry or else he was considering buying it from him. Feeling a little more assured, Richard stuffed his hands into his pockets and sauntered towards them.

“Good morning, Gerry—still cold isn’t it?”

“Oh aye—’morning, Richard—this is Mr Herbertson,” he replied, offering a half-introduction.

“Yes, I know Mr Herbertson,” Richard said darkly, looking the blackmailer straight in the eyes. “I thought you were supposed to be heading south.”

“Gotta ’ave meself sunnink to go in, don’ I? Anyway, who said I was goin’ anywhere?”

“You did?”

“Did I?”

“Yes—and I’d like to know why you’re still here.”

“Free country, Dicky baby.”

“That doesn’t tell me why you’re here.”

Lenny’s face took on the familiar slimy leer; as usual he took his time answering, slinking around the Mini and looking at them over the top of it. “As my financial adviser, Richard, me old cock, I wonder what you fink of me buyin’ this ’ere motor.”

“I’m not your financial advisor, and I’m not interested.”

“Gerry wants a ’undred for it—”

“I know it doesn’t look much,” put in Gerry, a little shaken by the obvious animosity between the two men, “but the main thing is the engine—sound as a bell. Just needs a bit of bodywork—the bash on the wing was last winter—skidded off the road. It had a new exhaust about six months ago, and you can see the tyres are good.”

“I fink I should ’ave me a spin, don’t you, Richard?” Lenny said, and Richard ignored him.

“Yes, get behind the wheel—we’ll drive round the village,” said Gerry opening the door for him.

Lenny: “Cornin’, Richard?”

“No.”

Gerry tried to start the car. It wouldn’t. A trifle flustered, he said, “It usually goes first time, but it’s a bit damp today. It’ll go if we give it a shove. Richard—will you?”

Fortunately there was a gentle slope all the way from the back of the building on down the drive to the main gate. Lenny wrenched the wheel over, Richard got the vehicle in motion, and then stood watching as it slowly gathered momentum. Midway down the drive it spluttered into life—and they were gone.

Richard remained where he was for a time, not biting his nails but looking as if he was. Now three of the school staff had met Lenny. If he was planning complete infiltration he definitely had another think

coming. Lenny's threatening presence loomed larger daily. There was no way the situation could remain as it was. Perhaps, after all, there was a way...

He put his hands into his pockets again and returned to the flat.

"You look a little drawn, Richard," said Louise, as she hung her coat. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just wondered why you rushed outside like that."

"Oh it was Gerry's old Mini. It wouldn't start. He needed a push. How was your weekend?"

Before she could answer Eddie burst in on them, and, as demonstrative as ever, he grabbed Louise around her waist, lifted her and whirled her around like a kid. "Well now, how's me favourite flower? Grand to have you back, if only to get shut of Fanny Fernackerpan for a coupla days."

"Eddie," she gasped, "put me down, you fool. Anyone would think I'd been away for a month."

"Just my way, luv. How was your trip? Have a good time, did you? And where's that little pal o' mine—out lakin', is he?"

"Lee's in the toilet, and yes thanks, the trip was fine. The only thing was—I was about to tell Richard when you—er—came in. It's my father. He had to be admitted to hospital."

"Oh look, I am sorry, Louise," Eddie said. "You want to be alone with Richard, and 'ere I come barging in like some gallumphing great clodhopper. Forgive me—I'll see you later."

"It's all right Eddie—really I—"

"I insist. I'll see you later—ah—there you are Lee, my little ray of sunshine. Come into my room and have a cream bun and some dandelion and burdock."

When Eddie and Lee had gone, Richard said, "How bad is it?"

"They don't know. It's his heart again, of course. They said if he takes it easy—"

"And you, dear, I don't suppose you wanted to come back."

"There was nothing I could do really—and I'll be going again in three weeks anyway." She sighed heavily. "We've known about it for some time. You begin to build up a sort of defence."

"I know darling." He took her to him, one hand smoothing the back of her hair. But in consoling her, he was really consoling himself, for the Heibertson scourge was uppermost in his thoughts.

"If only I were closer," Louise said.

"But they'll let you know if—"

She drew her head back and looked at him directly. "I meant closer to you, Richard. I need you so much, and I wish you needed me. I believe you do need me—but why is it every time you take me in your arms I've an awful feeling it's someone else you're thinking of? Richard—is there someone else?"

"Another woman do you mean? Don't be ridiculous, Louise."

"No, not another woman."

"Who else then?"

"The boys, Richard, the boys. You seem to love boys like most men love women and I don't understand it. I wish we could talk—just talk."

"There's nothing to talk about, dear—honestly."

Leaving the flat in search of a pre-lunch coffee, Richard said, "You realise you're on lunch duty today, Louise?"

"Yes, I realise." Still a little emotional, she blew her nose. "And I'm not looking forward to it. The girls are a damn sight worse behaved than they ever were before the prima donna arrived. And as for her potted psychiatry, well, you know how Barbara, the obnoxious little bitch, likes playing with fire?"

"No, I didn't."

"Yes you do. Who is it, when we have the fire going, finds more things to burn than anyone else in the building? Bits of paper, wood, pencils, empty boxes—"

“Well yes, I suppose you’re right—Barbara Yates.”

“And what is she burning?”

“You just told me: bits of paper, wood—”

“Ah yes, to you and me she is. But the gospel according to Chantry Beilis states that this is symbolism. She’s told Barbara that the sweet child is actually burning the mother she’s supposed to hate.”

“Oh come on, I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true—ask her.”

Richard heard a car coming up the driveway and went to the staffroom window to watch. Lenny, still driving, irresponsibly threw it into a skid in the slushy snow—doing a complete about-face. Gerry climbed out, said a few unheard words, slammed the door and returned to whatever he had been doing.

Lenny drove the Mini away again to the accompaniment of several toots of the horn, and that appeared to be that. Transaction clinched, he hoped. But what next?

The temperature had plummeted dramatically again by teatime; the slush had frozen solid and snow began to fall heavily once more.

Louise stayed later when it was Chantry’s night off, and as the roads had become treacherous, she would remain at the school overnight. So she, Richard and Eddie supervised whilst the older children put up Christmas decorations, and the younger ones tried their hands at making some.

The activity evening was in full swing when Richard spotted Barbara at the fireplace burning crepe paper off-cuts. He nudged Louise. “Watch this.” Bending over by Barbara’s side he asked, “What’s that you’re burning, Barbara?”

He really hadn’t expected her to sound quite so pat and almost keeled over in amazement when, with heavy belligerence, she replied, “It’s my mother.”

He tried to restrain his amusement. “Correct me if I’m wrong Barbara dear, but didn’t you bum your mother yesterday?”

Louise had edged closer and he threw her a wink.

“Yes, I did,” the girl responded, equally belligerently.

“But you’ve only got one mother. How can you bum her twice?”

She was stuck for a reply, so Richard gave her one. “As you can only bum a person once, and you like burning people so much, why not bum somebody else next time? Let’s see now—how about Miss Chantry?”

“Yes, I’ll bum Miss Chantry,” she said, jumping at the chance.

“Good girl, good girl.” He patted her head and led Louise away.

The Christmas preparations continued until the tree had been decorated, whereupon Eddie decided it was time to call a halt. “Now hearken unto Uncle all of you. You have ten minutes to get this lot cleared away, then everyone on the top deck for your sprays. After that the over-elevens can come down again to watch a very good Dorothy McGuire picture.”

Close by, Mark Selby had a devilish gleam in his eyes. “Wow, great! Dorothy McGuire!” he enthused.

Eddie took the bait. “Oh, you like Dorothy McGuire do you, Mark?”

“She’s a livin’ doll is Dorothy McGuire,” Mark conjoined as some of his mates started shoving him, trying to silence him.

“He’s taking the piss, Uncle,” Stu Robertson said.

“Oh, he is, is he? Get here Selby—now!” He pointed to a spot on the floor directly in front of his own feet, upon which Mark was to stand, mere inches away from Eddie’s wagging beard. The boy was valiantly striving to keep a straight face but failing dismally.

Eddie had no such difficulty maintaining a look of doom as he went on, “Selby, repeat after me: I must not...”

“I must not...”

“...take the mick out of...”

“...take the mick out of...”

“...Dorothy McGuire or fabulous Uncle Eddie...”

“...Dorothy McGuire or fabulous Uncle Eddie...”

“...ever again if I want to live.”

“...ever again if I want to live.”

“That’s all, you stupid ignoramus—dismiss.”

“That’s all, you stupid ignoramus—dismiss.” Mark didn’t know where he found the courage for his last remark, and ducking to avoid the clout across the lughole he was sure must follow, he stepped back and smiled his most irresistible smile. It most times worked.

It worked. Eddie grabbed the lad’s hair with one hand and delivered a playful sock to the jaw with the other. “If you’re not out of my sight before I count ten thousand, you’re for the high jump, my lad.”

Richard accompanied the boys upstairs to supervise their showers. He was amongst his gang in room three. None of them minded his presence whilst they stripped off and grabbed their towels. His one regret was that Hansa couldn’t be fitted in with them. It crossed his mind briefly that Kelvin seemed unusually quiet—even by his standards. He dismissed the thought and spoke to Mark. “Hey, Mark my lad, I’d like to know where you dug up that angelic smile you laid on Uncle Eddie. Turned him into a quivering jelly. I never saw anything like it.”

“I dunno, Uncle,” came the muffled reply as he pulled his tee-shirt over his head. “I just dinnae know if he was bein’ serious or not.”

“He wasn’t serious, but best to be safe. You never can tell with Uncle Eddie.” He took the boy’s cord Wranglers and folded them for him, conscious of their warmth and pleasant body odours.

He turned to see how the others were getting on. Stu was bobbing and weaving towards him with fists up ready for action. “Come on, Uncle—square up,” he said, throwing wild punches. Attired only in his knotted towel he advanced on Richard—who wasn’t much good with his fists, and had no real idea how to counter, should the lad begin to make contact. Stu would inflict no intentional physical hurt, but with Stu, accidents sometimes happened.

Danny saved the moment by leaping on to Stu’s broad back and yelling, “Hey, that’s my uncle, so you just lay off—reet!”

“Why, what you gonna do?” He threw the younger lad over his shoulder, landed him on his bed and started to tickle his ribs.

Oh, to be a fearless little boy again, Richard thought, wishing he could somehow get in on the act.

Danny could hardly speak as he scrimmaged around trying to escape Stu’s probing fingers, almost choking himself laughing. “Leave me,” he squealed. “Or I’ll smash yer—into mincemeat, Stewpot—Robertson, an’ I’ll shove yer in a jar an’ stick—a gollywog on yer, an’ then I’ll—ow quit that—’cos you’re a great—steamin’ twit.”

“You can sherrup ’bout shovin’ things in jars,” said Stu, trying to keep the wriggling boy flat out. “I’m gonna get them pants off o’ yer, see.”

“What for—yer want’n a sneaky peek? Guess who’s a poovie pervie?” the youngster shrilled, refusing to straighten out. “Uncle, help—get this poovie pervie off o’ me—he’s wantin’ a sneaky peek at my thingy.”

It was an invitation Richard couldn’t resist. He hauled on one of Danny’s arms. “Hey, that’s my Dan you got there, Stu. I’ll have him back if you don’t mind.”

“I do mind, an’ it’s your turn next, Uncle,” Stu laughed, pulling on Danny’s other arm, making a tug-o-war of him.

After the horse-play, Richard said, “Okay now, lads—let’s hurry up or we’re gonna miss Mark’s dolly bird, Dorothy McGuire. Into the showers with you—an’ the last boy back here gets a kick up the rump.”

“We’re gonna get you, Uncle,” Angie said, as he brushed past, towel in hand.

“Oh, you are? Like how?”

Angie didn’t elaborate, simply wore a sly look, and as he left the room he flicked his towel at Richard’s rear end, but missed.

“What like is this picture, Uncle?” Mark asked, pulling a face. “Not a musical is it? I hate musicals.”

“No, it’s a thriller and it’s worth seeing, so hurry up.”

“What abart me, Uncle Richard? If I’m a good boy, can I see it an’ ah?”

Lenny Herbertson’s voice was an iced knife blade in his spine. He swung around angrily. “What the hell are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“Oh that was easy, the door was open,” Lenny drawled, looking the boys over.

“Out—downstairs—now!” Richard pushed him from the room. “Just carry on, lads,” he shouted over his shoulder as he led Lenny down the stairs.

“Hey that’s my Dan you got there,” Lenny mimicked, nastily. “And the last boy only gets a *kick* up the rump? Coulda fooled me. You’re sure havin’ a fine ole time ’ere, ain’t yer, Uncle Richard?”

“Never mind that,” Richard said. “If ever I see you around here again I shall stop payment—our deal will be off—for good and all time, and to hell with the consequences.”

They were outside the front door now. Lenny looked at the thickly falling snow, and, as maddeningly obtuse as ever, mumbled, “Looks like we’re gonna ’ave us a bleedin’ white Christmas, Dicky baby.”

“I presume you bought Geny’s car,” Richard rasped, looking around for it.

“You guessed it. Clever boy.” He patted Richard’s cheek.

“Where is it?” snapped Richard, recoiling.

“Near the pub. Couldn’t get it up the ’ill, could I?”

“Then I suggest you get in it and drive right away from here, that’s assuming you heard one word I’ve said.”

“Oh I ’eard all right, Dick-rot, but it’s like water off a duck’s arse. Any ’ow, I am doin’ a bunk for a coupla days, but I’ll be lookin’ for me Christmas cheque when I gets back—right?” This time he stabbed Richard with a rigid forefinger.

Richard watched until the white swirl consumed him. It was obviously getting high time to act.

“Who was that cheeky bastard?” Stu wanted to know when Richard entered the steamy shower room.

“That was a blackmailer, Stu boy,” he replied bitterly. “He’s been on my back for years, and I’d like to tell you why, because I think you’ll be able to help me—all of you.”

“Sure Uncle, anything,” Stu replied, looking puzzled.

Richard was so deeply preoccupied that he failed to notice the little pockets of furtive activity and crafty sniggering erupting all around him. It dawned on him that many wet bodies were pressing in on him, and just as he was beginning to wonder why, someone shouted “Now!” Suddenly he found himself being manhandled by half-a-dozen naked lads who physically propelled him, fully clothed, into and under the hot showers—and held him there until he was well and truly soaked right through to his skin.

The boys could never have understood it, but the contrast between his clash with Lenny and the rapture provoked by the boy’s attention to him caused a lump to come to his throat. Tears mingled unseen with the falling water and he was shot through with such sudden incredible elation, he could hardly catch his breath. What did a man like Richard do when fondly attacked by so many bare young males? Jesus Christ! Explode me! One thing for sure. He did not want them to let him go. Stevie, Mark, Hansa—hang on to me. But let him go they did, and when he was permitted to step from the shower, his beloved little Hansa took his hand to command his attention. “That was a surprise, Uncle. Your birthday present. We figured you wouldnae mind. You don’t mind, do you?” There was a touch of anxiety in his voice.

“No, of course I don’t mind,” he spluttered, hiding his feelings in a towel. “But you got it wrong. My birthday’s in June.”

“Wait till you see what you get in June,” said Marie pointedly.

“You drown me, I suppose.”

“Prob’ly,” Mark went on, instantly changing his tune. “Naw, course we wouldnae. We all think you’re an alright guy, Uncle—so when do we go to the cottage again?”

Richard was too choked to reply, so he simply wrapped the towel right around Mark’s head and then embraced his moist nudity for as long a short moment as he dared.

“See, I told you he’d be a good sport,” said Danny, delivering a playful kidney punch.

Richard drew Danny in close too, for a moment, then looked down at his own sopping, drooping clothes. “I think I’ll go and change now,” he said. “If none of you mind, that is.”

Then he caught sight of Brian, leaning against one of the wash basins, clearly very jealous of the fuss the other boys were making of him. Richard shuddered and switched attention back to his gang.

“You better take some stuff off, Uncle—you’ll drip all over the carpets,” Hansa was advising, beginning to help lift his sweatshirt.

When he had peeled off and covered himself with towels, he looked them over devotedly—taking in their happy water-speckled faces and their glistening bodies for a moment before squelching towards the door. He turned. “You really are a fine bunch of lads and I love the lot of you. See you soon.”

What a stupidly emotional idiot I am, he thought, as he entered his room. Nevertheless, lying supine on his bed, he allowed the tears to flow.

Mark deliberately stayed awake that night because he was going to have fun. It was something he’d planned to do for several weeks, but life at the school made it difficult because people were hardly ever alone.

When he guessed the others were all asleep, he climbed from his bed, slipped into his sneakers, and crept from the room. In his pyjamas.

He tip-toed into the smaller boys’ room and shook little Scotty awake. With Marie’s finger at his lips to keep him quiet, the little lad sprang up willingly. Together, they halted at the head of the stair, and listened. Silence. They ran lightly down the steps, along the lower corridor, and into the dining room where the tables were set for breakfast.

Mark was quivering with excitement. He pushed up one of the sash windows; a counterweight clanked. He cursed his haste, stilled again, expecting some sort of response to the night noise. No one stirred. Reassured, the pair dropped over the sill and ran the few yards to the gym hut where Mark had propped a window open earlier in the day. He gave Scott a heave, then hauled himself inside.

Beyond a door at the further end of the warm room were the toilets and showers, in a section of the building without windows. Mark closed that door behind them and turned on the lights. They were safely alone—with as much time as they needed.

They threw off their pyjamas and plumped on top of the pile of mattresses they used for soft landings. And, white and brown cocks erect, they began cuddling each other pleasurably, the smaller boy, wriggling with merriment.

“Why d’we come in here, Maride? Why didn’t you jus’ come into my bed like you sometimes done?” Scotty asked.

“‘Cos we’re gonna play a game. I told you. Give us yer hands.” The dark lad held them out and Mark, who had removed his laces, tied one around and around each wrist separately and knotted them. Then he linked the lad’s wrists together behind his back with the padlock from his locker. A skipping rope was used to bind the youngster’s ankles.

Only then did Scotty realise he was helpless. He gazed down at himself a little dolefully. “Why do I have to be tied up, Markie?”

“It’s all part of the game, sprite.” Mark stepped back a few paces to feast his eyes on his captive’s appealing brownskin body, lying there in Z-shaped nakedness and vulnerability—a body with which he’d enjoyed many a clandestine union, pre-Danny. The stricture was new. Scotty wasn’t happy about it.

“Yeh, but I don’t like to be tied up. I’m scared, Markie. Please let me loose.” His handsome, child-features screwed themselves into tight knots and he began to cry.

Scotty’s tears, his defencelessness and the elation Mark was feeling, brought with them gushing sympathy. He picked up the straitened little kid, hugged him, kissed his tears, his rubbery lips, his shoulder. “Don’t do that, wee Scotty. I wullnae hurt yer, I promise. An’ I’ll let you go in a minute, honest I will. Aw, c’mon. You know what I’m gonna do to yer. It’s jus’ this way’s makin’ it more excitin’.”

“You ain’t—gonna—leave me—are yer—Markie?” Scotty sobbed.

“Course not. I wouldnae ever leave yer, sprite. You’re my pal, yer know that,” Mark said, gently laying Scott down again. “Okay, passwords, black boy—”

“I’m a brown boy,” Scotty sniffled, arch-backed.

“No, you’re green.”

“An’ you’re sky blue pink with yellor dots on.”

“Great stuff, Scotty. You’re smiling again. How many times we done that routine?”

“Ten million.”

“Right, so quit hollerin’ an’ let’s have some fun.” First he tickled his younger friend to keep him bubbling. His little body alternated between ramrod stiff and hooked fish. Next, Mark knelt behind the boy’s head and lowered his own until his nose was in contact with the dark skin he loved. Delivering upside-down kisses, he snuffled his way avidly over rippling torso-terrain like a tracker dog hot on the scent, sniffing, licking, contentedly grazing in groin-country, hovering for a moment above that lone quaking aspen, taking it between his lips and into his mouth, sucking, sucking, earth tremors, smelling, sensational, sucking, hard, harder, rumble, sucking, eruption.

Aftermath. The look on Scotty’s tear-streaked face could have melted wax. An eerie, dreamy faraway places look, half-happy, half-sad, lips a-tremble, a watery smile, sweet wetness—like a warm, showery afternoon on a tree-lined lane in autumn, still bathed in the orange juice rays of the sinking sun. Mark, now lying alongside, seized him again, holding him close, closer still. “Aw, Scotty, that was magic. Yer a wee stoater, d’yer know that? I love yerz all to little fuckin’ pieces.”

“I love you an’ all, Maikie. You gonna get me untied now?”

“Yeh, sure. Turn over.” He kissed the youngster’s hot little buttocks, savouring them a while, then released him. Scotty instantly locked his arms around his big pal’s neck, and their lips fused together in high ecstasy. “Lemme just cuddle you up first, sprite. Your wee black body’s gonna get squashed to bits.” The youngster curled up, kitten-like, and Marie wrapped himself all around his dark-skin beauty, loving the feel of him, the sanitary smell of him, running his fingers into the tight-curved tangle of fuzz he had for hair.

“Markie,” the boy began, at length.

“What, sprite?”

“Was good, but I didn’t like bein’ tied up. Don’t do that to me again, please Markie—swear.”

“Okay, Scotty.”

“You wouldn’t like it.”

“Mebbe I would.”

“Tie you up like me, d’yer mean?”

“Sure—if yer want—but yer gotta let me go after.”

“See—you’re scared an’ all.”

“You got a point, wee kiddie, but let’s do it. We gotta get back in bed soon.”
Reverse roles. Repeat performance.

The Christmas party was always held a couple of weeks before the kids disbanded. At Pinewoods Hall it was a fancy dress affair, and to augment the costume supply, Eddie had ordered six assorted animal get-ups. The hirer had slipped up and delivered half-a-dozen identical gorilla skins instead—too late to be changed. It didn't matter because the big boys in room three delighted in wearing them, presenting themselves as 'planet of the apes'.

The Father Christmas disguise was worn by Ramsie, whose stocky figure lent itself best. Hidden behind a pink face, a huge red nose and masses of cotton wool, he let rip with occasional ho ho ho's—which fooled no one.

Eddie came as a pirate whose eye-patch stood out horizontally, like a shade, since he couldn't envisage going through the evening on one eye. Alastair was resplendent in the whites of a brain surgeon, and Louise came as his nurse. Elizabeth's olive complexion lent itself to her Indian lady, and she looked gorgeous in misty blue and silver sari. Chantry was a hippie—which meant she looked pretty much as she always did. John the chef and his kitchen staff always laid on a grand buffet, and they too entered into the spirit of the occasion by appearing as a chef (!), Mrs Twiddie as Nell Gwyn, and so on.

But for Richard—who came as a short-panted, overgrown schoolboy—the pride of the whole charade were the costumes he had put on the two boys closest to him. When, years ago, he had been on his movie location in Austria, he had been fired by the way local boys were dressed, and had purchased boysized authentic grey ledeihosen, for no other reason than he liked the look and feel of them—more than a little. Danny was willing to do anything for a laugh, so he came as a Swiss boy in the leather shorts, complete with ornate braces over his own gingham check shirt and appropriate feathered head-gear. He yodelled a lot. Hansa wore next to nothing as Tarzan. Tarzan was Hansa's idea. Richard had Johnny Sheffield in mind, that spunky little lad who had played 'Boy' in the Weissmuller pix and who was still a delight in TV re-runs. The seamstress had taken a couple of chamois leathers and fashioned them into the skimpiest of G-strings with flaps and thong ties. His skin was tinted all over with theatrical make-up and with the knife at his hip, he looked tremendous. The sight of them both made Richard homy as hell. He needed a quick-acting febrifuge and quaffed a 7-Up with amazing dispatch.

Elizabeth and Louise had lined up a dozen kids armed with unblown balloons. It was a contest to see which of them could be first to inflate one until it burst. Excitement ran high and tension grew as the competitors heard, 'one two three—blow', and spectators stood, hands over ears, cheering their favourites. Richard was supporting his son whose balloon was already larger than the others. "C'mon, Lee, you can do it," he urged. Onlookers were incredulous. It was already far larger than it was designed to get. Still Lee blew, becoming redder by the second—then it suddenly exploded into many ribbons of over-stressed latex. Kids jumped sky-high, then clapped Lee on the back praising his courage.

"Hither page, and stand by me," laughed Richard, drawing him aside. Lee was essaying a medieval pageboy of sorts. "Good old Lee. You're getting to be quite an all-round winner, aren't you?"

"Some of 'em got scared, dad, and I thought mine was never gonna burst. Wowee!" He accepted his prize—a chocolate bar, and wiped sweat from his brow. "Phew! It's hot in here."

Following a particularly rumbustious game of musical chairs, Hansa took a seat beside Richard. The boy was bathed in perspiration and his make-up was smudging into darker-toned streaks as he puffed away, resting his head against Richard's shoulder—who was moved to slide a hand around the lad's midriff, drawing him closer. It was by chance his glance fell upon Chantry who was seated at the other side of the room, in conversation with Brian. As they spoke they both gave him sidelong looks that cast a shadow over the proceedings. It could have been his imagination playing tricks, but it certainly looked as if they were talking about him. The feeling of unease was dispelled by Hansa who, in jungle-man fashion,

grunted, “Me stinkin’ hot, get drink,” and romped back with a glass of squash for each of them. They sat together watching some of the kids dancing to The Crocodile Rock.

They all cooled off after a while, and Eddie sprang a surprise. He, Scotty and a girls’ chorus gave their secretly rehearsed rendition of ‘Good King Wenceslas’. Then they all joined in to sing some of the merrier Christmas carols.

And later when all the sausage rolls, crisps, jellies, mince pies and iced cakes had been devoured, the ‘juice’ all gone, the crackers pulled, the gifts presented and the balloons burst, they went to bed that night exhausted but happy.

After the boys had been bedded down, some of the staff had continued to celebrate with something stronger. Richard had taken a slight excess and was still under the influence when he woke with an awful foreboding. His scalp crawled though he knew not why. The naked body of young Hansa lay beside him, but at the same moment, it seemed, the boy was standing on the snow-covered ledge outside the window, hiding. That audacious bitch, Chantry Beilis was in the room accompanied by vindictive Brian Snapley. They were promising to expose Richard’s evil doings. With sham anger he succeeded in pushing them from the room where a leering Lenny Herbertson awaited them. “You should see what he does to little boys,” Lenny had told them, and they had believed him. “The man’s depraved. I’ve always thought so,” he heard Chantry say, as he slammed the door on them—hard! An action he regretted. The crash shook the entire building. Hansa’s foot slipped as he tried to re-enter. He threw out a hand which Richard failed to grasp. Hansa was gone—with a cry—landing with a sickening thump on the jagged ice crusting thirty feet below. Oh, my God! Please—don’t let him be dead. There he lay, in a ghastly twisted sprawl, quite still. His bedroom door was opening and he was seeing it from his bed. One moment he had been leaning out of the window and now he was in bed, with no recollection of how he got there.

“Okay to kip with you tonight, Uncle?” the boy whispered.

It was Hansa standing there as if nothing had happened.

Nothing *had* happened.

Richard’s senses reeled. So intense had been his dreaming that it was a little while before he was able to accept reality again. And then Hansa touched him. “You okay, Uncle?”

“Sure I am, son. Come on, get in. I think I had a little too much to drink and I was dreaming again—about you. Are you okay?”

“Sure.” Surprised.

“It was hellish. You were killed. I dreamt you fell out of that window.”

“Well, ah didnae, ’cos here am ah.”

“And am I glad of it? I don’t know what I’d do if anything bad were to happen to you, son.” He sighed with relief. “Tell me, Hansa—have Miss Chantry or Brian ever seen you come here?”

“Nub’dy sees me come, Uncle. How?”

“Because it would be frowned upon. People hate things they can’t understand, and they can’t understand grown men and little boys kipping together.”

“Ah’m no a little boy, Uncle, ah’m twelve nearly,” he protested.

“I know and I told you once before, I don’t mean it in a disparaging way.”

“What’s ’sparagin’?”

“It means to belittle, to make to seem small, but I mean it in the nicest possible way. You see, I love you as if you were my own son, and fathers sometimes see their young ’uns as kids always. You’ll find out when you’re grown up and have your own.”

“That’ll be a laff day.”

“No it won’t. It’ll be terrific. Come closer—I think I might just squeeze you to death. God bless you, little Hansa.”

Midway through the evening, Eddie was upstairs supervising the showering, then returning the cleaned-up boys to Richard, who was in the recreation room. Chantry was in the girls' wing with her brood, and Louise and Lee had gone home several hours earlier. This being Saturday there were no other staff in the building so that when the telephone rang it was Eddie—having the office keys—who charged downstairs to answer it.

Richard did not suspect an impending upset for one moment as he played an exciting game of Ludo with Hansa, Danny and Kelvin.

"Six," shouted Danny, stuffing the the back in the pot and throwing again. "Two," he yelled again, throwing his arms in the air, then gleefully returning Richard's last counter back to the start.

"Yay, you stopped him," said husky-voiced Kelvin.

Richard's man had been on the point of entering the safe zone. "You little swine," he said, striking Danny's chin a light glancing blow. "I'll get you for that."

"You should have let Uncle Richard win," Hansa scolded.

"Spoken like a guy with three men not started yet," Kelvin laughed, his eyes flashing beneath animated brows. "Don't worry, I'll get Dan for you, Uncle—but not with a friggin' three I won't."

Eddie blasted into their midst. "Richard—the phone. It's for you—very urgent. It's Louise—she's—" Richard was on his way to the office.

He picked up the instrument. "Hullo, Louise, what is it, my pet? Louise—Louise—this is Richard. Are you there? Louise!"

He turned to Eddie who was looking anxious.

"There's no one here, Eddie. Are you sure it was Louise?"

"Oh aye, it was Louise all right. She sounded excited, a bit desperate. She said something about Lee—something was happening to him. A bit garbled, it was. I just said, 'Hold on luv, I'll get Richard, he's only in the sitting room' and she said 'Quickly Eddie please'. She didn't put the phone down, did she?"

"No, she didn't hang up. There's no tone. I wonder what could have happened."

"She sounded frightened, Richard. Try dialling again."

He did so. "Nothing doing—engaged signal."

"I think you ought to drive over. I'll come an' all if you like."

"No Eddie, thanks. It's probably something and nothing, but I'll go if you don't mind, If she'd replaced the receiver I could have called her back. Probably doesn't know she left it off the hook. Won't be long."

As Louise always took the car herself, Richard jumped into the Transit and took off over a road that was still not clear of snow and ice. A frosty mist further impeded his progress.

He bounced painfully slowly along the single track where, at loch-side, the fog thickened, throwing the main beam back at him, making the going ever more difficult. Forced to drive cautiously to avoid sliding off the road into deep water, he had time to think. What could possibly have happened at the cottage to have made Louise leave the phone dangling? Perhaps Lee had had an accident or been taken ill and she had been called away to attend him—or had gone along to the hospital with the ambulance.

Rounding the last bend and heading for the clearing in front of the cottage, he again cursed the mist for at that point, on a clear night, the headlights would have flooded the entire building. It could hardly be seen.

He climbed down from the vehicle after cutting the engine and, noting that the lounge light was on, approached with stealth and a feeling of heightening suspense. It was like in the cinema when a director might use the subjective camera technique, offering the actor's point-of-view as he walked slowly toward some unknown 'thing' in dread expectation.

The trees stood about him in mournful attendance; still, silent, and frighteningly atmospheric; and except for the lapping of the water against the shingle shoreline, a deathly quiet prevailed. The freezing

mist hung like a vast, grey repellent shroud, holding all life in suspension.

The door opened and Louise appeared so suddenly, he jumped inadvertently. "Louise," he said, "what's happened, for God's sake?"

She was clearly upset. "Oh, Richard," she began, "he's gone now. What kept you so long?"

"You can see what kept me—this damned fog. Now—who's gone?"

"It was that nasty little man, Richard." She caught his blank look. "You know who I mean all right—that perfectly horrible slimy little Lenny man. Gerry Gadd told me you know him. So did Chantry. Seems everyone knows about him but me."

"Lenny Herbertson? He was here?"

"Yes, he was here. Who the devil is the little creep? He said you owed him some money, and that if he didn't get it he would do something to Lee."

"Is Lee all right? Eddie said you—"

"Yes, he's all right—now." She went on to explain how Lenny had gone into Lee's room. She'd phoned, but he'd grabbed the receiver from her. He'd poked his nose in everywhere. She thought he'd ransack the place. When he'd left, she had been too upset to move. "I was just dialling the police when you came. Richard, you have to tell me what this is all about."

"Very well, Louise," he murmured, "I'll tell you. I owe it to you." He told her about his brief, but traumatic association with Van Dorn and of Lenny's first appearance; how he'd been knocked out; how, when he'd regained consciousness, Van Dorn and the boys were nowhere in sight. "I got back to the hotel on foot, in time to have a shave and a shower and prepare for breakfast. I had no idea what I should do. Not surprisingly, Van Dorn hadn't returned to the hotel and Karl Schwartz was so curious about the way I looked, I had to come up with some stupid lie about being blind drunk and bumping into a lamp post. The story was out by mid-day—on telly—the evening papers really went to town. Evidently the Lenny character had freed himself—I was never very good at knots—and had made it to a police station several hours later. The younger boy had been sexually abused, exactly how wasn't disclosed. I vacillated between becoming involved by reporting the matter—and keeping quiet and staying in the clear. My conscience troubled me for days, but then, by some miracle I was let off the hook. The maniac was caught. Lenny, the sly fellow, had remembered his car number. The boys kept on insisting there were two men involved, and that the other one was called Buddy, but to give Van Dorn his due, he claimed he alone was responsible. I couldn't forget the incident, but at least I didn't think I had anything to worry about—until roughly four years later when Lenny turned up, along with a brute of a minder. They forced their way into the house and—"

"They entered our home—in Oxford?"

"That's right. They'd seen me on a television chat show and somehow tracked me down. Lenny was then nineteen. They threatened to expose me. Perhaps I should have been strong. Perhaps I should have sent them packing with a flea in their ear—but you see I wasn't strong. The bully boy—all black leather and chains and tattoos—and spots—dragged Lee out of bed. Actually hauled him up by one ankle. Threatened all manner of reprisals if I didn't cough up."

"This is incredible. Why was I never told before? They must have hurt Lee. He was just a baby."

"He'd just turned three. He wasn't really hurt, and I'd asked him not to say anything—because I didn't want to worry you. Anyway, I thought that was the last I'd see of them—but that isn't the way with blackmailers. Lenny turned up alone some three years later. Both he and his vicious mate had been 'guests of Missis Majesty' as he put it. Brute Man was still serving an extended sentence. I never found out what they'd been indicted for. I kept seeing Lenny, on and off, paying him to keep quiet and to prevent him bringing his vile bodyguard—until we came here. He traced me through the media—that nasty business with Big Joe—and it has started all over again. He'd labelled me 'child molester', don't you see? And in

my present position here, it would be a simple matter for others to do the same. However, I've a plan to be rid of him once and for all, and when you and Lee leave here at Christmas, I hope to carry it out."

"But why didn't you go to the police in the first place, darling? You hadn't done anything. You had nothing to fear."

"I told you why, Louise. I was afraid."

Richard couldn't tell her why he was so afraid. There was simply no way his innermost thoughts could be divulged—to anyone! Before coming to the school—even before the Van Dorn incident, he had reached a point where he considered himself beyond deliverance. He was not long married and should have been happy, but he wasn't. Louise still went to her Oxford bookshop and he was left with empty days, some of which he spent sitting at his keyboard staring endlessly at the yawn of A4 blankness. Dismal routine set in with malignant earnestness. Monotony nibbled away at the edges of his sensibilities, and doubts and depressions came and went. It was as if civil war had broken out—within his own head—an insidious thought-war. Benign feelings—there from puberty perhaps?—had risen against him, erupting with the might and march of marauding forces, laying siege to his creative processes, subjugating, damning. His lack of ambition worsened.

He would often drive into town, then wander aimlessly, creating a fertile seed-bed for self-inflicted tensions and torments that always arose from such wanderings. He plunged into monomaniacal pursuits which simply would not be sated. It was as if he had a built-in antenna put there for the specific purpose of zoning him in on passing or browsing boys. He would follow them in and out of shops or watch them at play—with that same strange longing he had experienced as a child himself. He was being compelled to like what he was doing when he did not want to like it—springing the pain-pleasure trap—having him latch on to and follow—albeit but briefly—those young boys whose rough, tough appearances most ignited him.

Why?

Why was it that the human boy was made and shaped in such a completely irresistible way? The boy. His was that most captivating assemblage of living tissue in all creation, with a refreshing newness, a zestful grip on life and a questing innocence that adulthood would entirely despoil. The boy. He knew what he wanted to wear—he knew what made him look good. Him with his skinfit blue jeans with their teasing arrangement of pockets and seams and trademark patches, and worn and scuffed contact points which all fused together in enhanced, but inexplicable, appeal. Him with his enquiring eyes and lively expression, his rawness, his manly gait, and his lustrous hair open to the play of the wind.

His damnable overall rightness which made Richard want to touch, to have, to hold, to love—and to hate himself for so wanting. He could not look away. He couldn't. Just how did one satisfy such lascivious urges? Could it be that he was unique, absolutely alone in the way he desired close association with young boys? The thought gave him pause. He felt debased and utterly wretched and he was often so overcome by the anguish generated that he had cried from sorrow and frustration. It was because his self-searching had become so insufferably debilitating that, coupled with the intolerably poor view he had of himself, he had been forced to do something about it. His young friends at Pinewoods were having a distinctly palliative effect, but questions remained.

He couldn't understand, and was greatly worried by, the peculiar fascination he had for boys' clothing and blue jeans in particular. Hansa's little bottom was a singular delight—shaped exactly right in proportion to the length of his legs. His faded well-worn Levi's were somewhat on the small side; had become an intrinsic part of him; had moulded themselves to his shape; hugging him, tightly clinging. The combination was, to Richard, vividly—even gratingly—erotic. So snug-fitting were those pants of his that the centre seam between the back pockets scored deeply the cleft between his buttocks, separating and emphasising their firm little roundnesses. Turn the boy around and there before one's acquisitive eyes was displayed the thrilling bump where frayed flies curved over and around his genitals; where white-crested

creases radiated from his crotch, having their own curious appeal; where thighs and knees had been rubbed smooth to feel like soft suede under a light touch. In his 'dog' dream, he'd been enabled to nose right in there without qualm, but he felt compelled to do the same in reality and therein lay the torment. Of such stuff was madness bom?

No, he certainly couldn't tell Louise any of that...

The snow was well compacted by now so, at playtime, snowballing was out. Sliding was in, however, and the unwary had to guard against falling down, or being mown down by some exuberant boy.

It was a bright day and Richard took the opportunity to get some candid photographs. He shot a full frontal of Danny, making sure his groin was in the picture. Try resisting being a crotch-watcher with a lad like Danny around! Here was a boy who had become very much aware of, and was apparently very proud of, the high calibre weapon betwixt his legs. Lately, his chosen undergarments were football shorts, rather than pants, and the measure of his masculinity could plainly be seen pressing against the inside of his left trouser leg.

Eddie had taken the day off to go painting in the hills. Richard now had sufficient confidence to take on all forty single-handedly—though his gang helped by keeping the younger boys in line. They were on his side and wanted to see him okay. Ever more rewarding became life amongst ‘these awful boys, these menaces to society’!

Peering through his single lens reflex, he was taken by surprise by the face of Stevie which hove into view, ending in big fat close-up—which he snapped.

“Hi, stallion,” Richard laughed. “Wanted your own private snapshot, did you?”

“It’s not that, Uncle—it’s—well, y’know that weedy guy what came into our dorm the other night—the one you said you didn’t like?”

“What about him, Stevie?”

The boy pointed. “He’s here again—look.”

“Good god, yes. Thanks for telling me. I know what he wants, but he sure ain’t gonna get it.”

Herbertson was lurking in the trees near the drive entrance. He didn’t appear willing to venture closer. Remorse? Very unlikely. His reticence probably arose from having seen the whole school out at one time.

Stevie continued, “You said you was gonna tell us about him, Uncle. You said you wanted me an’ the guys to help you give him the boot.”

“And I still do, son—more than ever. After lights out we’ll have a secret pow-wow. Tell the others in your room, but nobody else, okay?”

By the time break was over, Herbertson had made himself scarce again.

Came lights out. Richard settled all the boys, then crept into room three, closed the door and turned on the light.

“Okay, gang,” he whispered. “Gather round. It’s time for your bedtime story.” He repeated the tale he had told Louise, going on to outline his plan for disposing of Lenny, a plan which filled the lads with excitement, and they readily agreed to take part.

At around one o’clock, Richard embarked on one of his nocturnal prowls, dropping in on Hansa first. His lad was sound asleep. It was no longer necessary to raise him, because his bed-wetting had ceased completely.

He was taken by surprise when he entered room three, as were Mark and Danny who were sharing a bed. They were wide awake, their bodies taut, stiff with fear from having been found out.

“We ain’t doin’ nuthin’, Uncle,” Mark gasped.

Richard regarded them affectionately for a second. “Relax boys,” he whispered. “We’ve been all through this before. You should know by now you’re not doing anything wrong. I like to see boys I like liking each other, so let’s stop pretending—you were rubbing off, right? Your secret is safe with me. You know that.”

“Geez, you’re sump’n else, Uncle,” Mark said. “I never come across nub’dy like you before. I bet Uncle Eddie’d do his crappy crunch. I bet he’d make us stand in the corridor with us hands on oor heads for an hour—two mebbe.” Danny’s face was buried in his older pal’s neck.

“I can’t answer for Uncle Eddie, Mark. Tell me, has he ever caught you at it?”

“Huh, no! He never comes round after lights out. Oh wow, I forgot. There was one time after school—but we wasn’t doin’ much. Bet matron would go bonkie if she found out. I bet she’d chuck us out the school.”

“Well, I dunno about that. You can never tell how adults will react. Most will agree there’s nothing wrong with jerking off, but still get very uptight if they should ever actually discover it. Also, a good many seem to have forgotten what it was like to be a kid, so it’s best to be careful.” He smiled, looking at Danny who hadn’t moved. “Take good care of my shy little lad there, Mark. He needs you.”

“Thanks, Uncle,” Mark whispered, gratefully.

The other boys were still sleeping soundly. Before he left, he looked them over. There was the ineffable Stevie, seeming even more deeply mysterious in sleep; the supremely seraphic Kelvin, surely out-of-place in an institution such as this; the brutish, yet soft-centred Stuart; and Angie, who had kicked the blankets from his bed and who sprawled crazily, angled limbs everywhere, one leg dangling over the edge. Richard gently lifted the leg and covered him over again. He whispered, “Good night, lads”, and crept from the room.

Back in his own bed, he heard the scampering of tiny feet, and in seconds Tommy was by his side. “Hi, little pal,” Richard breathed. “Did I wake you up just then?”

“Aye, but’s okay, Uncle.”

“So what are you after—a wee cuddle?” Tommy didn’t reply, but took no second bidding. He dived into bed head first, feverishly scrabbling around beneath the blankets, like a ferret down a rabbit hole. With his one-inch waggler stiff as a nail, he ended up between Richard’s legs where he started to feel around. Richard reached down and pulled him out. Even though the boy’s need was clear, some innate sense suggested dissuasion. He was simply too young—and totally guileless.

“Hey hey hey, come on now, son. A wee cuddle I said—okay? What would your daddy say if he knew what you were up to?”

“I dunno,” Tommy murmured, content to be embraced.

“I don’t think he’d like it, and you’ll be seeing him again soon won’t you—when you go home for Christmas?”

“I dunno. Yes, no, mebbe. Sometimes my da’ takes me out. Sometimes I don’t like him ’cos he drinks stuff what makes him legs-wobbly an’ he ponks funny. An’ they take me away.”

“And what does your mum say to that?”

“I dunno. My ma never takes me out, ’cos she stays in a place where angels live. It’s a good place but my da’ sez I cannae go there.”

Poor little devil, Richard thought. So that’s it. His mother was dead, his father an alcoholic, and the youngster himself was palmed off on some kids’ home for the holidays. He ran his free hand through the boy’s curls. “Never mind, Tommy. I got you now. You can stay with me—just for tonight, okay?”

“Sure. I like you more ’n anybody, Uncle,” Tommy murmured, snuggling in closer.

“I know you do, son, and I like you too. Settle down now, there’s a good lad.”

The holiday arrived and with customary whoop and holler the school disbanded. All the children went home except those who either didn’t have homes or were not permitted to go there. They remained at Pinewoods Hall to be looked after by volunteer staff members. Richard knew his seven boys were amongst those staying so, of course, he’d stay too because his combat team was happily intact! Whether there’d be anything to combat was another matter.

Ramsie was vacationing at home with his latest girlfriend, and they were willing to have the balance which included young Tommy.

The two men had decided not to use the school buildings at all. Instead, Ramsie would take his five to his village residence and Richard would use the cottage—which fitted his plans exactly. He had deliberately not sent Lenny’s Christmas cheque in the hope the man would show himself.

The weather had turned bitterly cold again as Richard loaded his charges into the Transit along with their belongings, and it was whilst he was organising the stores that Elizabeth leaned from the office window, informing him of an incoming phone call.

“Ah Richard, me old cock sparrer. I s’pose you fought you’d seen the last o’ me this side o’ Christmas—right?”

“Well I—”

“You might ’ave if you’d sent my money. What ’appened to that cheque?” He sounded cross.

“What cheque was that, Herbertson?”

“You know what cheque. That what you said you’d send that night I caught yer wiv yer little bum-boys, so don’t come the dumb bastard wiv me—right?”

“But I did that. I posted it exactly as I said I would.” Lying was fun. “To number 8 Culcabeag. That was right, wasn’t it?”

“I was away for a few days.”

“Well then, it must be on your door mat.”

“It ain’t, I was just there.”

“What about the warden or superintendent, or whoever’s in charge?”

“She’s away.”

“I would suggest that she has the envelope and that you go and see her right away.”

“I can’t. She’s right away—for the ’oliday, and I want my money before Christmas, Dicky baby.”

Richard injected a deliberate lengthy silence. This was going exactly the way he wanted it. “Y’know, you are a bloody great neck-ache, Herbertson. There’s nothing I can do about it now. The banks are closed and so is the school. The kids are all away. You only just caught me in fact. I’m leaving for my cottage.” Come on, rise to the bait.

Lenny did. “You’d better fink o’ sumfing quick, Richard.” The pips sounded and he was forced to drop another coin in the box.

“I can lay my hands on some cash, but not before tomorrow night. Give me a ring at the cottage to make sure I’m back from Inverness.” He gave Lenny the number. “Then come out to me and I’ll give you some money. Do you know where the cottage is?”

“I make it my business to find out fings.”

“I still say you’ll push me too far one day,” Richard snarled, smiling.

“Oh, I don’t fink so, sticky Dicky. Not likely is it? Tell me, mate, are we gonna be alone tomorrer, or is yer wife an’ kid wiv yer?”

“They’ve already gone south for the holiday. I’ll be alone.”

“I wanna fly souf an’ all, for the winter, yer dig, so I’ll be seein’ yer tomorrer night. You’d better not let me down again, cockie.”

Although it was quite dark when they arrived, it was just possible to make out the white horses on the waters of the loch, whipped up by the increasing wind. The pines thrashed against a clear starlit backdrop and swirling dust particles from the unmetalled single track peppered and stung them into speedier unloading. Rugs were pushed against doors to prevent draughts and, chores done within the hour, they all clustered around a roaring fire with mugs of hot soup.

“And tomorrow night’s the night, boys. That phone call I had just before we left was our man. You just a wee bit scared, are you?”

“You kiddin’, Uncle?” Stu asked, as he jumped to his feet and strutted confidently about the room. “I told yer once, be a doddle. I could prob’ly do it on me tod if I had to. I’m bigger than he is, an’ even if I wusnae—”

“You can stuff that, Stu. I want in an’ aw,” Mark said. The others agreed.

“Yeah, an’ if I was to throw one o’ my wall-to-wall rammies, I could sort the bastard for yer, Uncle. I’d kick his teeth so far down his gullet, he’d bite his own baws off,” Danny threw in.

Richard’s eyes clicked several stops wider. “My god, Danny, I reckon that’s the longest sentence I ever heard you say. Colourful too, but I think we’ll stick to the original plan.”

“We’ll get him for you, Uncle,” Hansa said, inching closer and pressing a sympathetic hand on Richard’s knee.

“You’re sure now?” came from Richard. “There’d be a helluva stink if anyone found out. I’d be kicked out of the school for a start. Maybe worse.”

“We’re all with you, man, and nubdy’s gonna find out—cross me heart,” said Stu, nodding around the boys who nodded back in assent. “But why did we bring the monkey suits?”

“Because it’s best if none of you are seen. And more effective if Herbertson doesn’t know who his attackers are.”

“But we only got six monkey suits, and there’s seven of us.” “Right—so Hansa’ll be an invisible spectator.”

“Oh no, Uncle. I wanna help. Please. I can be disguised as something else. I don’t see why they should have all the fun,” Hansa pleaded. “I could be Tarzan again. I still got my wotsit thingy, an’ I could put a mask on or sump’n. Makes sense, Uncle. Tarzan and the apes an’ all that.”

“Yes, but even with a mask on you’ll still look like a boy.”

“I don’t care.”

“You worry too much, Uncle,” Stu put in. “Yer dinnae wanna go round feeling sorry for this wee crap-arse after what he did to you and Lee and Auntie Louise. You got a right to make him suffer. Leave him to us, and jus’ don’t look, if you’re too scared.”

“Let’s have a rehearsal,” Richard said. “You can demonstrate on me.”

“You mean tie you up, Uncle?” Hansa obviously didn’t like the idea.

“No, little kid, I simply meant for you all to see just how quickly you can render me helpless.”

“With pleasure,” said Stu, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

“Painlessly!” Richard warned.

“Whadyer always call Hansa little kid for?” Mark asked, giving the younger boy a poke. “We all call him yellor river.”

“Habit, I guess. He is a little kid to me—you all are. What’s wrong with that?”

“Get lost, Uncle—we ain’t little kids,” Danny said.

“Have it your own way. Anyhow, where do you get off calling him yellow river?”

“It’s ’cos o’ that pop song. Christie—you know—what they play all time. An’ ’cos he’s a pee-bed.”

“No I ain’t, Mark Selby,” Hansa protested, hotly. “Not no more, I’m not. You better watch it, else mebbe you’ll get duffed up—by me!”

“Oh wow! Uncle’s fave rave got tough all of a sudden. Okay, *little kid*,” Mark taunted him—though without malice—“Right now’d be a good time. Get ’em up.”

“Can it, Selby. I dinnae wanna get blood on Uncle’s carpet,” laughed Hansa.

“Wouldn’t be my blood, kiddie.”

Richard was enjoying the repartee. “Y’know guys, it’s great having you all here. You’re a wonderful bunch of lads, and don’t let anybody tell you different—or else they’ll have Stu to answer to.”

Stu fisted the air and bowed around in imitation of a victorious boxer.

“Sit doon, Robertson, ’less yer wantin’ knocked doon,” Mark said. “You don’t wanna go sayin’ things like that, Uncle. Gets ’im all big-headed.”

“You’re anglin’ for a manglin’ you are, Selby, yer great wanker,” Stu retaliated, forgetting himself. “Oops, sorry, Uncle.”

The spontaneity and lack of inhibition pleased the man, and he was anxious to show he considered the remark no great crime. “Sorry about what, Stu? Everyone knows Mark’s a great wanker. It ain’t no big deal—right?”

“Sherrup, Uncle,” said Mark, acting bashful.

Some of the others nudged the dark-haired boy, and those who didn’t know Richard as intimately as Mark, Danny and Hansa, looked at him askance, not able to grasp quite yet the idea that a mere adult (who shouldn’t know about such stuff) could actually understand them.

“As a matter of fact, lads, school rules don’t apply here,” Richard went on. “Feel free to do and say anything you like—within reason, of course.”

“Anything?” squealed Mark, evidently spoiling for some sort of action, and wanting to put the proposition to the test.

“Go on,” responded Richard, cautiously, wondering what he’d let himself in for.

“Right—a joke: Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, her knickers all tattered an’ tom. It wasn’t the spider that sat down beside her, but Little Boy Blue with a horn.”

They all hooted, even though they’d heard it before—then looked to Richard for his reaction. He was laughing too, at the rampant high-spirits the boys were working up.

“I got one,” said Danny. “What’s long an’ thin an’ covered in skin, red in parts an’ shoved in tarts?”

The boys waited for Richard’s answer. “You tell me,” he said.

“Rhubarb—what else?” laughed Danny, pretending innocence.

“That ain’t right, Dan, yer dirty old man,” and Mark grabbed his pal round the neck and roughed him up on the carpet. “Hey, Uncle, you wanna know what this wee guy said to me? Said he wished he had a ten-foot wallop—”

“He’s got one,” Stu said, sullenly, sensitive about his tiny pecker.

“And what would Danny do with a ten-foot wallop?” Richard asked.

“Think of it, will yer? Ten foot of uncontrollable flesh—wowee! He’d have to wind it round his body to stop it rampagin’.”

“You’re a liar, Mark,” Danny flared, giving his chum a punch in the guts. “It was you said that. It was him what said it, Uncle. He’s jus’ a dirty great liar.”

“Anyway, sherrup. I jus’ thought of another: Mary had a little bike, she rode it back to front, and every time the wheels went round, the spokes went up her—” a loud sniff replacing the unsaid word. “Y’want more? Little Jack Homy sat in a corny givin’ Bo Peep the eye. He shoved in his dick, she said, ‘That was quick,’ an’ ‘Oh, what a *big* boy you are!’”

Which made them all howl again. Except for Kelvin who was looking distinctly downcast. Richard would find out why as soon as he could get the boy on his own.

He put it out of his mind and repeated his challenge. Reticent at first, the boys were soon falling upon him with joyful abandon, forcing him to the ground, securing him in holds against which, combined, he had no defence, establishing that mere seconds were all they needed to disable a grown man. Even when Richard fought back with pretended ferocity they were easily able to hold him, and he found himself enjoying the physical contact, the close proximity and the scents of these exciting young bodies. Now boys straddled his chest and began ‘torturing’ him, and now he had thrown them off again. Different restraints were tried, and in the midst of the friendly fracas he threw the occasional wrestling hold on one or another, won a submission or two, and continued to embrace them in various odd attitudes whilst they all

took a breather. This was the kind of work-out he hadn't experienced since his schooldays and every breathless second was bliss. Then, of a sudden he found his head trapped, scissored between Danny's strong blue-jeaned thighs, with his face mere inches from the boy's crotch. The scents emanating from there, coupled with the realisation that he was just a bite away from the extent and girth of that terrific weapon of Danny's, made his head swim. Visualising that prospective sperm factory sparked the view that he was as close to a centre of creation as is possible for life-bound man to get, and the grip and containment very nearly blew a libidinal fuse. Hansa was trying to pull him off, but Danny's legs tightened even more around his neck and now the ecstasy turned to alarm. Someone else was pinning his arms and he couldn't move. Even his jaws were clamped tightly shut. He was completely helpless. Needle-points of searingly bright light hovered against darkening vision. Oh my god, he thought, I'm going to black out. Danny—please—help... Danny—stop... Danny... Daaa—neeeeeeeeeee... He felt himself whirling in space, impelled by some strange invisible power, jetting him upward and outward with such massive acceleration that the air was sucked from his lungs. He screamed an unheard scream.

Danny released his hold. His neck was free. Blood surged back into his brain and he could breathe again.

“Uncle, Uncle Richard—are you okay?” There was fear and urgency in the sound of their voices.

He sat up and rolled his head. “Jesus Christ, lads, I think I blacked out. How long was I away?”

“Just a minute or sump'n. We didn't notice at first.” Stu helped him to his feet. “We was all scared as hell, man.”

“It was my fault, Uncle,” Danny said. “I didnae mean it.”

“Don't worry, son. I enjoyed the battle—mostly. Anyhow, you all proved you can do the job, so, let's break out the coke and crisps and watch that Hammer horror on telly.”

“Was that him?” Hansa asked, when Richard replaced the receiver.

“That was him, lads,” Richard replied. “Time to get ready ’cos it’s X minus sixty minutes—and counting, so—into your monkey suits.”

Stu gathered up his shaggy costume. “This is gonna be volcanic,” he said. “But I’m goin’ starkers inside this thing, ’cos it gets too hot—specially the rubbery head things.”

“Change right here, boys. Don’t mind me,” Richard said. “I’ve already seen everything you’ve got.”

“Yeah, but we ain’t seen everything you got, Uncle—eh, boys?” Stu said with a sly grin. “One ’o these bright shiny days we’re gonna rip your pants clean off, man. Else you ain’t never gonna be one of us.”

“Well,” Richard stammered, “if that’s what it takes—”

“You ain’t gonna have nuthin’ to say about it, Uncle,” Mark added.

“Mind if we change the subject? I have an idea. The eyeholes of those masks are a shade large and show a lot of white skin. Let’s black around your eyes for a more evil look.”

“Yeah, great. Boot polish?”

“Naw, we need the boot polish for other tilings,” Mark said, looking meaningfully at Danny.

“Watch it,” Danny warned, “else you won’t need nothing, ’cos I’ll black yer eyes with my fists.”

“Yeah? That’ll be a laff day.” Mark climbed into the body part of the gorilla suit and Danny zipped up the back for him. “We can use charcoal from the fireplace.”

“You gonna rub that stinky suntan gloop all over me again, Uncle?” Hansa asked, stuffing his penile appendage into the tight little chamois ‘Tarzan’ slip.

“Sure—why not? ‘Come to my arms my beamish boy. Oh frabjous day, callooh callay, he chortled in his joy.’ That’s Jabberwocky.”

“Uncle’s flipped, guys,” sang Kelvin, huskily. “Must be the excitement what’s done it.”

“Flipped, nothing. That’s from a poem by Lewis Carroll.”

“Pal o’ yours, is he?” put in Angie.

Hansa over-rode the general badinage with an attempted blood-curdling Tarzan yell, as he bounded towards Richard with flexed biceps.

“Savage wee fucker,” murmured Stevie, then, “Geez, forgot again, Uncle. Penny in the swear box.”

“Have that one on the house, stallion—and shift yer butts. We haven’t got much time.” He took the Leichner bottle, poured some of the liquid make-up into his hand, and started applying it to young Hansa’s skin.

In accordance with their plan, none of the boys were actually inside the cottage when Richard heard the approach of Lenny’s Mini. He was punctual anyway, Richard mused, as he lit a cigarette to accompany the double whisky he had already poured. He had had a couple of drinks earlier to steady his nerves.

He heard the vehicle stop. The engine died, sounding pleased to do so. The car door creaked open—was banged shut. A moment of silence. And then the quiet footfalls on the tiled approach. A tap on the door. “Come in,” Richard said, “The door’s open.”

Lenny poked his head in first. When he saw Richard sitting alone, the rest of him came in and he closed the door. Then he strode casually into the centre of the room, gazing around. “You don’t ’arf do yourself proud, don’t yer, me old cock?” he sneered.

For the first time ever this man was a welcome intruder. “I’m getting older, Herbertson. I’m beginning to need my comforts. Take a seat—there—opposite me.”

“I won’t take me trarsis off, I’m not stoppin’—as they say.”

“I’d like you to have a drink with me. Whisky?”

“Oh well, ta muchly, I don’t mind if I do.” Lenny rubbed his hands briskly and took the indicated chair. “Very cosy this, very cosy indeed.”

“Yes. Snug as the proverbial bug.” Richard poured the drink and leaned forward to meet Lenny’s reach. “There you go—cheers.”

“Yes, cheers. Ain’t you gone a bit lovey-dovey tonight, me old cock sparrer? I mean, it ain’t usual. You ain’t—er—finkin’ o’ doin’ noffin’ shtoopid, are yer?” Lenny stroked his nostrils with the index finger of his free hand.

“Like what?”

“Well, I wouldn’t wanna go puttin’ no ideas in yer ’ead.” “I’m just pleased to have some company this cold evening,” Richard continued, airily.

“You ain’t never been pleased to ’ave my company before.”

“One has to call a truce sometimes. Even the protagonists in the trenches called a truce at Christmas—and it is Christmas.”

“Jus’ wondered, that’s all. So we is all alone—right?”

“That’s right. We don’t usually see a soul in winter. The track ends in a sort of car park about four miles further along. I was never here in the tourist season, but I’m told they come in their droves—to climb the ‘Meall’, as they call it locally. Gaelic name. Don’t ask me to pronounce it.” Richard was happy he could sound so convincingly chatty—but he must get closer to the point of the exercise. “So what did you think of this cottage before?” he broached.

“Before? How d’yer mean like?”

“Well, you saw it the night you visited my wife and son, didn’t you?”

“Nar then, fancy me forgettin’ a fink like that. I hopes they didn’t get too upset, only I figured you was wantin’ to do a crap-out, an’ I figured if I stirred fings up a bit like, you’d get the picture. I don’t like making a nuisance o’ myself, ’cos I’m a nice guy deep down—only I can’t stand welshers, see?”

“And what about Louise and Lee?”

“Funny question that, cock. I don’t dig it.”

“Where are they now, Herbertson? Where are Louise and Lee now?”

“Why ask me, Dicky baby? You feelin’ okay, are yer? Yer telt me yersel’ they was away for the ’oliday, didn’t yer?”

“Oh, they’ve gone away all right—for good.”

“I don’t foller.”

“So you don’t follow?” Richard held his glass in both hands and bent forward as if studying its contents, then raised only his eyes to look at Lenny.

For the first time Lenny seemed uneasy. There was something unusually assured about Richard’s manner, and it was clearly giving him the creeps. “Look Richard, me old cock, I dunno what you’re tryna get at, but I fink you better gimme what I come out ’ere for, an’ I’ll just jump in me little banger and beat it—eh?” A scuffling sound from the kitchen startled him. “What was that?”

“What was what, Lenny?”

Indicating the door to the kitchen, he stammered, “I fought I ’eard a funny noise out there.”

“Did you?”

“Yes I did. You ain’t got sumdy ’ere wiv yer, ’ave yer?”

“Like who?”

“I dunno, do I? But I know I—there—’ear that?”

“Just the mice.”

“Bleedin’ big mice.”

“Highland mice. Breed ’em big around here. Porridge, I shouldn’t wonder. Big as gorillas, I guess you’d say. You’d be amazed.”

“Pull the ower, Richard.” He stood. “I’m warnin’ yer—you’re talkin’ funny an’ I don’t like it. If you’re tryna wriggle out of our bargain... Just you ’and over the cash right now, an’ m be on me way.”

“You’ll be on your way all right, but not the way you’re expecting.” There was a small glass bell on his chair-side table. He picked it up and rang it.

The kitchen door opened and two gorillas entered. The curtains to Lenny’s right parted and two more gorillas were standing there. Lenny tried to make for the door, but a third pair barred his way. Then, from the kitchen came a muscular little figure with an evil face inked on to a white cotton bag covering his head. He advanced towards Lenny followed by the six beasts who forced him back into his seat

“Take him,” Richard commanded. The gorillas fell upon him, swiftly binding his ankles and tying his hands behind him.

Lenny, ghostly pale, found his tongue at last. “Christ almighty, I mean, bleedin’ ’ell, Richard—what are yer doin’? Oh hey, come on mate, what is all this? What in gawd’s name are all these animals? You gotta be jokin’, right?”

“It’s no joke Lenny—me old cock sparrer! This is right where your fun ends and mine begins. I reached that breaking point I warned you about. Only fair—yes?”

“Okay Richard, fair enough. I got the message. Lemme go—right?”

“Wrong.”

“Richard—please—”

“I told you, it’s funtime. For us, of course.”

“So what yer gonna do? Whadyer need all these gorilla fings for? What do yer want, fer Christ’s sake?”

“Eleven thousand quid I think I made it Lenny—in total—plus interest naturally. Because of our long association I can offer you easy terms. Say twenty per cent down and the rest by the end of the year.”

“Aw come on, Richard. Yer know I can’t pay. Yer know it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong again, cock-rot. Of course you can pay. You don’t need money.”

“What then?”

“How about blood? Maybe your life? Oh, Lenny, my friend, you have such a lot to give. D’yer wanna know something else? No? Well, I’ll tell you anyway, ’cos you’re a captive audience. It’s just great to be able to sit here, with my drink and my smoke and my helpers, just to listen to you singing a new song. You really can’t be a very happy little blackmailer right this minute, can you? You walked in here tonight expecting to leave with another bundle of unearned income, little dreaming that you wouldn’t be leaving here at all. So now, how about giving me a little information about Louise and Lee?”

“Oh shit. What do I know abart them ’cept what you told me yerself? They went away, that’s what you said, weren’t it?”

“That’s what I said. Tell me why, though. I’d like to hear you tell me why.”

An idea seemed to hatch in Lenny’s feeble brain. “You said they’d gone away, right? For good? They left you, is that it, Richard? They left you ’cos o’ me?”

“Because of you. Correct.”

“Well, that’s easy then, ain’ it? I’ll just tell ’em I’m gettin’ off your back. I’ll make it right for yer, Richard. Then I’ll just crawl into the bleedin’ woodwork and yer won’t never see me again. I swear it, Richard, on me muwer’s grave. I swear it, fer Christ’s sake.”

“Sorry. I’m not buying.” He turned to Hansa. “Okay, Tarzan, instruct your apemen to proceed.”

The boys had been instructed not to speak but their heavy breathing added to the sinister effect. Hansa prodded the animals into life again, flailing his aims to get them to do what they already knew they had to do.

Lenny could only watch—with quivering lips and growing fear. He watched one of the gorillas leave the cottage with a rusty petrol can, hearing what had to be petrol slopping around inside. Another had

picked up something he had been unable to make out—a quantity of nylon fishing line. He squirmed as the largest of the gorillas approached him again, armed with a long rope. Leaving a long trailing end, the creature tied the other around his chest. Tarzan bashed his shoulder to command his attention and indicated he should rise to his feet. Since his ankles were restrained, a couple of the animals carried him from the building, as others lumbered out with other unseen items.

Some fifty feet along from the cottage, in a clearing, they seated Lenny on a wooden chair they had placed directly beneath a sturdy tree branch.

Richard donned a heavy topcoat and scarf, jammed another cigarette into one corner of his mouth, stuck his hands in his pockets and nonchalantly crunched over the compacted snow to join them. The kids were playing their parts brilliantly, loping around animal-like.

Lenny watched them pour petrol into a pre-built wig-wam of sticks. He watched the top of the can replaced and the can re-located beneath the tree. A match was applied to a roll of paper, and the paper to the sticks. They exploded into flame. Then a number of torches were ignited, some of which were carried by the gorillas and others stuck in the ground at strategic points. Lenny flinched each time someone came close.

Richard knew Lenny had been held captive before—in prison—where he'd had 'rights' which ensured his safety. At least he would have known he'd stay alive. But he had absolutely no control over his fate here, and all manner of possible outcomes must by now be haunting him.

Richard warmed his hands at the blaze. "Isn't this jolly?" he said. "Now we can see what we're doing."

"Richard, my friend, what *are* you doing?" Lenny asked in a dry-throated whisper. "Whadyer want, mate? Why don't you just lemme go? Please. I promise I won't never bovver yer again."

"I would be guilty of committing a serious diplomatic blunder if I were to do as you say, Lenny. Being the moronic idiot you are, you'd immediately forget this moment and start your old tricks again, and I'd be the idiot if I allowed that to happen—wouldn't I?"

"Oh I wouldn't Richard, I wouldn't."

"You'll never have the chance to prove it, cockie. It's all too late."

The gorillas took the loose end of the rope which was attached to Lenny and threw it over the branch above. Then they hauled away so that Lenny was gradually raised from the chair until he was made fast with his feet swinging a yard or so above the ground.

"Jesus Christ, I can't breave proper," Lenny cried. "The rope acrost me chest, it's too—it's Weedin' painful." Now he switched from entreaty to anger. "Get me outa this right now an' quit actin' the Gestapo officer, yer Weedin' arse-faced shit!"

"The man's still got fight left in him," Richard said. "Lenny boy, you ain't seen nothing yet. And I'm still waiting for you to talk to me about Louise and Lee."

"I dunno what the fuck yer 'spect me to say." Lenny was suddenly stricken by a dread thought. "Oh, my god, they're dead ain't they? That's it, they must be dead. Sundry killt 'em and you fink it was me. You fink I did it. Is that it, Richard? Is that right?"

"Precisely. Now we're beginning to get somewhere at last," said Richard, deciding to perpetuate the delusion.

"But I didn't—I didn't. I was away in Glasgow for a few days. I telt yer I was goin' away. I didn't even know they was dead, cross me 'eart I didn't. If I'd 'ave knowed, d'yer fink I'd 'ave come out 'ere tonight? D'yer fink I'd 'ave phoned? Wouldn't make no sense that, would it? Can't yer see, Richard? It weren't me—it weren't me."

Richard ignored him. "It is well-documented psychological fact that the perpetrators of serious crimes always return to the scene of their misdeeds. It is equally well-documented psychological fact that if a man is under sufficient duress he will say anything to save his skin."

“But you’re missin’ the point, mate. It don’t even look like you’re ’earing what I’m sayin’ to yer. Richard—please listen to me. I didn’t do anything to Louise and Lee. I’m a fuckin’ bad penny, right enough. I always ’ave been, but I never did nub’dy no grievous bodily, gawd’s truth. I didn’t kill ’em, Richard, I couldn’t.”

“You raped my boy and then you killed him. Of course, I should hand you over to the police, but that would be too easy on you. They treat you too well in prison. So—I wonder, Lenny, if you have any idea what they used to do to nigra rapists in the deep south—in the States, you know. Here’s a little free education which will serve you no useful purpose, because you won’t live to benefit from it.” He turned to Tarzan who was tending the blaze. “Next phase now, please,” he ordered. Hansa sprang forward signalling his beasts. Two grabbed Lenny’s feet to prevent him drawing his knees up. A third shinnied up the tree.

Richard stepped closer and with slow deliberation undid the buckle of Lenny’s trouser belt, unfastened the catch and slid down the zipper. Then he pushed the trousers and pants down around the man’s ankles. What he was doing was repulsive but necessary; he couldn’t chicken out now! Lenny uttered a sick moan. His privates had shrunk considerably through sheer terror, but there was still enough exposure upon which to work. Richard called for the nylon fishing line to which a looped slip-knot had been tied. He slid the noose around behind the man’s testicles, encircling his complete genitalia, then tossed the other end to the boy on the branch above Lenny’s head. He secured his end to the branch, a little way along from the rope—so that the line was taut but not painfully tight.

Lenny’s eyes and mouth were wide with alarm. “Oh my god, no!” he screamed. “Richard, don’t do this—please. I didn’t do nuffin’ to your wife an’ kid, honest I didn’t—an’ I’ll find a way to pay yer back all the bleedin’ lolly I took—stole—from yer—but please, Richard, take that thing off!”

Another gorilla climbed the tree with the petrol can which he handed to the one perched on the branch who, in turn, unscrewed the cap, and poured a small quantity on the rope.

Richard took the chair closer to the fire and sat on it facing his captive.

“This, Lenny, is what happens to rapists. Are you listening? They loose their capacity to rape again, or have any kind of fun. I have always said that those who have not learned how to use their sex equipment sensibly don’t deserve to have it at all.”

“Oh, help me—please. I never raped nob’dy.”

“The night you and bully boy entered my house down south, you said you would do to Lee what Van Dorn did to that other boy.”

“Sure, I said it, but I wouldn’t never have done it, honest.”

“Too late, mate. In just one moment that ferocious beast above your head will put fire to the rope. We estimate that it should take roughly five minutes to bum through. Those five minutes will be the most intensely educative five minutes in your whole life. Then when the lesson is over, by which I mean when the rope has burned through, your body will suddenly drop to the ground but your private parts will not. Your falling body weight will perform as neat a job of self-castration as you’re ever likely to witness.”

The fire snapped; its flames flickered and fizzed, and light and shadow played around and amongst the spectral characters, all of whom were looking up at the body writhing in terror.

Lenny continued to plead to be set free. But no one responded. If they were hearing him, it was as if they were not understanding. He screamed inside, feeling his heart banging hugely tympanic against the constriction at his chest. His feral shrieks ripped the still night air to shreds.

“No no no, I didn’t do it—I didn’t do it, Richard—I didn’t, I didn’t.”

And then...

“I did it, okay then, I did it. I’ll say anything you want me to say. I killed them, I killed them—only please take it off me—please lemme go. Pleeese...”

Hansa walked quietly to Richard's side and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I think he's had enough, Uncle," the boy whispered.

And in that instant Richard knew he could go no further. He rose slowly to his feet, and gathered his menagerie around him—making it appear to the dangling man as if he was in conference with them. Then he approached Lenny. "We have decided to leave you to the law, Herbertson. They'll catch up with you soon enough—but if by chance they should not—and if by chance any of us ever see you around here again, well, I'm sure you'll understand we will have no choice but to carry out our original intention." And turning to his lads again, he commanded them to release their victim.

No doubt fearing that the worst might still happen if someone made a wrong move, Lenny implored his captors to be very careful. Even the thought of castration would be hurting him.

His legs crumpled beneath him as he hit the ground again, and there he stayed for a while, filling his lungs with air the tight rope had denied him. Then he climbed to his feet, pulled up his pants and walked unsteadily back to his car without a word. He didn't look back as he drove off into the night.

"We did it," came the muffled cry from a gorilla that sounded like Mark. "We put the shits up him like crazy."

"Yes, but what if he'd died of fright—a heart attack or something? I never even thought of that," Richard said. "Could have ended in disaster. Talk about foolhardiness—wow!"

"Don't be a jelly baby, Uncle. He had it coming," Stu said. "You sure as heck made some great speeches, man. I reckon even I'd 'ave shit mesel' if anybody did that to me—an' that fish gut round his bollocks—arrgh!"

"What if he runs straight to the cops?" the Kelvin gorilla asked.

"He won't do that," Richard replied. "He's already got a record as long as your arm, and I think he really fell for the bit about Auntie Louise and Lee. No, if it comes to a choice between prison bars and public bars, I know which he'll go for. He'll get the hell out—fast. You did a great job, lads. How can I thank you?"

"We'll think o' sump'n," Mark said, grinning an unseen grin.

Hansa was shivering, although he had been too caught up in the excitement to complain. "Come to me, son, before you freeze to death," Richard said, holding his overcoat open.

"You'll get all smeary-browed, Uncle."

"Nae sweat, Hansa. Come on."

Unexpectedly, the boy jumped up at him, wrapped his legs tightly around Richard's middle, and his arms around his neck. Richard supported him by placing one hand beneath his chamois-skinned bottom, using the other to draw his coat together—to warm his welcome, goose-pimpled boy as best he could. He started for the cottage.

"This bonfire's too good to waste, Uncle. Okay if we stay out a bit longer?" said a muffled Stevie.

"What—dressed like that?"

"Yeah—it's fun."

"Okay. I just hope no tourists chance by!"

Back in the warm building, Richard said, "Come on, little son, let's get you into a hot bath. You're feeling okay, are you?"

"Sure, Uncle. Jus' got a bit scared near the end, 'cos I reckoned you was really gonna do it—you know?"

"To tell you the truth I was scared too, because I got so excited I could easily have gone through with it, even though I had no such intention. Just wanted to give him a massive shock and it worked, but just think—I could have been locked up!"

As soon as Hansa was washed and dressed, Richard prepared a pot of hot chocolate and shouted the others in. He had his back to the doorway when they entered—quieter than they should have been. Timing

to find out why, he saw them all slowly advancing towards him, still fully costumed.

Richard suspected what was in store for him—figured he might enjoy it too! “Now hold on, wait a minute, lads,” he said, “haven’t you had enough excitement for one day?”

Evidently not, for the dark brown wall of menace drew nearer. He searched the moulded ferocity on each face, trying to decide which boy was which. “Please, lads. I’m too young to die!” He tried to fend them off with outstretched arms, but it was no use. When they were close enough, one of them shouted, “Grab him, boys!” and then they fell upon him. Before he knew it, he was flat on his back, part-smothered in phoney fur, with one of the hairy beasts spanning his chest. Others were unzipping him, and although he made a pretence at trying to prevent it, his jeans were being hauled off, followed by his underpants, whence they all sprang back, spectators to his huge embarrassment. He tried to cover himself quickly, without success. The boys unmasked themselves and pointed, howling their sweaty heads off. “Get a gander at that, guys,” Stu jeered. “He’s got a hard-on like a trap bolt!”

“I’ll get my own back for this, you young devils,” Richard said, reddening a little.

They took no notice and joined in what was, to them, a well-known rhyme. “Shame shame, we know your name, better run like hell, ’cos we’re gonna tell,” then fell about laughing. To his greater chagrin, the little bastards began tossing his trousers from one to the other. Hansa tried to take his side, but to no avail.

“I thought you were supposed to be able to control these wild beasts, Tarzan,” Richard yelled, as he darted about trying to grab his flying trousers.

They allowed him to dress again, and Danny, sloughing the rest of his animal skin, said, “You’re a good sport, Uncle. I bet there ain’t many old guys would take that from kids an’ not give ’em a bollockin’.”

“Not so much of the old, Danny boy, or else you get your own private bollocking,” Richard said, running his fingers through Danny’s sweat-soaked hair. Then he addressed them all. “Tell me, lads, didn’t what we’ve just done to Lenny bother you at all?”

“Course not,” Mark volunteered. “It was jus’ like as if we was battering some kid what crossed us. Right, guys?”

“Sure, nae prob,” said Stu. “Anybody else yer want done in, man, we is yer kiddies.”

Richard went to bed that night thinking of the wonderful transition that had taken place since his arrival at the school—from his early doubts to total acceptance. The fates had lifted him to the heady heights of euphoria.

But rejection was waiting in the wings...

Hardly had the new term got under way when Eddie, who had had his fill of Chantry Beilis at last, called Richard aside and said, "I'm up to here with that bleating dame with the crystal balls. Now she's saying you shouldn't be allowed to take boys to your cottage, or on holiday, or on potentially hazardous trips because you haven't had proper training. Says the authorities would take a dim view. I say it's high time we clipped her wings so, Richard, if you'll accompany me to the staff room, I'll have it out with her."

"If you think it'll help, but I'd rather you didn't."

Eddie closed the staffroom door on the three of them and standing arms akimbo, he let fly. He reminded her what her job was supposed to be; he criticised her interference in matters that were not her concern; changing the rules, the diet, how the children were handled; he verbally tore to shreds her 'bloody bit of paper stamped qualified', and slammed her feeble attempts at what she called child psychology.

Richard remained silent throughout because he knew his stand was insecure. Worse. He sensed that Chantry knew it too. He was remembering his dream, the strange look she and Brian had given him at the party, and his other various clashes with her.

Eddie concluded his remonstrations. "You and your so-called do-gooding breed are pathetic, every damned one of you."

"We shall see who is pathetic when I speak to Elizabeth on Monday morning." Her first response.

"About leaving, I take it. Because I'll recommend your dismissal come the end of your trial period, which I believe is in a couple of weeks. And my weight carries water around here since I was proved right over Mr and Mrs Greenhouse."

"What I shall have to say to Elizabeth," she went on, giving Richard a glance that sent shivers, "will have nothing to do with leaving, nor will it have anything to do with you. It will be strictly between Elizabeth and myself—at least for the time being." She rounded on Richard, unexpectedly. "And what might your complaints be? I presume you're not standing there for the good of your health," she added, acidly.

Caught unawares, he was typically tongue-tied. "I—erm—I'm bound to agree with Eddie, as did Louise in fact. We—"

"Louise? Humph! She acted wisely, if you ask me. She did right to leave you—and to take that child to a place of safety."

He was alarm-shot, felt total cock-on-the-block exposure. "My wife and son have not—"

Eddie cut in. "I'd like to know what you're hinting at, madam."

"I shall not say another word."

"In that case, be careful what you carry outside the school. Elizabeth will stand for no more nonsense, 'specially after the Greenhouse fiasco."

"Nonsense is it? You brought all this upon yourselves when you practically ordered me in here, with a kind of insolence I've never put up with before," she said, crossly. "I'll have you know, Uncle Eddie, that I am not one of your repressed children and I will not be treated as if I were. And now, if you've quite finished, I'll return to my duties."

Leaving the men feeling as if they'd gone through the wringer.

After lunch on Tuesday, one week later, Chantry's mysterious attitude was resolved when Richard was summoned to the office. To his surprise, Charles awaited him—and he hadn't even known the Principal was in the building.

"Have a cigar, Richard," Charles invited, proffering a wooden casket containing very large Havanas.

“No thanks, Charles. Not unless an Edward G. Robinson mouth comes with it,” he said—a poor attempt at levity, because he was decidedly ill-at-ease. Though he did his best to appear collected, he believed he knew what this was going to be about—but was by no means sure. So much had happened during the past few weeks.

“Well, Richard,” Charles began, “I’m afraid what I have to say is a little embarrassing for me, and I dare say it will be for you too. The thing that troubles me most however, is that I have to raise the point at all.”

Richard gouged into the hardened mass of brown sugar, prised a chunk loose and stirred it into his coffee. “I think I know what’s on your mind, Charles.”

“I thought you might, Richard. And I’d hoped you’d save me having—”

“Is has to do with the Luft boy and myself—correct?”

“I’m afraid so. It came to the attention of one of our other staff members—”

“Chantry Beilis?”

“Yes. One of the other boys in Hansa Luft’s room had told her that Hansa sleeps with you regularly and that various other boys have been seen to frequent your room after lights out. It sounds bloody underhanded I know, but this woman has been watching you and was able to substantiate Brian Snapley’s story. I take it you follow what I am getting at?”

“Certainly, but I—”

As if his speech had been rehearsed Charles forged on, disregarding Richard’s attempted reply. “There is no one more broad-minded than I am, Richard, but there are limits. Our behaviour book shows one entry made by you, indicating that the Newmains boy stayed with you the first night he came. Nothing at all wrong with that. You are to be applauded for your excellent work in successfully integrating our newest member. Hansa’s name, likewise, appears just once. Can you explain why?”

“I refrained from making entries for what has now become obvious—that repetition might be misunderstood, and I—”

Charles interrupted again. “It seems to me you treat this whole business rather too subjectively for anyone’s good. Allowing yourself to pander to our youngster’s every whim is simply not on. Can you honestly offer justification for having boys in your bed every night?”

“Every night is untrue. In fact, it’s very far from the truth, and even if it were, yes, I believe I can.” Frustration forced a pause. The written word was more his forte—he was never very good in open court. “But Charles, I shouldn’t have to justify myself to you. You know very well that many of the children are in need of a great deal of affection and attention and they should be permitted to act according to their instincts, until those instincts rule otherwise—as they eventually surely will. There’s nothing sordid about any of my relationships with the boys, and in my defence I have to tell you that those with whom I have been most closely associated are developing much more stable and adaptable personalities. Stuart Robertson is less vicious; Danny Newmains has never exhibited the violence with which his case history unfairly condemns him; and Hansa stopped wetting the bed—a habit no one seemed able to break until I came. And again, according to Alastair and Eddie, he’s much more amenable than when he chummed with Brian. Don’t you see, Brian brought this matter to Chantry’s attention primarily out of vindictiveness and jealousy, because I spirited Hansa away—as he sees it? Human nature, that’s all it is. There is nothing to be concerned about, Charles, and I can only ask you to let things ride.”

“I don’t see how I can, Richard. You see, as far as the other staff members are concerned, they’ve noticed little discernible change.”

“With respect, I don’t believe that for one minute. You really can’t be serious.”

“But I am serious, Richard. This is a serious business. However, I want you to understand that if I alone were the arbiter I would say you’re doing a pretty good job, so get out there and press on. Unfortunately, it isn’t that simple. We have that professional lady in our midst who is out for blood and

will definitely make trouble for me and my schools if I don't take meaningful action. Now, I don't take kindly to having guns at my head, and I would not normally stand for nonsense from the likes of her. In point of fact, I have no intention of doing so. As it is, this school will be closing down very shortly, and by popular request our lady troublemaker will be conveniently closed down with it, but in the meantime I must ask you, most regretfully, to tender your resignation."

"That's not on, Charles. I have nothing to fear." Oh Christ, he thought, could I defend this under fire?

"Perhaps not, but I have. I'll have no further scandal associated with my schools. We managed to skate quite nicely around that Big Joe matter, and that earlier business with Mr Greenhouse troubled me quite a bit. It's bad news and it can stockpile and do me and my schools no good at all. You do see that, don't you? You do see I have no choice?"

Richard was deflated and momentarily stuck, then he recalled the reference to the school closing, and sensing a straw, he asked why.

"That's the main reason I'm over here, Richard. I came to announce the fact this evening. The property is far too heavily penalised rates-wise. To make it pay I'd have to double the number of children. Getting the children is no problem. It's where to put them. If I build extensions I also build in higher taxes. But the crux of the matter is this. I had a very lucrative offer from a hotel chain, one that I simply could not refuse."

"What happens to the kids?"

"I shall split them between my schools. I'm opening another near Aberdeen later this year. As a matter of fact, three of the children are up for fostering. Hansa Luft, coincidentally, is one of them."

Richard was stunned. My Hansa, oh for Christ's sake, no, not Hansa! Now stray-minded, he went on, "And the staff? Couldn't I be transferred too? If, as you say, you will be severing connections with Miss Beilis, we could make it look like you trashed me."

"You could certainly give me a ring when I've accomplished the change-over, some time in April I would think. We'll see what we can do. Meantime, I have to thank you for your otherwise very excellent services, and I am genuinely sorry I have had to throw this at you at this particular time—"

Oh no you're not, you bastard! Richard thought, gritting his teeth.

"—but we'll keep in touch. Finish your coffee."

Despite his bold front, Richard knew there was little he could add and that any attempted resistance would be thwarted from the outset by his guilt feelings. If he hadn't actually enjoyed sex-play with Hansa he might have had the strength to fight. He dare not risk exposure and had no choice but to go along with Charles, who was obviously determined. His little speech sounded horribly final—of the 'don't call us, we'll call you' variety. But the most cruel blow of all was yet to be delivered. He was 'requested' to withdraw right away, without further contact with any of the kids or the other staff members. His belongings would be forwarded.

As Richard closed the door on Charles Hurst-Sanders and Pinewoods Hall School, it was as if he closed the door on life. The effect upon him was devastating. The cottage was his only recourse. He returned to it with his mind in turmoil. He was restless in bed that first night and, thoroughly distraught, cried himself to sleep.

He was in the city and he needed the toilet. He didn't know why he was in the city. He had his briefcase with him, but it was empty, just for show.

The public toilet was the usual stinking abhorrence. He found a vacant cubicle and entered. Making sure the seat was clean he dropped his pants and sat.

He noticed the plastic carrier bag, semi-stuffed behind the pan. He slid it forward and gingerly peered inside. Trousers. Rolled up. He shook them free of the bag. Boy's trousers, as might fit an eleven or twelve year old. They were well-worn, dirty, tom, smelly. But exciting. He would take them away with

him. Have fun later. He put them in his briefcase and tried to visualise the boy who would have worn them. The visualisation caused arousal. He began to masturbate.

By chance, his eye fell upon a small hole about the size of a pea, which had been bored through the partition between his and an adjoining cubicle. Next, and with heart-stopping horror, he detected movement on the other side of the hole. The shine of an eyeball! Someone was watching his private activities.

His skin crawled. A massive shame blacked him.

With sonic speed he adjusted his dress, picked up his case, darted from the toilet and was mingling with the shopping crowds outside before the peeper could have realised he himself had been spotted.

He was in a derelict part of the city. In the rain. In the middle of the night. He was sweating profusely for he had been running—running scared for what seemed like hours. He was soaked right through his shabby attire, but it was of little import for he had no thought but escape. Hounded, hunted, pursued by both law and lawless—a curious predicament indeed.

Caught. Terror-stricken, he was standing in the centre of a vast disused warehouse, trapped in a tube of brightest light, which beat down upon him from high up among dripping, creaking rafters through which a cheerless cold wind souged unremittingly and vicious, squally rain slashed through sightless windows, whose eyes of glass had long since been gouged out by the very vandals who sat in judgement of him that night. On all sides they sat, tier upon leering tier, hardly visible in the murky distance. Coughing, muttering. These pimps and whores and drug-pushers, these thieves, cut-throats and wastrels—wretched hell-rakers all—who saw him as worse than they. One such, set up as judge and jury, spoke from the ether, allowed him to plead his case, which he did with eloquence. He needed help, not punishment—but his was a lost cause and he knew it. His malefactorous inquisitors had condemned him—for he was worse than they. They demanded the opening of his briefcase—which was full of little girls' shoes. Where now the trousers? No matter, his crime was his spiriting away of little girls, with toys and sweets and promises. And when he got them alone he ravaged them and then killed them for their footwear, which were objects of fetish. He didn't know why he did it. He knew he had to be stopped. Clawlike hands fell upon him and dragged him away to their gallows. Before they dropped him they forced his name from him. His name was 'M'!

Richard had known he was in for another round of nightmares. They always seemed so real, so long, so detailed, yet could have lasted mere seconds, as dreams are supposedly wont to do. Okay, so his fetish wasn't without precedent. It made no difference. Words! Where were the words? Mankind's phenomenal advances in communicational techniques ought, by now, to offer the means to embrace every nuance of feeling and expression—but they did not. Richard wanted to describe with absolute precision what it was that had made him the way he was—why he liked tough little boys as much as he did—why he had a special fondness for their apparel, and particularly their trousers, but he could not. Because the right words simply did not exist. He was convinced that even other fetishists, whose pair-bonding took other forms, would be incapable of explaining why boy's trousers.

So, he thought, now that I have lost everything most dear to me, what have I left but to withdraw from society? From life? It was cold but the sun shone. Absently, he strolled to the loch-side and gazed out across the great expanse of water, steel blue beneath brighter blue skies. He inhaled deeply. The air was like wine—suitably chilled. Here was a vastness, a stillness, a freshness—nature in all its unspoiled wonder and grandeur—which seemed to infiltrate his every fibre—beckoning—seeming to invoke a curious longing which he couldn't define with any accuracy. It was as if the cosmic soup—from whence sprang all of earthly life—was calling—calling, inviting him back into the pot. He had no intention of combating the thought for it excited him. To become absorbed, to be at one again with the molecular macrocosm that was the divine continuum, would be to find eternal peace. Better by far than attempting to

integrate with a too rigidly structured society in which he was the alien, denying him, as it did, simple self-expression.

Suddenly feeling chilled, he returned to the cottage and stoked up the fire. Giving his morbid thoughts the heave-ho, he thought of his lads, and what their reaction to his vanishing act would have been. He reckoned that observers would have found it hard to believe that those seven boys could have been as near-perfect as he regarded them. They were. To him—they were. So very often, it seemed, children were not children any more, but smart-ass precocious little monsters, too quickly in command of their own destinies, and of the grown-ups within their provinces. All-adult and adult-proof, and adults were rightly afraid of those nastily contumelious remotenesses they themselves had bred. There was no joy in them any more because there was nothing that could be shared. Such was not the case with his lads who, he knew, bore him no malice, exhibited no overtly devious traits, and whose personalities interacted with his own honestly, openly and—yes—thrillingly. There was beauty in them and an unspoiled spontaneity because, without being aware of it, they actually enjoyed being boys.

He poured himself an unmeasured Lagavulin, stood back from the fireplace and raised his glass to Hansa, whose picture he had placed above the mantelpiece—a picture that dominated the whole room. It was an enormous black and white blow-up, the head and shoulders photograph of the lad, fuzzy around the edges because the enlargement had created too heavy a demand on the negative. For Richard, the blurriness enhanced the picture, investing it with a quality that made the head appear to be floating in a mist, midway between still image and corporeality—especially when viewed through half-closed eyes. There was a sort of earthy handsomeness about the face that insinuated itself upon one—like new music made more pleasurable through familiarity. He had been casually snapped, frozen in images of endearing ruggedness and epic expression that could not have been captured in a posed shot. It was almost as if his boy was actually present. If only...

He did not know where he found all the love he felt for him. It seemed to well from some internal hot spring. It was a kind of love he'd never known before. Whatever society might think of it, he firmly believed that even the most altruistic moral behaviour, and virtue, and reason, must step aside for the most noble and rewarding forms of human love which arose not from such sources, but from a much deeper, primeval stratum of instinctive feeling.

There were times when he hated himself for feeling as he did, and yet he lived for those moments when he would see the boy and touch him again. Even as he reproached himself, he knew that in his guilt and agony dwelt a strange kind of joy. It was as if he was ravaged by some loathsome illness from which he did not want to recover. When Hansa was with him, his being was transformed into a beautiful mechanism running smoothly and silkily, bathed in a warm, golden oil—in rhythm with creation. Then, whenever he was deprived of his company it was as if sand had been shovelled into the works.

As time passed, Hansa's love for him would become less ardent, as it should, but his would endure. And all he had, other than the photograph, were the little chamois loin cloth and a pair of worn Wranglers he had outgrown. These would remain functional. If he placed his head inside the unwashed blue jeans, with their trace urinary scent, the evanescent imagery thus produced was enough to attain erotic appeasement. Medicine—for the excessive, irrational devotion that would go on tormenting and devouring him.

“Oh Hansa, my dear precious little boy—where are you now?” he said aloud. “You, who afforded me my one brief shining hour. Would that you were here to hold me and be held. Would that I could exert that telepathic pull I deluded myself in thinking I once had—to draw you to my door. Come to me again, deserving as you do the highest accolade imaginable for being the one solitary object in my whole life that ever really meant anything to me...”

Throughout all of their more intimate moments, the boy had rarely spoken, yet he had filled Richard's heart with music, put sunshine in his soul and infused his every particle with an all-transcendent feeling of

well-being.

“...and I do not think you were even remotely aware of your truly colossal worth. Bless you, my little kid. Bless all of my boys. I know I shall never see the like again.”

One week elapsed—a week which Richard regarded as being amongst the worst he’d ever experienced. The weather had taken a fiendishly dramatic turn, and it seemed to him that even the elements were in opposition. Gale force winds battered that part of the Highlands for three days, and with a ferocity that was rare, even by Highlands’ standards.

A tall old larch toppled, missing the cottage by inches, and Richard had to use a saw and hatchet simply to get through his front door. Snow fell in earnest, drifted by the gusting winds to depths of six feet and more—and the waters of the loch partially froze.

Towards the end of the week, the foul weather moderated a little, and Richard began to think about returning to the bosom of his family. Louise had written during the holiday saying that she wished to remain down south, partly because of the deteriorating condition of her father, but mainly because she had begun to find the cottage too isolated. He could understand that. You’d really have to be a recluse, or a tramp, or a fugitive—or a complete idiot, to want to hide out there alone.

He had just about made up his mind, when the mailman got through with a number of re-directed items from the school. He flipped through them, and was on the point of disinterestedly tossing them aside, when he spotted one with an Oxford postmark. The envelope contained letters from both Louise and his son. No news, just friendly chat. He soaked up the contents lovingly, longingly—and began thinking again about the mistakes he’d made...

Dear, sweet Louise. You have a quiet beauty that is yours alone, and of which I have been foolishly oblivious. You have an inner repose which I, thoughtlessly, disturbed and abused. You unselfishly and tirelessly held out your arms and was so often crudely and cruelly rebuffed. You deserve infinitely better than you’ve ever had from me. But I truly love you now, my darling—and I want you back.

And Lee, my own little lad. That distasteful podginess has been edged out and you’re firming up into a real boyish boy—and I have to have at least one real boy in my life. Oh, Lee—my Lee—how I ignored you and despised you and how differently I feel now. Lee, my son, I love you—and I want you back....

He turned his attention to the other letters he held. One of them hadn’t been re-directed—it was from the school. Just my severance pay, he thought, as he ripped the envelope open. Not so. It was a letter from the lord and master himself. Charles had tried to reach him on the telephone, he read, but having failed, he was requesting that he, Richard, be kind enough to report to the school as soon as possible, to see Elizabeth—as he was returning to East Lothian and would be unable to speak to him personally. Now what? Has one of the boys let something slip regarding the clandestine events at the cottage? He threw it aside, desultorily, and opened an envelope from his publisher—expecting to see a royalty cheque. This one was from Sir Alexander Jessop himself—the head of Jessop International—who wanted Richard to give him a ring. He was going to be in Edinburgh next week, and had important things to discuss. Evidently, the three of his books that had been reprinted and gift-packed as an entity last year had precipitated a nice resurgence of interest in the works of Jay Gaynor-Smith, and an independent movie producer was interested in reaching him, with a view to his drafting a treatment of—*Deimos Scion*. Surely not. Also, Jessop wrote, when are you going to deliver something new? “Oh well, great, that’ll be a laff day,” Richard dismissively snorted, aloud, emulating his beloved boys.

Give him a ring? Nothing to lose, right? No time like the present, right? But his telephone was dead, which was presumably why Charles had been unable to reach him. Would probably be weeks before the engineers got around to fixing up such an isolated extension. He glanced at his watch. 15.10. The kids would be in class. Perhaps now was a good time to drive out—if such a thing was possible.

He donned his topcoat, met an icy blast as he strode over the recumbent larch, and approached his snow-covered vehicle.

Entering the school hallway, Richard trod the carpet runner—with the pattern like fallen leaves—fondly remembering the first time he had done so, and was again struck by a singularly ambient ‘school smell’ that defied accurate description. It somehow evoked the very feel of young boys. Even though there were none around, even though there was no sound, he was warmed by their invisible presence.

Elizabeth met him and, as graciously as ever, ushered him into the staffroom.

They sat, he without a word.

She handed him a sealed envelope. “That’s a letter of apology from my husband, Richard. He was so sorry he couldn’t be here to see you himself, but there was a break in the weather, and he—”

“Apology?” Richard mumbled, unmoved. “Whatever for?”

“Charles should never have dismissed you—he knows that now. When you left—”

“So that’s it. He made a mistake.” Sarcasm seemed the best ploy. “I’ll say he made a mistake. I had thought very highly of you and your husband. This place, your ideals, the way you run it, I saw as beyond reproach. But in pandering to that Beilis woman and her insidious, subversive activities, Charles destroyed all that. He—”

“Hold fire a moment, Richard, please. Let me explain, will you?”

“Can you?” He managed a contemptuous snort.

“Last Thursday, after you’d left the building and your absence was noted, the staff—Eddie and the teachers—rounded on Charles with such unexpected ferocity that he—well, they all demanded you be reinstated immediately—or else! They hold you in high esteem, Richard—as I do myself. You’ve been a great asset to the school and...” She paused. “We all want you to write off this bad business and return to us. I must tell you that many of the boys were very upset when they knew you’d gone. We almost had a rebellion on our hands.”

“Sorry, Elizabeth, but I couldn’t work with Miss Beilis again,” Richard said. “As I said, she’s taking over.”

“She *was* taking over, but I dismissed her. We had the most unholy row in front of the children, something I simply will not countenance. She was wickedly critical of the way Eddie conducts things here. They almost came to blows. She wouldn’t have been happy until she had seen Eddie deposed as well.”

“Charles told me he disapproved of my behaviour with some of the boys, and Eddie and Alastair are alleged to have said my general influence has not been especially effective. I’d be working under a cloud. It’s just not on.”

“What Charles told you was coloured by Chantry’s allegations. She had suggested that your relations with some of the boys exceeded the bounds of decency—of which we see no evidence. What exactly she had up her sleeve, we don’t know, but we believe your activities may have paralleled those of Charles himself. Why, in our early days here, he would take boys into his bath if he thought a child needed such contact. All perfectly innocent, but liable to misinterpretation in some camps. Charles was afraid that if you didn’t leave, she’d have you publicly exposed and I’m sure you can understand what the consequences would have been. The media can be very destructive. As for Eddie and the others, they were never consulted and didn’t even know you’d gone.” She paused, clearly uncomfortable with the job at hand. “I must also tell you that this school is not being sold out to a hotel chain either.”

“What!” He flung his chair back, rose to his feet, and stalked towards a window. “My god, I don’t believe it. How could he have just sat there telling so many goddamn lies? And with such plausibility.”

There followed an extended hush during which Richard became aware of Elizabeth’s distress. He softened. After all, it wasn’t her doing. He returned to his seat.

She sighed and quietly added, "Charles did have an offer he had no intention of considering. It's all in the letter you have there. What else can I say? Except—can I ask you, most humbly, to forgive and to forget?"

"I think you can, Elizabeth. I think you probably can," he mused, fingering the unopened envelope he held. Mustn't appear too willing. "But what about Hansa Luft? Was his leaving a fabrication also—to make it even easier to—erm—cast me out?"

"No, Richard, I'm afraid that part was true. You worked miracles with that boy, as with so many others—especially the now homogeneous room three lot."

"Homogeneous? Strange word."

"Perhaps, but true I think. They're unified now, all pull together. They used to fight like cats and dogs. As to Hansa, we did our best to hang on to him, but Mr Maitland took him away this very morning."

"I'm sorry I was unable to say goodbye to him."

"It was a tearful parting, Richard. I think you were better out of it. He spoke of you a lot. He loved you, you know."

"Yes, I do know."

"Hansa was returned to us after a failed placing once before. But now he's a more resolute little boy than ever. He knows what he wants. Perhaps he'll return again. But, Richard—will you come back to us?"

"Yes, I'll come back. Thanks for being truthful. It couldn't have been easy. Charles left you with a tough job, right?"

"I'm used to tough jobs, Richard. Good. Then that's settled."

"What about the kids, Elizabeth? What did you tell them?"

"We simply said you had decided to stay with your wife. Look here, I'll be taking tea this evening. I'll make an announcement—and then you can walk in. But I warn you, you'd best be prepared. You'll bring the house down. Just wait and see." Eddie collared him as he was returning to his room.

"Hi, Eddie," Richard said. "Reckoned you'd seen the last of me, yes?"

"Not at all, old lad. We raised the roof. Be a good chap an' come into my cubby hole for a natter," Eddie said, effusive as ever. "I've got something to tell you. Here you go—have a pew."

Richard sat on the bed.

"Richard, old lad," Eddie went on quietly, and more soberly than Richard had ever seen him before, "I am a paedophile as well."

"You're a—here, hang on a minute—what do you mean by 'as well'?"

"It takes one to know one," he added, kindly.

"But you—I never suspected you for one moment."

"Of course you didn't. That's 'cos I'm an old hand at the game. I got to be a master of the big cover-ups."

"Then what was all that squeaky-clean innocence, and all that righteous indignation, the day I was shooting my mouth off about boys jeiking-off, and so forth?"

"Alastair was there, matey. It's not stuff for public consumption, you know."

"But what makes you think that I—?"

"Come on, old lad, admit it. It's something to keep quiet about, but nowt to feel ashamed of, or feel guilty over."

Both men were silent for a while. At length, Richard murmured, "You knew about Hansa and me?"

"Not till that mouthful o' blabber, Snapley, spilled the bean can."

"I tried to keep what I was doing under wraps, but now I see all I did was make an idiot of myself."

"No, you didn't."

"And of course you're right. I've known for quite some time there's something very wrong with me."

"Wrong with you? Rubbish. There's nothing wrong with you. What makes you think that?"

“That word you called yourself. Paedophile. It’s a word I’d never heard until the press began making it their flavour of the month. Paedophiles are—forgive me, Eddie—they are child abusers, aren’t they? Sexual molesters?”

“So that’s what’s bothering you. No, Richard, you got it all wrong, just like the papers who get hysterical about it. The definition of paedophilia is one who loves young kids, maybe even too much sometimes. Notice I said ‘love’. Meaning paedophiles wouldn’t dream of hurting a kid. People who do hurt kids and force them to do sexy things they don’t want to do are exactly the same as men who brutally rape women. See the difference? No, there’s nothing wrong with you, old lad.”

“It’s just that I feel so damned lustful sometimes—downright randy in fact—and eaten alive with remorse. I seduce the boys, you know. That can’t be right.”

“Aye, it can. If, real deep down, you feel something for a kid and you think he might feel the same way, well then, you’ve gotta sign. You’ve got to give out with some sort of a come-on, otherwise—well, put it this way—how else are you ever gonna make contact?”

“It just doesn’t feel right, somehow.”

“Only ’cos you’ve been thinking wrong. Love is where you find it. The kids, bless ’em, they need to know who they can latch on to—but care is all. They’re the ones to say go-ahead, but you’re the adult, pal, you’re the guiding light. As long as you remember that—”

“But don’t you think it’s the type of kid we have here makes them the way they are? I know you don’t like classifying them as types—different from the rest and all that—but the lack of proper parental affection—”

“Not at all, Richard. Kids know which adults they like and which they don’t. Didn’t you? Have you forgotten? I haven’t. Some of them want grown-up attachments. No such thing as types, Richard, just kids with different needs.”

“But god damn it—why did they have to take Hansa away?”

“He’ll be back.”

“That’s what Elizabeth thought, but don’t you see, he doesn’t even know I’m here.”

“He knows all right ”

“For Christ’s sake, Eddie—”

“Okay, I’ll stop beating the birds about in the bush. When I was saying ta-ta to him, he asked me for your address in London, ’cos that’s where he thought you were gonna be. But I told him you was coming back here.”

“And how did you know that, wise guy?”

“After what we said to Chas! Listen to this. If Elizabeth hadn’t talked you into it, I was gonna stretch you on the rack meself till you’d given in. I was gonna drive out to the cottage if you hadn’t showed up by Sunday.”

“By god, Eddie, you’re a cleverer fellow than I ever took you for.”

“Course I am, Richard. You bashed the hammer on its napper. Some people take me for a bit stupid, but it’s all part of my big act. Anyway, I’m glad you’re back and, hey—I’ve got some news. Remember Heather?”

“Ramsie’s girlfriend?”

“Aye. They’re gonna get hitched, and y’know what?”

“I’m all ears, Eddie.”

“She fell in love with wee Tommy Bums at Christmas. They’re gonna apply for fostering him.”

“That is good news. Good for them. Tommy deserves no less, bless him.”

“And did Elizabeth tell you? Ramsie’s our full-fledged headmaster, as of right now.”

“That’s a decision I could have made months ago.” Richard rose to his feet and stretched, taking a deep breath at the same time. “By Christ,” he exclaimed, “I’m glad to be back. Tell me, chum, do I look

like a new man to you?”

“I reckon you’ll live. Stand tall and proud, lad, you’ve a duty to perform. Get out there and do it. People like us are bloody good for the kids, so quit thinking different Just don’t go flappin’ yer teeth about it, that’s all.”

“There’s just one other thing troubles me quite a bit. Their clothing, I mean the way they dress. I have this morbid—erm—thing about their trousers—”

“With me it’s tracksuits,” Eddie cut in, showing no surprise. “All part an’ parcel. Nowt morbid about it. One o’ life’s little funnies. Laugh it off.”

It was as Elizabeth had predicted. When he walked into the dining room, following her announcement, the majority of the kids went wild with excitement and awarded him three cheers. They clustered around him, pulled at him, wanted to know if he was back for good. Well now, he thought, if going away always produces this kind of response, maybe I should do it more often. Elizabeth left him to it.

But most of all, he felt good when he saw the looks on the faces of ‘his gang’, and it was Mark who, *prima voce*, said, “Geez, we all thought you’d gone away ’cos o’ what we did to you at the cottage.”

“No fear, kid. I told you—I can take it,” he said, landing a pulled punch in the boy’s guts.

“They come an’ took Hansa away, Uncle,” Kelvin said. He was looking incredibly wistful. Very quietly and hesitantly—so no one else would hear—he shyly added, “Mebbe I could get to sit with yer sometimes, y’know, jus’ sometimes.”

“Your seat’s reserved, Kelvin,” Richard asserted happily, drawing him nearer. “You can count on it.” That invisible barrier between them seemed due for demolition at last. Could it be that Kelvin had nursed secret longings almost from the beginning, but had stood back from Richard for similar reasons? He loved him and had been afraid to show it? Was this why he’d appeared troubled? The answers would be found.

“Good job Hansa didn’t stay, Uncle, ’cos he’d have had to chuck in all his pocket money,” Stevie said. “You should have heard him swearing his head off at that guy what took him. Said he was gonna run away.”

And Danny said, “Me an’ Markie was gonna do a bunk if you didnae come back. Wouldnae be caught dead in a boggin’ dump like what this is, if it wusnae for you, Uncle.”

“I knew it. That’s why I came back, Danny boy. Somebody has to keep you young ruffians in line.” He raised his voice. “Right—how about everyone sitting down again, and getting on with your tea—like now, kids!” They obediently scattered—and he knew he was home again—to stay.

Eddie and most of the youngsters were caught up in the excitement of a Glasgow Celtic-Rangers derby on television that evening. True to his word, Richard had taken Kelvin on his lap, observing with mild curiosity that this boy, like others, also sported an erection as he sat. Richard pondered this effect he had upon the lads. Curious. Was it unique, or did his colleague produce similar results?

“You seem a bit down in the dumps, Kelvin,” Richard said. “Aren’t you interested in the game?”

“Yeh, but—”

“But what, son? You didn’t finish.”

“I dunno. I cannae tell you, Uncle,”

With discretion, Richard whispered, “Oh, come now, Kelvin—what is it you can’t tell me? I’ve noticed before you seem upset about something, and Mark happened to let slip you acted funny sometimes. Is there anything I can do?”

Kelvin stayed silent but turned eyes filled with appeal on Richard as if expecting his eyes alone to do his explaining.

Richard could make nothing of the look. He applied gentle pressure to the boy’s thigh. “Tell me, Kelvin,” he murmured.

Following a pause, he said, "I'm too scared, Uncle."

"Too scared? Of what? Surely there's nothing so scary that you couldn't tell me about it."

"I can't, Uncle."

"I've an idea, son. What if you came to my room tonight after the others are asleep? Would you feel more like telling me then?"

"Okay."

It was after two in the morning. Richard's curiosity and excitement were displaced by disappointment when it began to look as if Kelvin wasn't going to come after all. He was about to undress when he heard the faint tap on his door, followed by the pyjama-clad boy's entrance. "I fell asleep, Uncle," he said.

"But you said you'd come and you have. Good lad. I like people who do what they say they'll do." Richard sat in his armchair and invited Kelvin to join him. "Now, do you feel like telling me what it is you're afraid of?"

"Yeh—okay." Kelvin took his time continuing. He still seemed very downcast, but at length mumbled something about thinking he was going to die—a revelation that chilled Richard.

"Good grief, Kelvin, whatever gives you that idea?"

"'Cos I got some kinda disease, Uncle, an' I didnae wanna tell nub'dy 'cos I might get stuck in hospital to die." He seemed about to cry.

"You don't look ill to me, Kelvin," Richard said, affectionately. "What makes you think you are?"

The boy patted his breast lightly. "Got lumps on my tits, Uncle. Please don't let on to nub'dy else. I dinnae wanna go to no hospital."

"Let me see, son," he said, knowing already what the boy thought was wrong.

Kelvin bared his chest reluctantly and Richard gently fingered the indicated growths which were about the size of small half-walnuts. "This is nothing at all to worry about, son. These are called breast knots. All a normal part of growing up. They'll disappear by themselves very soon."

"The others didnae get 'em."

"Perhaps they did, but failed to notice. Some boys do, some not. So you see, you've been worrying yourself sick for nothing."

The boy covered his face with both hands, his body started to shudder, and tears welled.

"Oh, c'mon now, son. You'll be okay. No need to cry, you know." He took the boy's head to his shoulder, tenderly stroking his hair.

Following another lengthy silence, during which Richard cuddled his welcome, fast-maturing youngster warnily, Kelvin whispered, "Sorry 'bout blubberin', Uncle. It's jus' 'cos I figured I was gonna the an' now I amnae."

"It's relief. I know that, son."

"You wanna know what I wish?"

"What do you wish?"

Kelvin hesitated again. "I wish I had you for my dad. I liked you right from when you first come, but I didnae know how to—" His statement died on him.

"Aw, Kelvin my lad, what a nice thing to say." With one deft swipe, that pedestal he'd placed his sprawling little Adonis on was swept aside. "I'll tell you the truth. I've been feeling exactly like you. I've liked you all along, and can you believe it, I was scared to tell you? Isn't that stupid? I can tell you now—you're a magnificent kid, and I'd be proud to have you for a son. How about from now on we pretend that's the way it is?"

That radiant closed mouth smile shone through his tears. "Okay, Uncle."

"Does anyone know you're in here right now, Kelvin?"

"No, they're all a'kip."

Anxious to avoid a repetition of his abortive seduction of Stevie, Richard would proceed cautiously. He knew he would never conquer the enigmatic stallion's nether regions and had happily resigned himself to the fact. He also admired that particular exemplar of boyhood purity all the more because he hadn't succumbed. Kelvin might feel the same way. Tentatively, Richard asked, "Would you like to stay with me a while?"

"Yeh." The boy swept aside the sad wet residue with the heels of his hands.

"Would you think it strange if I asked you to come into bed with me?"

"I don't mind."

"Would you think it strange if I kissed you, Kelvin—on your lips?"

He smiled again. "D'yer wanna? 'S funny, but 's okay, I guess."

"C'mon then, and you can tell me why they sent you to Pinewoods, okay?"

Richard gazed at Kelvin's appealing out-turned lips for one brief moment, particularly his arched upper one, before implanting a long-lasting kiss, to which the boy responded with astonishing intensity. Then they removed all their clothing and climbed into bed together. There was no Chantry to worry about now, and there'd be no entry in that blasted behaviour book! Following his audience with Charles on that fateful day, he had told himself that such incidences as this would henceforth be conducted away from the school, but there was no way he could put off the here and now. Flushed with love, he took the rangy, all arms and legs boy into his embrace, hardly able to believe his good fortune, for he had coveted this spidery good-looker far too long.

"It was 'cos I kep' on doing a bunk from home," Kelvin said, snuggling in contentedly and, like bindweed, his long legs entwined themselves around those of his new dad. "They was always arguing and fighting and my three big sisters was an' all. I couldnae stand it, 'cos they made me do everything—all the mucky jobs an' junk like that. The police always took me back again an' didnae believe what I said, 'cos every time, my mum an' dad was all nice an' lovey-dovey, then when the cops was gone, they'd gimme a doin' and say I was mad for to keep runnin' away and I'd get locked up. My dad wusnae my real dad an' he kep' on whacking me on my head. Once I got knocked oot nearly. One time when I run away I got to England, an' when I was brung back this time, I got a social worker. She's what sent me here. This place was piggin' useless till you come, Uncle."

"Why, son? You get along all right with the other boys, don't you?"

"Now I do, but not till you come."

"And you get along all right with Uncle Eddie—yes?"

"He's okay, but a bit bossy—not like you. If you didnae have come back, I was gonna run away an' all, with Mark an' Danny."

"So you're happy now, Kelvin?"

"Oh yeah, 'cos I love—I mean—"

"It's okay, son. You can say it. I love you too. I knew you weren't a bad boy. Knew it all along. What a shame we were both so dumb we didn't let on what was in each of our minds, eh?"

Richard's fingers travelled the length of the boy's body. He wanted to find out if Kelvin still had an erection. He did. Richard enveloped it in a loving palm. This time the portents were right, it seemed. Before he did anything else, he squeezed Kelvin's rock-hard penis a little more tightly and murmured, "Yes? No?"

Sweet young Kelvin merely nodded, and a new adventure began.

Richard had explained that he would be away in Edinburgh for a couple of days, in case the boys should take it into their heads he'd deserted them again. Danny got him on his own later, giving out with that enchanting phrase—'can ah chum ye, Uncle?'—which had so charmed him the first time he had heard Hansa say it.

Permission had been granted, and on a rainy Saturday afternoon, their departure was imminent. Richard was closing his overnight bag when the high-spirited Danny burst into his room. "Here am ah," he said, (another delightful Scottish expression) presenting himself with feet apart and arms outstretched, seeking approval.

Richard looked him over appreciatively. Here was a cleaned-up version of the Danny he had first seen on the day of the youngster's arrival at the school, except that his hair was shorter, now attractively awry. He was wearing his lightly abraded leather bomber, his green trousers, brown check shirt—and his highly-buffed 'docs' with new yellow laces. The cord welt stitching was highlighted with white chalk, this being the current tough-boy trend. There was that appealing fixed wistfulness—and there was that comfortable curvature...

Richard would walk with pride with this boy at his side. "You look pretty terrific, Danny, but I think we're gonna have to buy you a jockstrap."

"What's one o' them?"

"Well it's a—it's a sort of—well, it's a kind of elasticated supporter, son, to—erm—to cosset your magnifique equipment." He gave the last two words a phoney French sound as, with a little cough, he glanced briefly groinwards. "To stop people wondering for whom the balls roll."

"What—yer mean this?" Danny said, grabbing his own genitals, (none too carefully, Richard thought) and grinning a little self-consciously.

"You got it, kid."

"Sherrup, Uncle!" he said, quietly reproachful. He added a warning. "Better let me see before you get it, 'cos I might not like it."

"Sportsmen wear them, Danny. You'll like it." Feeling light of heart, Richard picked up his bag and, with his free arm draped around the lad's shoulders, they headed for the car.

They had been on the road for an hour or so—a rain-lashed, single-track road that threaded its way through bleak and inhospitable terrain. The wipers—fighting an almost losing battle with the deluge—were having a mesmerising effect on young Danny, and he was beginning to feel drowsy. He moved in closer and rested his head against Richard's shoulder.

"Getting tired, son?"

"Yeh."

"So why don't you spread yourself out along the seat, and put your head right here?" He patted his left thigh.

The boy readily complied—without difficulty—for this was a vehicle with a bench seat and column gear change.

"Can you still drive okay, Uncle?" Danny placed his left hand on Richard's leg too.

"Well, put it this way—I can drive as well as conditions out there allow. You just relax and get some rest if you want."

"How much longer?"

"About an hour and a half, I think. We should hit the A9 soon. It'll be easier going after that."

Quiet moments later, and to Richard's complete amazement, he felt the young boy's hand turn peripatetic. It wandered first to his knee, and back again, rested tentatively, then crept inch by slow inch

towards his groin, where groping little fingers sought the top of his zipper and tried to pull it down. Richard's sitting position prevented it. The foraging fingers came to rest for a while, and Richard felt his temperature rocket. Should he assist or dissuade? The last thing he wanted was to offend him. He adjusted his posture to ease the sudden pressure inside his pants, and patted the wanderlust hand to reassure the lad. Danny's fingers locked themselves as far around the yielding, pre-primed boner as the trousers fabric allowed, and there came to rest. Felt good, of course it did, but Richard's driving was being seriously impaired, and deep inside he was a little disturbed, didn't really want the boy to do this—then cursed inwardly, because he knew it was a lie.

He pulled into a lay-by and spoke to the boy as tenderly as he knew how. "I'm not cross with you, son, not in the least. But I would prefer, I mean, could you save it for later on? Will you do that?"

"Sure. It's jus'—well—I figured you wouldnae mind."

"I don't mind, really I don't." He took the boy's face and held it squarely in his hands. "You see, kid, you make me feel kinda homy. Makes it hard for me to concentrate on my driving. You wouldn't want us to pile up on those rocks out there, would you?"

"Nu."

"Come on then, lie down again. Try to get some kip. I'll tell you when we hit the big city."

They parked just long enough to do a little shopping in Princes Street, then at a little after six, checked in at the new high-rise Pentland Plaza on the outskirts—where Richard would join Sir Alex for Monday lunch.

When Richard threw the door to their room open and ushered his boy inside, the lad was awe-stricken. "Crummy, this is some kinda posh dump, Uncle," he exclaimed, testing the springiness of one of the *beds*.

"Posh dump, eh? Contradiction in terms that is, my son," laughed Richard.

"I wusnae ever in a hotel before. It's great. Look, you can make your own coffee an' stuff. Is it free?"

"Well, not exactly. It's in with the tariff."

"Whatever that is—an' it's got a swimming pool an' all, you said."

"Yes, it's in the basement. Fancy a swim before dinner?"

"Yeh—but we had dinner."

"That was lunch. The late meal here is called dinner."

"Weird."

Richard smiled. "If you say so. C'mon, get your swim trunks and let's go."

Later on, with everything else behind them, they retired to their room, closing the door on their own private world for the first of two evenings together. Richard invited Danny to try on one of a pair of supporters he had bought for him.

Unselfconsciously, Danny stripped off completely, screwed up his face and examined the jockstrap closely, mystified, trying to figure out which bit went where. When he had done so, he snapped himself into it, and frisked around the room looking extra vitalised.

Richard reclined on a bed, elbow propped, and watched him, admiringly. "Not a bit shy about showing yourself off, are you, Danny?"

"Nu. Should ah be?"

"No you shouldn't. You've got plenty there to be proud of. How's the Litesome?"

"Great. Makes yer feel some kinda springy."

"You've got a fantastic little body, son. Like a slightly smaller version of Stevie."

Danny's taut musculature bore testimony to an active life, neatly displayed around and beneath clavicles which formed an appealing wide chevron. The long-limbed lad's loins were slim, sleek and

beautiful—not a microgram of excess flesh anywhere on him. “How d’yer come by it?”

“Come by what, Uncle?”

“Your well-shaped body, damn it. Are you listening to me, or what?”

“Aye—I heard yer. I was doin’ karate training, y’know, in Greenock. I did it good.” He embarked on a series of karate-inspired high-flying kicks, punches, grunts and chopping actions.

“I can believe that. You’re a lively kid. Tell me, is it *really* true it took four grown men to haul you out of your classroom that time?”

“How d’yer know that, Uncle?” He continued to leap around, tackling an imaginary foe. “Boof! Hah! Pow! Take that, puke-face!”

“It’s all in the records,” Richard said, greatly amused and infatuated by the lad’s animal dynamism.

“Aye, it’s true. Only it wasn’t like they was grown men, Uncle. More like they was all big chickies, shit-scared of a kid what would stand up to ’em.”

“But you injured two of them, didn’t you?”

“Not on purpose. They was like lassies what didnae have no muscles, an’ they was pushin’ their luck, that’s all.”

“And you like it better if a man acts like a real man—someone with command, authority—someone who can dish out discipline fairly?”

“S’pose so.”

“Good lad.”

“See you, Uncle—I hated your guts that first day. When you was holding me down to get my hair off, an’ when you was tryna shove me into them short pants. But next, I got to figure yer must be okay ’cos you ain’t scared an’ you’re tough. So next, when yer didnae split about Mark an’ me when we was doin’ that you-know-what stuff, I started to like you best. So now, ’ceptin for Marie, you’re my best pal in all the world.” Richard was stumped for words for the moment. What a heart-warming, nay, heart-rending thing to say. To belong to a smart tough kid like Danny—what else did one need? At length, “Quit jiggling around like a demented tiger for a minute, and get your body over here, brat You deserve a bear-hug for those few propitious words.”

He came, willingly, allowing Richard to enfold his jock-strapped body in his arms. He squeezed him tightly, intoxicated by his chlorine-tainted near-nakedness, his hard shape and his lusty compactness. The little live-wire was irresistible. He planted a kiss in the dent behind a collar bone, keeping his nose and lips in contact.

Danny pulled away almost immediately and, as if uninterrupted, went on, “Only now I’m gonna beat you up, Uncle, ’cos don’t forget, I’m still the big boss-man aroon’ here—reet?”

Richard offered no resistance and was dragged to the carpet amidst a flurry of flying limbs. He found himself flat on his back, his cheeks firmly sandwiched between Danny’s sturdy thighs. Such was the sudden surge of joy this simple act induced, and so finely balanced was Richard’s sensitivity, that his tear ducts, so easily tripped, threatened a precipitation right then. He was reminded of the thrill these same legs had given him earlier, before they’d plunged him into unconsciousness. But this time his vision was clear, and his feelings alert and responsive. “Okay, you got me, young Tippy bootboy. I’m powerless. Now what? You gonna squash the life out of me again, are you? Or mebbe kick my teeth so far down my gullet, I’d bite my own balls off?”

Danny grinned, recognising his own words. “Nu.”

“Then, what?”

“You’re s’posed to fight back.”

“Okay, in a minute.” He gazed up at Danny’s appealing cornflower-blue eyes, set in a face alight with excitement and anticipation. “But first I’ve gotta say this. I’m not really tough like you said, young ’un. It’s

just that I've got this terrific temper I can summon whenever I need it—just like you have.” Why he was compelled to confide thus, he didn't know.

“Yeh, sure,” said the boy, not really listening. He was wanting action, and he began to pinch the man's nose, alternating this with vigorous rubbing—which did start his eyes watering. “Yer gonna get a big red conk if you don't fight back, Uncle. We can use yer for a lighthouse.”

“Okay, you asked for it,” Richard said, simultaneously exerting a mighty upward heave which dislodged the boy who flew over Richard's head and landed face down. Before Danny could recover, and with the speed of a striking cobra, Richard grabbed a leg, folded it over his own arm, and began to force the boy's ankle towards his backside.

“Think yer can make me submit, Uncle? I'll never submit.” But as the pain increased he changed his tune and, beating the carpet with his fists, he yelled, “Submit, ow ow ow, okay I give in!” The very second he was released, he sprang at Richard again and, laughing mischievously, said, “I didnae give in. I'm jus' a dirty rotten liar, an' you've had yer chips now, Uncle.” During the ensuing scuffle, the lad managed to work his way behind the kneeling man's back and clamped his hands on both trapezius muscles, squeezing for all his worth, with a grip like a steel trap—producing excruciating pain which instantly flattened Richard out again. He had no choice but to concede defeat.

They continued to knock each other about for a while, until Richard was well and truly whacked out. The boy's supercharged energy was far from spent, but he was glad of a respite. The pair of them stayed on the floor, sitting side by side with their backs to the wall. Sweating profusely, breathing heavily. They gazed at each other, smiling broadly—but these were much more than mere smiles. They were loaded. They carried with them the transference of mutual respect, and that special feeling—male prerogative?—that arises from friendly combat. It bound them together. (We're close buddies—we trust each other.)

After a while, Richard sighed hugely, and said, “Well, young 'un, I'm for a bath. To get rid of the sweat and the chlorine—dries my skin.”

He immersed himself in the warm water. He had imagined that Danny would want to try out the television, but to his surprise, the boy entered the bathroom too, stripped off his strap, and without a word, climbed into the bath—increasing the depth of the water to within inches of the rim. “You scrub my back, an' I'll scrub yours,” he said, soaping his hands.

“A pleasure but—hey—you'd better not scrimmage around too much, or we'll flood the bathroom. Let's be having you.”

There was, by now, no way on earth that Richard could keep his erotic feelings at bay, and he produced an erection without even thinking about it. When their bathing had been completed, he took the soap-slippery boy to his breast and held him there, hugging him almost fiercely. The boy freely acceded to his embrace, contentedly relaxing, agreeably succumbing to touch, warm water and steamy atmosphere.

Richard was so highly exhilarated as a result of the rapid empathic bond they had forged, that he felt compelled to pile even more praise upon his young mate's shoulders. “Oh, Danny, what a fabulous boy you are,” he murmured, riding an ecstatic wave. “You make me feel so damn good, I might just burst, I might even—” This time he was unable to stifle a little sob, which the boy instantly detected.

“Uncle, you're greetn',” he said, with some surprise, raising his head to look directly into Richard's face.

“Nonsense—and get back down there,” he said, pretending to chastise as he pressed the boy's head back to his chest again. “I got soap in my eyes, that's all,” he lied. “What's it to you?”

“Yer can't kid me, Uncle. You're greetn'. What for?”

“Christ, lad, is nothing sacred? I told you, it's because you make me feel so goddamn good.”

“Weird.”

“I agree. Now shut yer little cake 'ole and let me have peace for a bit.”

“Uncle's a weirdo,” taunted the boy, trying to look up again.

Richard rewarded his impudence by shoving his head under the water, which caused some of it to slop over the side. “Now see what you made me do,” he scolded, hauling the boy back to his former position again.

“Uncle’s a weirdo,” Danny trilled once more, still full of fun.

“You gonna hush up, or do I have to drown yer?” This time he wrapped his legs around the boy, holding him still in a sideways position, and this time he stayed put, raising a hand which he placed on Richard’s shoulder. Richard saw those tough-boy tattoos on his arms again, and fingered them lovingly. Then he allowed his free hand to range down across Danny’s body until it met his penis. His hand closed on it. He’d never seen it erect before and couldn’t help feeling amazed. It was even larger than his own. Was its size amplified because it was underwater? It must be six, or even seven inches long—almost a two-hand job—on an eleven-year-old? Positively freakish. But if you’ve got to be a freak, what better course could abnormality take? What happier manifestation? Heaven only knew what dimensions it would attain in maturity. Danny didn’t object to Richard holding on to it, and they remained thus until a chill in the water brought their closeness to a temporary conclusion.

They climbed into one of the big beds together, sliding between crisp, white cotton sheets where, astoundingly, the boy took immediate command. Richard lay on his back and, without hesitancy, the boy straightway stationed himself on top. He then gently slid his solid shaft beneath Richard’s perineum. Richard closed his thighs on it, creating a mutually rapturous ensnarement. His own sex-piece was flattened between both lower abdomens. Danny rested his own head alongside his partner’s and embarked on a slow, methodical undulation of the pelvic region in intercrural masturbation—coming as close as two males can get to intercourse without actual penetration.

Richard’s body was aflame, yet he felt humbled in the presence of such a masterful youngster. His hands caressed the boy’s back, ultimately cupping his firm, trim buttocks and doing his best to help Danny along the road to orgasm.

He smiled to himself. The constant movement across his own cock was going to cause him to climax too. Could be messy. He reached out a hand and grabbed tissues he’d lifted from the bathroom. “Taking a long time is it, son?”

“Nu. Best if yer do it slow. Mark sez so.”

They continued whispering together throughout the ensuing act, though there were occasional extended moments of quiet between each utterance.

“That mighty conqueror trapped between my legs is the biggest one I ever saw, kid. D’yer know that?”

“Not till Mark told me—then I see the others. Stu’s mad jealous ’cos he’s only got a wee tiddler. Mark takes the piss out of him, Uncle. Calls him Willy-nilly sometimes—an’ sometimes Peanuts.”

“That’s unkind of him, but that’s Mark, I suppose. Cheeky son-of-a-bitch, right? And I know how Stu feels about his plonker, but it won’t make the slightest difference to his sex-life. What does Stu say when Mark takes the piss?”

“Sometimes they have fights, but they soon get pals again. Mark sez if yer hold it in your left hand it makes it feel bigger.”

Richard’s body rippled with suppressed laughter. “You’re very fond of Mark, aren’t you, Danny?”

“Sure. Some great big boy is Mark.”

“Yet he was the one who blacked your balls and then initiated the stringing up.”

“Geez, Uncle, that’s history. Anyway, I like him now.”

“Remember your first night at the school? You and me shared a bed then, much smaller than this one—yet we didn’t even touch each other all night”

“I telt yer—that’s ’cos I didnae like yer that one time.”

“Seems to me you end up liking most the people who treated you very badly to begin with.”

“Must be a nutcase, I guess.”

“You’re no nutcase, Daniel Newmains. You’re a little smasher, and guess what? I love yer, kid.”

“Sure. Me too,” he muttered, dreamily reciprocating. “Shush please, Uncle, ’cos it’s gonna happen soon.”

“Do you come yet, son?”

“Huh, no—well, mebbe jus’ a wee bit.”

They lapsed into a blessed silence which lasted several more minutes, then the boy initiated a slightly speeded-up action, which invoked seismic stirrings in both of them. Before long, he ceased thrusting altogether, his whole body stiffened, and then Richard experienced a series of powerful convulsive jerks between his legs, and for Danny it was all over. The boy withdrew his mighty rod, leaving a trace trail of pre-lube and seminal fluid between the man’s legs, then rolled off to Richard’s right side and relaxed. Richard took a tissue and executed a quick mopping-up operation—around his own navel too, which was moist with like substances. Then he shoved his arm beneath Danny’s neck and drew him close again.

“Have you been doing this sort of thing for a long time, Danny?” he whispered.

“Nu. Markie showed me.”

“And how did you know I wouldn’t mind?”

“Dunno. Jus’ knowed it, that’s aw.”

“Did you, son,” he said, sensitively. “I wonder if you realise that if anyone should find out what we’re doing right now, we’d be boiled in oil, then burned at the stake, then tossed to the lions.”

“Some trick, if yer can do it,” breathed the boy.

“Well, I would anyway.”

“What for? It’s jus’ fim we’re gettin’.”

“Oh, god bless your innocence, little son. If only the rest of humanity would view it as you do. Tell me something else—do you think this will do you any harm?”

“What harm? I don’t get it”

“I mean, might you get to like it so much, you’ll want to do it with men and boys all the time?”

“Get lost, Uncle. It’s ’cos I’m not old enough to do it to lassies yet. But when I am—wow—watch out lassies.”

Watch out, indeed. They’ll need receptacles the size of space station docking bays! “Good for you, son. Spoken like a man. But Brian Snapley reckons he’s old enough already, and he’s eleven too. What do you say to that?”

“Snapley’s jus’ a clarty fat pig an’ a brag-mouth an’ a big liar. I bet he never done it, an’ any lassie what would fancy him would have to be a clarty fat pig an’ aw.”

Presently Richard felt the boy’s fingers curling around his own unresolved boner. The fingers tightened until his whole hand closed on him in a vice-like grip. The unexpected contact caused it to pulse just once. This moment marked the first time ever in his adult Ufe that another male had handled him thus, and he was initially taken aback.

“Want me to do it to you now, Uncle?” Danny murmured.

“Thanks, wee son, but if you don’t mind, I’ll take a rain check. I’d rather you didn’t. Nothing personal, Danny, just the way I feel.”

“Nae sweat—but can ah hold it for a bit?”

Richard gritted his teeth—was suddenly foundering in the floodwaters of chronic anger and frustration—precipitating an outpouring of almost uncontrolled, invective-laced periphrasis. “Hold it? Yes, Danny, you hold it, you wondrous little bastard. I just love every wee bit of you to hell-fire and back again. You’re a tremendous little fucker, d’yer know that? Do it, son. Do it, for Christ’s sake. And sod the bastards, sod ’em all, fuck all the bastards who shriek thou shalt not. Just go ahead and do what you fuckin’ well like, because shit shit shit, I shall savour every bleedin’ second of it forever—an’ that’s twelve pence in the swear box!”

“You throwin’ a flakey, Uncle?” The boy was alarmed by the unexpected aggression in Richard’s tone. “Did I do sump’n wrong?”

“If you mean angry, yes I am, good an’ angry. But not with you, Danny boy. Never with you. You’ve done nothing wrong. As far as I’m concerned, you can do no wrong. You’re perfection. You’re everything anyone could ever hope for in a boy. You sizzle. You’re a star. You’re solid gold. No, Danny, oh no son, it’s society’s ignorance I’m mad at—something you’re still too young to understand. Balls an’ brains in a kink. Gravel in the groin. Hah!”

“Geez, Uncle, are you okay?” Danny murmured, much disturbed. His hand had disconnected and he was showing signs of withdrawal.

Richard didn’t often lapse into bad language. Expediency had been the mother of his malediction—helping him dispatch the last remaining vestiges of remorse. A great calm came upon him.

He sighed a bed-shaking sigh, his irritability subsided, and the brief storm passed. “I’m sorry son, I’m really very sorry. I didn’t mean to sound off like that—didn’t mean to upset you—and I apologise for all those swear words. It was very wrong of me.”

“That’s okay, Uncle,” whispered the boy. “That didnae bother me.”

Richard managed a little laugh. “You probably know more words than I do, Danny. Forget it, little pal, okay?” He cuddled him more tightly, kissed his forehead, and giving caution and inhibition the elbow, added, “Go ahead if you want to, son. Pump away as much as you like—as you said, you’re the boss.” He took Danny’s now reluctant hand and encouraged him to re-establish his grip—and the boy responded.

Jesus Christ! This young guy’s got a helluva hold on me—like a gin trap. And an action like a piston engine. Expert. Anyone would think he’d been doing this stuff longer than his years. To think that I should be lying here right now with this fearless little wanker. Soul on fire—heart doing back flips. My thraldom for the right adjective! They existeth not, quoth the ancient one! Forget adjectives. Enjoy! Enjoy!!

On heat for so long already, it took no time at all. Perhaps too quick. He climaxed soon afterwards, having taken over from Danny just before ejaculation. They sat, back rested, sharing a cigarette, and after a little while Danny said he ‘wanted to be done over again’—as he put it.

This time Richard wanted to see, rather than merely feel, and suggested they get out of bed. Danny was willing, said his thingy had gone droopy, but ‘nae sweat’.

Feeling positively salacious, Richard nevertheless took in the sight of the youngster’s king-size dangler and figured that anyone—anyone at all—would be hypocritical indeed to deny admiration for the incredibly glorious length of it. He took Danny by his upper arms and gently lowered him to the edge of the bed. Then he knelt in front of him so it seemed that the thing swam before him, filling his entire field of vision. Here was an appendage appreciably more mature than the rest of the boy who bore it so indifferently. Its prepuce was permanently partially drawn back exposing a small pink moistness of glans, the rim of which stood out in bold relief. As did the veins which traversed its complete measure, branching randomly and erratically. Richard leaned forward to kiss it tenderly and repeatedly, and though not really into fellatio he nevertheless found himself encircling the bulbous tip of it with his lips, creating a momentary blissful entrapment. An action which caused its lengthy flaccidity to stir again, questing. A speedy stiffening set in as Richard grabbed it firmly and seated himself on the bed at Danny’s right side, and with his left hand around the little boy’s lean waist he probed the firm square slabs of ganglionic armour-plating defending his satin-skinned abdomen.

“Hey, wow, that’s terrific, Uncle. You do it good. You’re a great log flogger.”

“For Christ’s sake, Danny, will you shut your wondrous little trap. You’re getting me all embarrassed.”

“Stu calls you a jelly baby,” laughed Danny, squirming deliriously.

“And not without good reason. Dunno why I should tell you this, you sexy little bastard, but this is not my regular line and I wouldn’t have been doing it at all if you hadn’t savagely attacked me.” He squeezed

the boy even more tightly. "But, hell, I'm glad you did. As you said, it's fun we're getting." Then, to himself, By god, I never dreamed this much fun was possible. I never dreamed such boys existed—or that I should ever find myself in such company—or that I should ever be permitted to connect with a cock of cocks like his. Thrill upon thrill. *Lord*, help us!

"It's nearly cornin' again—oh wow!" Danny stiffened, his knees snapped together, and seconds later his testes produced little more than one of Mark's so-called 'pearlers', but Danny was satisfied. So was Richard, as the two of them climbed into bed again and lay in each other's arms, skin on skin.

"Talk to me som'ore, Danny," Richard breathed. "I like to hear you talk. Tell me now, this karate you said you did. How come you stopped if you were getting on so well?"

"Dunno. Jus' did. Didn't seem no point."

"But don't you get belts and things, to show your grade, to show how good you are?"

"Yeh. I was a yellor belt. That's a fifth kyu."

"Kyu?"

"Means 'boy'. It was okay, coulda done better if I'd have stuck it."

"I bet I know why you didn't. For the same reason Stevie didn't stick to running. You both needed someone who cares, someone who loves you. Someone to come home to who's interested enough to listen to your achievements and to give you encouragement. Without that—as you say—what's the point. Am I right?"

"Dunno. S'pose so. My ma couldnae give two fucks. I never hardly saw her."

"And your dad?"

"He done a bunk when I was jus' a wee 'un."

"That's helluva sad, Danny."

"No it isnae. Didnae bother me."

"Nothing seems to bother you. You're a regular stoic. What we did to Lenny Herbertson didn't trouble you either, did it?"

"Why should it? I coulda bashed him into mash tatties meself, if I'd 'ave wanted to."

"Yes, I reckon you could. Y'know, I'm glad you and I have gotten together this way—and that we're on the same side. Tell me something else: How come you've shown no fear or even bashfulness, throughout all we've been doing here this evening?"

"I don't get yer, Uncle."

"Well, when I discovered you and Marie in the sick room you were embarrassed. The second time, you were shy—buried your head in your big pal's shoulder. Why, son?"

"Cos it's private. Ain't nub'dy else's business. Sexy stuff's jus' for them what's doin' it, that's aw."

"You mean that across the board, don't you? Goes for everybody—grown-ups as well?"

"Aye. Nub'dy should tell nub'dy, not ever."

"That's a very wise head you've got on your shoulders there, Danny, and you're quite right." He pondered what the boy had said for a moment. Other people's sexual liaisons—whatever form they took—invariably suggested prurience when they became public domain; were viewed as something vaguely disgusting—as if civilised man should be able to rise above such base relations. Indeed, some still do believe in abstinence divine. Laughable really. They should self-destruct, for they are themselves the vile spawn of that same 'filthy act'. All of which made it patently obvious that man-boy associations such as theirs would never achieve societal acceptance. But, under the prevailing circumstances, who cared?

Richard lay awake for some considerable time in a kind of rhapsodic haze, clinging to that sensational, magical male-inminiature by his side. What a boy! He and young Hansa were so very different. Dear, lovable Hansa. He thought of their beautiful shared intimacies, which paled beside the excitements Danny had generated—not that they would in any way diminish his ardour for his first love: it was far too strong for that. But whereas Hansa was docile, malleable and mostly silent (but with fire

when called for) Danny was considerably more coarse—electrifyingly so. He would have loved to have seen him in action against the four men at his last school. He certainly had it in him. He considered. To be Danny's friend, to have him take the dominant role was a privilege. Their most tender moments didn't have quite the same depth or poignancy as those spent with Hansa—he had never kissed Danny on his lips for instance—but by god, this hard-edged young lad was quite the randiest little fucker he'd ever known. Before he doused the light, he gazed around the room—the room that he and Danny had made their very own secret world. He'd remember it with fondness for all time.

Danny had been happy to play in the hotel pool during Richard's business lunch. Sir Alex had brought along the colourfully-named Devereux Chase, that doyen of movie fantasy, who had successfully coerced Richard into preparing a first-draft screenplay for *Deimos Scion*. It appeared that sci-fi buffs all over the western world, and in Japan, had taken the thing to their cultic hearts. A movie was therefore inevitable. Sure-fire box-office, in cinematic parlance. It was from Chase he learned that fellow-producer Gary Kurtz was in current confab with writer-director George Lucas. They were jointly planning a little piece called *Star Wars*. 'Chase-Jayco' had to beat them to it. If this started a new trend, as they were sure it would, there'd be a call for more of the same. Sir Alex suggested that, just as soon as the Chase project was well in hand, Richard get in touch with his old editor who was still operating under the Jessop aegis—to discuss future plans.

So now Richard's earlier career looked set fair to take off again, but could he do both jobs? Why not? Absolutely no reason on earth why the two shouldn't jostle along happily together, side by side. He'd need help, of course. Perhaps Edna, the school secretary, could stand some extra-curricular cash. She took dictation well, was as accurate as a nimble-fingered keyboard operator. And he could rattle things off in double quick time when the need arose—and it had!

Late on Monday evening, Richard dropped Danny off at the school and drove straight out to his cottage. He was in a mellow mood and wanted to be alone to reflect the weekend's unique diversions. Feeling good, he bedded down soon after his arrival.

In the middle of the night he awoke with a start and sat bolt upright, bathed in sweat. He'd heard a crash, as of shattering glass. He felt suspended 'twixt dreamscape and actuality. If he'd been dreaming he couldn't recall it. If, on the other hand, someone had broken into the cottage...

Dreamcrash or not, there were scuffling sounds emanating from the kitchen and his first thoughts were of Lenny, returning to avenge his humiliating ill-treatment—with leather and chains minder in tow? At his right hand, a heavy brass bedside lamp. He held his breath whilst he removed the shade, the bulb, the connection, and so armed slid carefully from his bed and into his gown. He crept from the room with raised weapon and growing tension. Blood roared in his ears so loudly, he fancied any intruder must surely be hearing it too.

The kitchen door was fractionally open and the light was on. Someone there, all right. Steeling himself, he took a firmer grip on the narrow end of the lamp and rushed the door, flinging it back on its hinges. He almost dropped where he stood at the sight that met his glazed gaze.

"Oh, my god!" he gasped, his tremors replaced by a sudden surge of elation of such colossal magnitude his head swam. "Hansa!"

Richard's explosive entrance had clearly stunned the boy. Wild-eyed, he simply stood, frozen to the spot, initially speechless. "Geez, Uncle, you scared me," he stammered, recovering. "I didnae know you was here. I was gonna—"

"Never mind, son. Come to me." Richard placed the lamp on the draining board, his pulse rate resuming some semblance of normality.

As once before, Hansa took a running jump at him, clinging with arms and legs, passionately burying his face in Richard's neck.

"Oh my god," Richard repeated, fondly supporting him. "You don't know how good it is to see you again—and so fresh smelling." He kissed him and nosed into his hair—hair damp from a journey through the chill of night, his clothing permeated with intermingling outdoor odours—wood smoke, cut grass, the earth. He was shivering, travel-scuffed, weary. Richard rubbed warmth into him. "How in god's name did you get here, son?" He didn't wait for an answer. He had noticed blood on Hansa's wrist. "Oh, hey—looks like you've injured yourself. Let's fix that first, eh?" He seated the boy on a tall stool at the breakfast bar and sought first aid.

"I'm sorry I busted your windae, Uncle, but I couldnae get in. If I'd 'ave knowed—"

"Forget the window, Hansa. It doesn't matter one bit. I'm just so damned pleased you're here." He raised the boy's wrist, wiped it clean. The blood made it appear worse than it was. "Uncle Eddie told me you were going to run away, but I never expected—"

"Yeh, Mrs Mophead was a stupid ole cow. I wusnae gonna stop there. No fear. She had five, seven kids, I dunno, all lassies 'cept for this one big fat kid what was kinda mental an' all slobbery. He had an 'orrible face with pudgy eyes an' his tongue sticky-out all the time, an' scraggy hair what looked like sum'dy had pulled some off, an' he couldnae talk proper, mebbe 'cos of his sticky-out tongue which was too big for his slobbery gob. He gimme the creeps, 'e did, Uncle."

"Yes, I think I know the type you mean, Hansa." He concluded his doctoring. "There, how's that feel?"

"Fine—but wo! I'm famished. Mrs Mophead didnae give us enough grub."

"That wasn't her name, surely."

"It was Mrs Muirhead, or sump'n, but I called her a stupid ole mophead."

"To her face, no doubt."

“Yeh, an’ she made me sit till I swallowed some puke y grab what she said was stew. It was like lumps o’ carrots an’ tatties an’ bits o’ meat what was floating in hot water s’posed to be gravy. It would have made me spew my guts up if I’d have had any—which I didnae.”

Richard was foraging for food, of which there was a scarcity. “Not much here, Hansa. Bread, a bit stale. Eggs. How about scrambled eggs on toast? No milk, but hot chocolate has its own milk. Okay?”

“Great.”

“There’s an apple. Get stuck into that while I get my chefs hat on. And you can tell me how you got here—from Stirling, wasn’t it?” He picked pieces of broken glass from the sink.

“Aye. I was dead lucky at the start ’cos this young guy what was goin’ to Inverness gimme a lift in his terrific car—a Triumph Spitfire, y’know?”

“Yes, I know. Bit risky though, Hansa, hitching rides I mean,” Richard said, whisking eggs.

“S’pose so, but there ain’t no other way to get here. Anyway, Derek—that was his name—was okay, I could tell.” He went on to explain that the young man had said he was in the navy, stationed at the dockyard at Rosyth (or sump’n); that he got to like him and trust him from the way he talked; that he had then taken a bus partway with money he’d nicked from the mophead (serves her right); that he’d thumbed another lift with a real old couple (they was over forty) who called him a likely-looking lad and would have taken him straight to the police station if he hadn’t lied about being out with staff and kids and got lost; who finally deposited him at the school gate where he’d waited till the car had gone, “An’ then I come straight here. Uncle, what’s likely-lookin’ s’posed to be?”

Richard chuckled. “I honestly don’t know, son. It’s a peculiar term often applied to boys. I suppose it could mean whoever says it to you likes you, and you’re easy to like, my likely looking lad!”

“Sez you!”

“Yup, sez me, but listen—why did you come all the way out here when you could have simply gone into school?”

“’Cos matron would have sent me back, so I come out here an’ was gonna phone not sayin’ where I was, ’less it was you on the phone. I ain’t goin’ back to mophead’s dump, Uncle, so old Maitland can stick it. Maitland’s a posh git what thinks he knows best what kids want, only he doesnae. I wanna stay here with you, Uncle, ’cos you’re the best one I know. Can I? Nub’dy would know anything ’bout where I am.”

Richard knife-and-forked his boy and pushed a steaming plateful before him. “There, have a bash at that. Best hash-house style. Salt?”

Hansa persisted. “Can I stay, Uncle?”

“Hansa, my lad, there’s nothing I’d like better, but I’m afraid it’s not on, and I’ll tell you why. I’ll bet the first thing your Mrs Mophead did when she couldn’t find you was to call the police. They’ll be scouring the countryside for one lost little boy right now.”

“But nub’dy would ever find me here, Uncle.”

“No one can hide forever and when you were discovered I’d be charged with kidnapping. You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you?”

“Guess not.”

“I shall have to take you back to school with me tomorrow. Neither of us have any choice, son. But I’ll promise you this: I—and Uncle Eddie and matron and Uncle Charles—will do all in our power to keep you at the school this time. With luck, we’ll give old Maitland the boot. That way we’ll still be together. That way I’ll be able to look after you properly—and I will. You and me are gonna be close pals for as long as you like. End of speech. Whadyer think?”

“Okay, Uncle, but I gotta make a promise an’ all. Nubdy’s gonna stop me being with you, an’ if they try I’ll jus’ keep running till they get cheesed off. They’ll have to tie me up or stick me in some prison—stuff like that.”

Richard smiled. “They don’t stick little ’uns in prison, son.”

“Doesnae matter. I mean it.”

“I believe you. Now, eat. Then we’ll get you cleaned up and we can use what’s left of the night in bed—okay?”

It was all so simple and clear cut, wasn’t it? Richard nursed secret admiration for the boy’s ingenuous, determined reasoning—in a way that would get lost in the polluted mind-world of the grown-up—but at the same time was all too aware of the manipulative power of the state and of the devious ways in which individual adults, given authority, operated, especially if challenged.

Richard took a black coffee, a cigarette, and a chair to the table. He was sitting half-behind and a little below the boy, and with a keen analytical eye fondly regarded that lovable, scanthaired infant of his, tucking in ravenously. Vaguely reflected in the one intact pane. Perched on the high stool with legs widespread. His feet, in black canvas and white rubber basketball boots, their insteps lodged on the crossbar, silently drubbing as to some unheard rhythm. A heavenly masculine posture; a long curving body inside a sweatshirt from which the neckband had been ripped, leaving a frayed edge, exposing a teasing, desire-inducing expanse of bare skin; the length of his thighs and the bend of his knees in tight-fitting dirty faded jeans; that dimensionally perfect bottom of his, squatting on the stool that, if animate, would surely be squirming deliriously! (This steadfast wee lad has travelled almost two hundred miles on his own—just to be with me! Oh, my Caledonian brave, how I love you!) Beside him, the battered little suitcase containing the sum total of his worldly possessions. So sad. This was a boy who deserved so much more.

When Hansa had finished eating, Richard said, “I know you’re feeling tired, son, but will you take a wee stroll to the loch-side with me, just for a minute?”

“Sure, if you want. The grub was good, Uncle.” He sprang from the stool and with a quick flick of the hand nipped free the pants that had stuck in his fetching little cleft. He wiped the back of his other hand over his lips and followed his friend outside, seeming to have been granted a new lease of life.

Richard put his arm around the boy’s neck and drew him close, shoving a hand inside his shirt, tenderly caressing his chest, a nipple. Thus side by side they approached the water’s edge. “And I thought I was never going to see you again, son,” he mused.

“Me too, but why did you go away? You never said you was goin’.”

Considering veracity inappropriate, Richard answered, “Needed a break, that was all, but I won’t ever disappear again without telling you—and that’s a promise. As a matter of fact, I might easily have seen you on the road today myself. I just got back from Edinburgh. I took young Danny with me, just for the weekend.”

“What d’yer take him for?” A charged utterance.

Richard, aware of it, said, “Just for company. You like Danny, don’t you?”

“He’s okay,” Hansa replied, dismissively.

“And the other boys in our gang?”

He shrugged. “Yeh, but Mark scares me a bit.”

“That surprises me. You said you’d duff him up right here that night he called you a yellow river.”

“Only ’cos you was there an’ all.”

“I see, but why are you scared of him, son?”

“Ah jus’ am.”

Could be Hansa felt himself apart from the rest of them because he wasn’t in their room. Or it could be he hadn’t quite lived down Mark’s ridicule of him yet. Richard decided he’d attempt to close the gap when they returned.

He found a rock ‘chair’ and sat, taking Hansa on to his thigh. “Hansa, my lad, we’re all in this together. I know you’re maybe too young to understand, but I can’t be seen to show favouritism. I took Danny only because none of the others objected. If they had, we’d have had to draw lots—or arrange to

take turns. It has to be that way. You have to remember that no matter how things look to you, nothing will ever make any difference to you and me. I've told you that so often. Hansa, you've got to believe me."

"I do." He inched closer.

"Right, how about a big wet slobbery kiss?"

Their lips met. Richard held the boy tightly to him, and with eight hands hugged him all over at once, voraciously. The back of his head, his shoulder blades, his behind, his back again, his neck. Stuck fast in a weave of erotic enchantment.

Before they returned to the cottage they stood at the water's edge for a moment, gazing out across the dark expanse. It was a cold, clear night. Above them, hundreds upon hundreds of stars glittered from a sea of black velvet. There were no clouds to blight the awesome sight which was so monumental as to take the breath—and their aspirations were plain to see as they were whisked away on the crisp, refrigerated air. Nature's vastnesses were silent, and yet—it wasn't quite silent. There was a sound, a sound beyond description—a quiet roar? Somewhere in the unfathomable distance a torrent spilled over a fall, heard as a continuous drone that seemed to hang on the panoply of night and time and space. At their feet, tiny wavelets lapped against the pebbly shoreline, and there came the ceaseless trickle of water from some small nearby bum. The cosmic soup. (Find another ingredient, divine being. I'm not ready for the pot quite yet!).

"It's so wonderfully peaceful here, isn't it, Hansa?" Richard mused. "Do you like it?"

"I like you, Uncle."

He laughed. "That isn't what I asked, but it'll do. Let's go inside. It's colder than I thought."

Richard drew a bath of hot water and helped Hansa to undress. The boy stepped into the water back-turned, and Richard seized the opportunity to bury his face in the lad's jeans and underpants, acutely aware that this fabric, these garments, had clung sheathlike the instant before directly next to his skin, hugging his modest hips, his buttocks, his bollocks. The feel of them, the scent from them, as seductive as the boy himself. He inhaled deeply, swooning vertiginously as from a whiff of nitrous oxide, thrilling more than ever to the tell-tale odour of the youngster's declining enuresis—which still imparted a lingering, pulse raising 'fragrance' that was intrinsically Hansa. He stripped off and joined him, feeling positively predatory.

Later, they moved about the place sans ignominy, completely reconciled to each other's nakedness—to the very ends of their shared penile rigidity! Richard was rejoicing in the sort of freedom he imagined practising naturists must experience. Casual. Equable. Warm. Hansa commented on the huge picture of himself, wanting to know how Richard had come by it. He hadn't known he'd been photographed, and was clearly delighted.

Richard followed Hansa into the bedroom with a towel, and, stimulated by the youthful soap-scented boy's closeness, proceeded to rub his hair dry. After which Hansa plumped on to the bed, lying on his back with an up-thrust pelvic area and his hands clasped behind his head. "You gonna do that thing to me again tonight, Uncle?" he asked, a little hesitantly.

Richard regarded Hansa's perpendicular penis—firm and unwavering as a mainmast—with faint amusement as he approached the bedside. "If you like, son, but aren't you tired? You've had quite a day."

"Not too tired for that. Please, Uncle, do it to me, will yer?"

"A pleasure, Hansa. Shove over a bit then."

Richard was surprised by the request because, although they'd shared a bed often enough, there had only been two earlier occasions. Hansa was a boy to whom sex-play was secondary. Richard had known it would diminish over the natural course of time. With Hansa it would be sooner rather than later. Neither had the boy ever wanted to return the favour—which was why Danny's direct attack on Richard's equipment had caught him so unawares. Love and a strong feeling of belonging were far more important to

Hansa—and he was all the more lovable for that. Their relationship was built on unshakeable foundations which did not need reinforcing with sex. Their compatibility was secure and their friendship would endure. Richard had no doubt of that because in some ways the boy was so much like himself. In spite of Richard's new-found emancipation and the nailing down of his sexual orientation, he still looked upon inter-generational sex as an unnecessary adjunct. Take it if it's there—if not, c'est la vie. Touch. That was the important thing. Close physical contact. To be able to touch their clothing and to feel their skin against his own. Being surrounded by, and being at one with, tough young schoolboys was amelioration enough.

Basking in sunblest contentment, he drew his handsome lad close, enfolding him, responding to, and rejoicing in, the feel of the youngster's invigorative smaller form, enjoying a reprise of all those delights experienced the first time he had shown the boy the way and the awakening. There was something indescribably wonderful in being enabled to cuddle up the little lad without fear or favour. The chatterbox in Hansa was silenced as before when Richard's fingers closed on his willing wee phallus—and he blissfully surrendered to the rhythm and the rising sap—the spiritual and the physical melded in the idyllic, glowing perfection of a very real and everlasting love.

Wanting the moment to last, Richard manipulated the rigid little organ tenderly and slowly with fingers a-dngle, changing the manner in which he held it from time to time to mutually prolong the breathtaking sensations. Even stopping occasionally to fondle the boy's balls. Previously this had all been enacted beneath the bedcovers, but now Richard had his face close to the operation because he wished to see and to scent as well as to feel.

Presently, Hansa's body began to tremble, his legs to stiffen and his penis to harden still further. His back arched a little, his hips rose to meet Richard's deliberate stop-start pull on him. Another magical minute or so elapsed and then, following a stupendous pulsating, the boy ejaculated with a gasp and a sigh and sank from Richard's grasp again. He had produced his first small emission and raised himself up to see it before collapsing back to the bedcovers enthralled. Richard wiped it away before resting his cheek lightly upon Hansa's abdomen, inching slowly towards that miraculous little organ and then kissing it over and over.

He brought Hansa to climax two more times before flaking out beside him and wrapping as much of himself as anatomically possible around the boy. The lad applied a reciprocal embrace and they hugged one another as if to the death.

"I don't have to ask how that was, Hansa, because I know," Richard breathed, smothering him in kisses.

"It was great, Uncle. You was great. I didnae know—I didnae—I, um, it's jus' that—I um—" Whereupon, the boy burst into floods of tears.

Richard was much concerned. "What is it, son? Whatever's the matter? Tell me—please."

"It's jus' that I dinnae wanna go back to that mophead dump," he sobbed. "It's jus' that—I never wanna leave yer, Uncle. I jus' like yer a lot. I jus' love yer, that's aw, 'cos you're the best one."

"Oh, bless yer, kid. I think that's the first time you ever used that word love, but you didn't have to because I know it I love you too, and I told you, I'm sure we can fix it for you to stay." Indeed, Richard thought, to force the youngster away now could be construed as cruelty to children. It mustn't happen. It won't happen! "Come now, let's dry your eyes and forget about that for tonight, okay, son?"

His sobs gradually subsided and his avid grappling with Richard's body eased and the lad began to relax again.

Some time elapsed, and when Richard thought the moment opportune, he said, "Hansa, I know you don't want to satisfy me as I have you, but do you mind if I satisfy myself in your presence—I mean, with you here—now?"

"Like how?"

“Let’s get under the covers first.” Richard would have liked the boy athwart his throat treating his nose and mouth to penile and testicular titillation to accompany the act, but felt this inappropriate, and the last thing he wanted was to risk something that might offend Hansa and threaten their love. Danny wouldn’t think twice—a future delight? Instead, he invited Hansa to lie on top of him face down, with legs astride. The boy then allowed passage of Richard’s penis between his legs, snug-fitted to his perineum, enabling Richard to press its tip tightly to his little buttock’s cleavage. Then Hansa locked his legs together inside Richard’s own, applying a spellbinding squeeze. “That feels nice,” Hansa whispered, at the same time silencing any possible come-back by bringing his salty lips, still tear-damp, into communion with those of Richard whose senses soared again. The boy adhered himself so tenaciously that Richard could not have moved his head even if he had wanted to. He was being sucked in, could hardly breathe, was being swallowed whole! This rated as Hansa’s most ardent attack on him so far. His head was swimming, his heart throbbing and, down below, he was thrusting away with unheard of vigour, being assisted by his own fantastic young savage. He climaxed in a dazzling, mind-blown scintilla of glory and, releasing himself from Hansa’s long-held kiss, implanted his own kisses all over the youngster’s handsome features, at the same time sliding his hands across the boy’s smooth skin: his incurvate spine, his shoulders, his wee bum, his thighs. Grasping, clinging to, holding on to this clean, fresh-harvested, dew-splashed young male body speared Richard through and through with passion unbound, forcing one final, colossal, nerve-exposed jolt of pleasure. And then release.

Breathing steadily and rhythmically again, they remained as they were for some considerable time, not speaking, not needing to, inactive, at peace. And with no more than two hours before dawn, Hansa, his much loved ‘little kid’, dropped off to sleep at last.

A pictorial catalogue of his boys drifted across Richard’s own increasing somnolence. He remembered feeling there could never be anyone else to take Hansa’s place, and it was true. There was only one Hansa. But in different ways there were others, too: Danny Newmains, his sexual roller-coaster. And there was gentle, loving Kelvin Campbell who wanted him to be his dad. And there was his spirited athlete, Steve McKimmie, who would permit spinal massage and friendly wrestling as their only physical contact, but with him that was enough. There was that scruffy young tyke, Angie Butler, whom he had yet to conquer. There were the stalwarts, Mark Selby and Stuart Robertson whose mere presence was sufficiently rewarding. And then there was the much desired, dark-skinned Scotty Srakane. Oh yes, there was still nine-years-old Scotty, whose best years were yet to come. And there would be others who would follow on. He knew that as long as he remained at Pinewoods Hall School—and he hoped to stay there forever, becoming in his old age a sort of Mister Chips—he’d never really want again.

Even as sleep consumed him that evening, he knew he’d come as close to repletion absolute as it was possible for anyone to get—anyone at all—whatever their predilections. He had a friend, and colleague in the full sense of the word, in Eddie. Louise and Lee would visit at Easter. His will to write again was restored. His life was in order and he was at peace with self. He had reached for, and had attained the zenith of, a high, bright arc from which he would never again let himself be toppled.

If you enjoyed this book you would probably also enjoy our recent collections of boy-love short stories:

The Ninth Acolyte Reader
The Eighth Acolyte Reader
The Seventh Acolyte Reader
The Sixth Acolyte Reader
The Fifth Acolyte Reader

Five anthologies of short fiction about boy-love as it really is experienced by the boys and men involved. A total of 56 tales that span the centuries from Ancient Greek myth to the very real present of Spanish Harlem. Writers include Andrew May, Daniel Mallery, Luis Miguel Fuentes, Frederic Trainor, Alan Edward, Christopher Monteriano, Edward Bangor, Jotham Lotring, Paidric MagUidhir, I. L. Ingles, J. Darling, Kevin Esser, Robert Aldrich, Jaymee Chelsea, Marcus Tilley, William Barber, Mark Derby, K. I. Bard, Jacques de Brethmas, Robert Campbell, Hakim Bey, Bob Henderson, Thomas Mitchell, Simon Worthy and Steven Wood—some of the best known and finest writers working in this field today.

Included are ghost stories, love stories, adventures; tales told by boy-loving men, boy-loving boys and boys involved with their man friends. Some are humorous, others very serious and intense indeed. But all involve boys no matter where the tales are set: in the Classical world, Australia, England, Crete, Italy, France or America—and all share the point of view that erotic love between men and boys of good will is a valuable and precious thing which should be protected and encouraged rather than persecuted. These are predominantly happy stories, a fine antidote to the bad news boy-lovers are constantly buffeted by.

Singularities, Book One
by Robert Campbell

A collection of short stories which Gore Vidal called “Interesting enough to be banned in Texas.” Robert Campbell had a most varied talent. He could adopt the voice of a redneck preacher, a small town embittered cynic, a naive Caribbean Island boy, a middle-class Midwestern American teenager. He was as at ease writing about East Africa as his own American Middle South.

There are tales in this book about two boys struggling with their gay consciousness, love between men and boys which span the troubled waters of inter-racial suspicions, the dance of courtship and power politics at a Southern military school, a 14-year-old psychopath as beautiful as he is deadly. Perhaps his most amusing creation is a remarkably clear-sighted lonely-hearts columnist who gives the most scandalous advice to teenagers with sexual problems.

Recent novels from The Acolyte Press:

Something Like Happiness
by Kevin Esser

Andy Damon is a fourteen-year-old small town Midwestern American boy. He is good-looking, popular at school, a bit of a ‘danger freak’—and he likes boys rather than girls. This is a lovely, honest, often humorous, and frequently very erotic account of his fumbling quest for emotional and sexual fulfilment. It leads him from his secret collection of boy images to the fringes of an alternate world of pot smoking, kiddie-pom production and commercial sex, and he participates in one wild orgy. Many memorable boys swirl through this tale of Andy’s Odyssey: the black Spinks twins, Snickers and Deacon; his beautiful classmate Timmy; Matthew, the little neighbor boy who hero-worships him, now starting his dive into puberty; and the Fuentes brothers, Manny and little Femandito. “Thanks to the author’s graceful handling of its theme,” writes Robert Rockwood in the NAMBLA Bulletin, “*Something Like Happiness* is a sexy and wonderfully entertaining BL novel.” And Quentin Crisp wrote, “This is a book that I think readers of the *Native* will love.”

As Schoolboys From their Books

by Mario Kochaney

An amusing, generous, bawdy account of the erotic goings-on in an English prep school as it never was and never could be. Eleven-year-old Jean-Philippe comes to the school half way through spring term. Fourteen-year-old Andy Chanting, a ‘Top’, takes the new boy under his wing, and, very soon, into his bed as well. Brian Miners, another ‘Top’, falls in love with his P.E. instructor. Swirling around these main stories is a storm of pubertal boys: Barney Winters, the *nouveau riche* kid, “Kiss Me” Barchester, a most promiscuous spring of the landed gentry, Jocko who tires to get it on with practically every other boy....

Adam and the Paradise Garden

by Peter Gilbert & Tom Holt

Gone swimming, presumed drowned. Mark’s clothes are found the next morning neatly folded on the Public School beach. But fourteen-year-old Mark was an exceptionally untidy boy.

Mark’s classmates Adam and Ben are caught in an act of intimacy: they are sent, as punishment, to work in the garden of a famous writer—who just happens to have known Mark as well. And then Adam disappears, and the tale moves to a stormy island off the coast of Scotland where an eccentric professor is making biometric studies of its captive population of willing boys....

The Well-Tempered Schoolboy

by Jared Bunda

Bobby Ames, fourteen, American and beautiful, would seem to have everything he could wish for a roommate lover at St. Matthews, his English boarding school, hero-worship by the younger boys—until he receives word that his mother has died in a boating accident and he decides he must leave to seek a father whom he hasn’t seen since infancy. Bobby’s quest leads him over to Amsterdam, with its hostels, canal boats and youthful prostitutes. There he is taken in by a strange “foundation” which matches boys with men needing sons, heirs, and perhaps lovers as well....

***St. Matthews Passion*, by Jared Bunda**

Author Bunda’s first novel about Bobby Ames. It tells of Bobby’s arrival at St Matthew’s, his difficulties in gaining acceptance among the other students, his love with Anthony, scion of the English aristocracy. This is the tale of that love, of “candy striping” and other brutal games played by the older boys on the

younger. Jared Bunda beautifully describes the great storms of happiness, sadness, anger, love and lust which sweep through the growing minds and bodies of pubertal and adolescent boys.

***Lucky Lips*, by Ron Elan**

Ernie Willet is eleven, a good-looking, popular, athletic kid, but two years earlier he lost his father, suddenly, in a car accident, and he's been trying ever since, oh so very hard, to "be a little man". He almost convinces his mother. He has support in 16-year-old Rick who lives down the street, whom he worships and who secretly adores him. But what is he to make of Gordie Lewis, his classmate and "best enemy", who tackles him every time he sets foot outside the school and now invites him to his home for the weekend? Are their wrestling matches for fun, to win, or are they aiming at something else? In this novel, Ron Elan explores with sensitivity, humor and excitement the world of an 11-year-old boy, with all of its surprises, pathos, fears, and erotic aspects.

***Shakespeare's Boy*, by Casimir Dukahz**

The Elizabethan glory. Shakespeare, Marlowe. The last days of England's greatest queen—and a pure Casimir Dukahz creation, a 13-year-old boy-actor. Ruy is a fatherless, motherless, cheeky and irrepressibly sexy street urchin who achieves instant, tumultuous fame on the stage of the Globe Theatre playing Juliet (although he would rather do Lady Macbeth). Off stage he draws to himself, as moths to a candle, all manner of men, from tramp to King, and boys both rich and poor.

The last book, and only novel, the immortal "Duke" wrote before being called on that last great trek in 1988, at the end of which we are sure he found himself atumble with mischievous and exploitative youngsters in the heaven he so richly deserves.

***Kim, My Beloved*, by Jens Eisenhardt**

The story of the passion of a very fallible, anxious young man for a cheerful schoolboy; how the boy slowly responds to the man's love; and how they then must deal with the outside world (in this case a rural Danish boarding school) which can never learn of that love and its secret consummations. A very personal and well-written autobiographical novel which explores the depths (and heights) of a long-lasting and extremely intense man-boy relationship.

***Dance of the Warriors*, by Kevin Esser**

The middle of the 21st Century. Medieval Christian militarism has reduced America to a dispirited province of failing crops and decaying cities. Gays and boy-lovers are packed off to the Camps in Utah, never to return. The only rebels are 'vags', young male members of a warrior cult living in such wastelands as the abandoned reaches of North Chicago. This is the ultimately uplifting odyssey of two boys, 13-year-old Teddy and his great Chicano friend Cisco, who must fight their way through epic battles toward freedom.

***Solos, Duets and Improvisations*
by Wallington Fuger**

Sprawling beside a rock-bound lake, all but isolated in the Canadian North Woods, is the Farmer Academy, a private prep-school for musically talented boys. Joel Forrest is a 14-year-old freshman there,

as precocious on his violin as he is naive about his growing body and its erotic potential. His budding good looks attract Craddock, the Don Juan of the senior class. Roxy Knowles, another freshman, has only once in his young life touched another person intimately—and falls in love with his straight roommate. Sophomore V. I. Mallory only knows erotic humiliation at the hands of another senior—until one evening he is asked to look after the small son of his flute teacher....

“True Life Experiences” non-fiction books:

***The Pagers Papers*, by Richard Rawson**

For years a little Philippine village which had been earning its livelihood taking tourists on boat trips to a scenic waterfall quietly carried on a second industry: local boys by the dozens, with parental approval, formed temporary, and occasionally longer-lasting, liaisons with Western boy-lovers, and the local hotel was a sympathetic participant in the scene.

It is all over now. The secret was out in the mid-seventies. Western society made a scandal out of what it labelled “child abuse”; Philippine politicians got elected on promises to “clean it up” (which they did); international charities raised millions promising to “save the children” (which they didn’t); and policemen discovered a whole new source of income shaking down real and suspected “paedophile” visitors.

This book is one man’s recollection of the village in its “glory time”—part nostalgic paeon to a boy-lover’s lost paradise, part social document about boys’ sexuality as it really can be where sex-negative morality hasn’t sunk deep roots. *The Pagers Papers* is a book which will be roundly hated by everyone in the anti-child-sex industry.

***It’s Okay to Say Yes*, by J. Darling**

The author of this amazingly frank book has devoted the last 12 years of his life to the love and care of boys in the Third World. He has visited all those places where a well-publicised boy-love “scene” exists, and many more where it doesn’t. He has suffered persecution, even imprisonment, but gained the love and fulfilment he’s sought, at the same time helping his boys, curing them of illnesses, supporting their families, buying them the basic necessities of life—and a few coveted luxuries.

***Pulling It Off*, by Dr. Joseph Winchester**

For over 20 years, Dr. Winchester taped boys’ accounts of their own masturbatory experiences and practices. From this unique archive he extracted over 400 of the boys’ quotes and built this book upon them, adding only a sparse but intelligent commentary. 191 boys relate just how they got started masturbating, where they do it, what manual and other techniques they use, even their favorite lubricants. They talk about mutual masturbation, who their partners are, group activities, sex clubs and what precisely goes on in them.

***Getting It On*, by Dr. Joseph Winchester**

From the same archive of recorded conversations with pubertal and early adolescent youth which he drew upon for *Pulling It Off* (see above), Dr. Winchester has now let six boys tell, each in his own words *taped at the time it was all happening* the tale of his ongoing sexual experiences with other boys and

men.

From our “BL-Classics” line of plain-cover erotic novels:

The Chronicles of Fenway Academy

by Peter Zupp

Jay Mattheson teaches English and monitors a dormitory of 13-year-olds at the Fenway Academy where he falls in love with blondly beautiful Billy. Adventures from the steamy bedrooms of Fenway to a motor-bike sexual odyssey all across America.

The Chronicles of the Desert Ranch School

by Peter Zupp

Just before he turns fourteen, Jeff goes away to this exclusive boarding school in the Arizona desert. There he learns about “a boy’s best pastime”, has his first affairs with his classmates, and falls in love with one of the older boys. Unfortunately he also attracts the school’s headmaster, who seems more than a little strange....

The Chronicles of St. Barnabas

by Colin Murchison

What could be more spiritual, ethereal than the pure tones of a cathedral choir—and how sensual and exotic their tastes can be!

The Chronicles of Scout Troop 131

by Peader O’Cullain

Idyllic camping, lazy summer days, the smell of wood smoke—all in the company of another Scout who, through the long, soft summer nights, shares your sleeping bag and your most subtle and erotic dreams.

The Chronicles of the Roster Dilemma

by Simon Worthy

A 15-year-old small town American boy tapes the tale of his active sex life over the past three years: his discovery of self-pleasuring, being instructed by other boys, erotic warfare with boys in another town, and, finally, his warm, developing love relationship with an older man.

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