



PENZANCE

E. S. James

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Prologue

Perhaps I'll just sit here and pretend to be asleep. I'll keep my eyes closed, tight; I'll ignore everyone; I'll keep my chin on my chest; I'll listen to the chatter around me, to the *bumpity-bump* of the car on the rails, and I'll pretend to be asleep. And then, perhaps, at some point - when I feel the train braking, slowing, pulling to a most-determined stop - I'll open my eyes suddenly and pretend to be waking. Then, for the benefit of my fellow travellers I'll look out of the window and exclaim "Good heavens, it's my station!" and I'll dash out into the corridor and onto the platform. And perhaps there, in that place (whatever place that is), and in that moment, I'll start a new life. Just me and my three-piece suit and my little brown valise.

The idea is oddly appealing. A new place, a new time. New people, new situations. A new start.

I imagine everyone has thought along those lines at one time or another; some may even have done it, run away - out of fear, dissatisfaction, anger or whatever - so many people go missing every year! Some may even have rationalized their cowardice - convinced themselves that they were just taking a break, or that they were doing it for the greater good: "I'll get in the car and go for a drive"; "I'll take a long walk"; "I'll learn to fly and go exploring"; or - as in my case - *I'll leave you now, alone, my dear, with the kids and the house and the miserable wretch of a life that I seem so thoroughly to have fucked up, because much as I regret it the only way I can see back to peace of mind and heart is to leave all of this entirely behind.*

I'd like to apologize, but I can't; that would imply regret, and regret only serves the past. A new start is supposed to be that single day that ignores the past and all that was wrong with it. I'm sorry, but I just I can't bring myself to apologize.

It's a good plan, I think, this pretending to be asleep. There's a sort of tidiness about it - like birth or re-birth - a

sense of choices made, of elements unknown. It's exciting, yet prudent, somehow, at the same time. It's a good plan: all I've got to decide is when to "suddenly open my eyes."

Let's see, between Paddington and Penzance there are twenty-something stops – one of those should fit the bill. Beautiful country down that way, especially the further you go; quaint, small towns and villages – uncomplicated lives. Not Tiverton, though – that's where we live now.

I'll want a quiet place. I shan't want to be too much bothered with neighbours and the like. Of course, eventually I'll have to have some friends, but for the time being at least I should probably rest and keep to myself – yes, in fact, I'm sure I read somewhere that that's how it's supposed to be. Or perhaps I just saw it on television.

Of course, that's all very well but where will I stay? Even running away involves *some* social interaction. I mean, I'll have to talk to people to arrange lodgings, to buy food, sort out power and coal and... *Damn it all, I can't stay in a hotel the whole time!* So I'll have to buy a house – just a small one, but it'll need to be paid for, stocked, maintained. Already I see how I can't really retreat from the world completely. Still, houses are cheap in the country. Perhaps I'll luck into a place overlooking the sea – perhaps the house will have a view of the water from a lovely high cliff – inviting, tantalizing. High above the rocky shore.

It *could* happen.

Yes, a quiet place in the country where things aren't complicated, that's what's right for me. Not like the city where everywhere you look people are wound up and impatient and intransigent and you can't even take a walk in the park without wondering if you're going to get mugged or raped.

Or diddled.

I love the country. I've always loved the country.

Alright then, the plan starts now – bugger that, it's already started. It started when we left Paddington. No, it started when I left my office; no – even before that when I signed my name at the bank this morning. That's when the plan started. Or did it start the first time its very shadow crossed my mind? Who cares, honestly. It's already begun, and there's no way around it now.

It's nice, actually. Very nice. There's a comfort in it – in the rhythm of the rails, the summer warmth wafting in through the little vent windows, the easy peace that comes from quiet conversation between passengers, the scribble nearby of a pencil on the back of a novel, the occasional door – up or down the corridor – clicking open, snicking shut. I know, I'm just pretending, but if I weren't I really *might* just fall asleep in a place like this. Of course, the fact that I have never fallen asleep in a train before in my life is totally irrelevant; but, today at least, the hypnotic regularity of its clicks and rattles is... *useful* to me.

"Tickets please."

Bumpity-bump. Bumpity-bump. Bumpity-

Shit! Now what?

I won't move, that's what. I'll sit here, not moving. I'm pretending to be asleep after all; can't he see that I'm asleep? Oh, now I'm feeling awkward. Rude. I should answer. I should open my eyes and speak to the man; it's only right, after all. My plan is good, but I can't forget my manners. And yet, if I *wake up* now – just to please the ticket man – am I not putting the whole plan on hold? Yes, I am. And that's something I just don't want to do. I've done for others all my life – now it's time to... The mood is good, but if I so much as open my eyes it will be altered irrevocably, and the moment – this blissfully selfish moment – will be gone forever. He could destroy it all!

It's predictable, and easy: I'll look around, focus, converse with the man, hand him my ticket, watch while he clips it, see my travelling companions, smile or nod or such, look out the window and orient myself. Easy. But all of this beautiful,

random, quiet tidiness I've worked so hard to cultivate will be obliterated – everything will have snapped back to the mundane, the empirical, the real, the ordinary, the senselessly dull – needlessly sacrificed to the logic of a purely bureaucratic process. If I open my eyes, what I see could change my mind about the whole thing. If I open my eyes my clarity and focus will become cluttered again with images, things to look at, to ponder, and my resolve to begin again might well falter. And then where would I be?

If, on the other hand, I keep my eyes closed, yes I'll know the interruption of the voice, the confused exposure to events, but the *mind screen* will remain sacrosanct. There will be no *images* to deal with, only the imagination prompted by the voices and the conversations and the noises – the other sensory inputs – around me.

But that might not be completely true. After all, we've only just left Paddington; is it really realistic for me to be already asleep? Isn't that why they check tickets early – to catch people before they nod off? And is it really all that difficult to open my bloody eyes, give him my bloody ticket, then take it back and close my bloody eyes again to resume the plan?

"Sir, ticket please." Louder now. Also closer. A little more insistent.

Bloody hell! What do I do? He's got a right to see my ticket – it's his job. I'm thwarting him in his work! But I'm pretending to be asleep, and if I'm to stick to my plan it must begin *now* and I must stick to it religiously. If I "wake up" for him I must then remain at least cognizant for my cabin-mates, and that sacrifices the plan entirely, because with the eye-opening, the ticket-handing, the glancing and the smiling – the simple acknowledgments – the plan becomes delayed, subservient, beholden. And on top of all that, if my travelling companions then decide that *they* want to talk to me, well, surely out of sheer politeness I will be obliged to engage them even though

what I really want to do is tell them all to fuck the hell off so I can get back to the plan! I mean, I may have lost some of my personal focus – enough, indeed, that I want to run away in the first place – but I haven't lost my bloody manners! Plus, there really does have to be a reasonable amount of time that it takes one to fall asleep – not only out of Paddington, but afterwards – after I hand the man my ticket. It wouldn't do to hand the man my ticket, take it back, then just drop my chin back to my chest and start snoring. It would be unseemly, and it might cause some resentment in the cabin. They wouldn't understand that it's not about *them* – they wouldn't *know* that there's a *plan*. I mean, how could they?

Oddly enough, one thing I haven't even considered is that when I do finally feel that the time and place are right and I jump up to say "Gracious me" or the like, my cabin mates may not even be here – by that time they might long since have gotten off and left me to my silly dissembling. Now *there's* a thought: can one *pretend* to be something if one is alone at the time? Can one pretend something for oneself? Or must it be aimed at other people? It's the tree in the forest thing: if someone is there it's pretence; if not, it's simple fantasy.

No, I think I'll just keep my eyes closed, keep my head down, and let the mood prevail.

"Er, excuse me, sir, I think I see it there in his hand."

Now, that's a pithy voice. Male, I think, but who can really tell these days? Gentle, kind, even maternal. Probably a queer.

(Fucking hypocrite)

"I beg your pardon, Sir?"

"It's there, in his hand, the ticket."

"Is it?"

"I think that's it. He got on at Paddington and I seem to remember he didn't put it in his pocket or anything, he just held it while he looked out the window. You know, until he nodded off. It would be a terrible shame to wake him, don't you

think? He's obviously so very sound asleep - I've been watching him for some time now."

Oh great, the queer's been watching me.

"Well, let's have a closer look." Pause. "Yes, that's it - I can see the printing. You're quite right. Alright then. But I've got to punch it now."

Bumpity-bump.

"Well, do you have to? I mean, you've seen it there, haven't you?"

Bumpity-bump, bumpity-bump.

"I have, yes."

"Well then."

The nature of authority.

"Well, you could be right." By the sound of it he stands up tall. "I'm supposed to punch it, but perhaps it's not really necessary in every case. I've seen it and that should be enough." He pauses a moment more, apparently satisfied with his decision, then says: "We'll let him sleep."

"Oh, good. I do think that's best."

So that's excellent. Now he can punch the other tickets in the room and leave. The plan will remain intact and I - having had only my *mind's* eye rudely distracted - can begin again. Don't smile! They'll see it and they'll know it was all a ruse. One punch, then a second. Was that a third? Click. Click. Is it one queer, or three? (*hypocrite!*) I'll have to listen in for a while and see what I think.

"Hold on a mo', I think 'e moved."

Damn. I didn't mean to do that. A sudden shudder of the car made my arm drop and I almost dropped the ticket. So now what? Oh great, now the sweaty ticket man is going to lean over and try to punch the ticket after all. He's going to invade my personal space without asking, little knowing that I know

everything that's going on. Someone in my mind *tsk's*: *But how do you know he's sweaty? Well, aren't they all? I think you're being a little unfair. Who the hell cares what you think?*

Bumpity-bump.

Is this tacit approval? Is my sitting here like this actually *allowing* them to do this? Oh my, how *that* rings a bell! Complicity. Of course, if I were actually asleep it wouldn't be an issue, but because I'm only pretending, what I'm saying is "it's okay, just go ahead and put your hand between my legs, grab hold of my little ticket and give it a good, hard punch." Honestly! I should *wake up* now and be outraged. I should fuss, and jostle, and threaten, loudly, to call the papers and file a writ.

But that would spoil my plan.

And he doesn't have the power to spoil the plan.

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Stop, Reading.

Reading

But what is the plan? Is this the plan? To sit here, with my chin on my chest, bouncing harshly along with the *bumpity-bump* of the rails? And really, is that all I'm doing? It's an existential point, but when I'm this busy *inside*, can anyone really say that I'm not *doing* anything? The mere appearance of inactivity does not necessarily denote apathy. Just because they can't see the firing of the synapses, doesn't mean they're not, in fact, all *a-blaze*!

The conductor is gone. Now it's just me and the queers.

(*Carst -*)

How many are there? Let me see... Well, let me *hear*, anyway. Let's see how I do with my senses. The first is to my right - entirely too close for my liking, but that's British Rail for you. I'm guessing he's tall - his voice, when he speaks, seems to come from above. He's probably skinny, judging from his reedy, tinny voice. He likely has a long, thin, peacock neck with a stubbled, protuberant Adam's apple. He's looking at someone on the other side of the cabin. Is there love in that look? Lust, perhaps? Makes me sick. Reminds me of -

"So how's Anthony?"

That's all I need to know. Obviously they're both queer, and they know each other - *Oh, you know, from that time on the heath, the gang-bang in the bushes - you remember...*

Hark at me! Making assumptions about things I don't know *as if* I ever knew anything about anything! They sound young, they could be virgins! Maybe they've never done - *that* - before. Maybe they're not like -

"He's good. He's got a job at last."

Okay, the mystery shallows. Queer One and Queer Two are 'acquaintances'. Or friends. Probably not lovers. Sounds like they're being polite with one another. Or perhaps that's just me. Perhaps they're not being open because I'm there and they

don't want to share their nasty homosexual secrets with the great, unwashed hetero.

(Why are you - ?)

Is that how they consider me? Us? Or is that just us? Is that just the way that we think? Is that how we think of ourselves? We the straights? The majority? Projection. I know a lot of people think they're dirty, but that's because of what they did to - what they *do* with one another. *To* one another. Really, I mean really - they're the ones who are unwashed, if you ask me. It's so tempting to forget.

"Oh good, what did he get finally?"

Waitress down the Man Hole. Primary School Boys' Gym Teacher. Grocery boy. Librarian. Any of the above. What good are they, anyway?

"Constable. He's working out of Liskeard."

Bloody hell! Didn't see that coming.

Bumpity-bump.

Constable of what, though? Does that have to mean police? Perhaps he's the night watchman at a men's knicker shop! Maybe he's a bouncer down at boy bar, or the hyper-stressed commissionaire at a kiddy fun house. I tense at the thought. Why does the word *constable* summon up such huge gobs of respect and...

"That's brilliant. And so close to home. Does he get to bring the panda home?"

"Of course not, you silly tosser. They leave the panda at the station when they're off shift. The next shift needs it."

"Yes, I know, I was just blowing raspberries."

Great. Just what we need - a bloody sense of humour. I'd put money on it - Queer Two is wearing makeup, or he's got a ring through his nose, or gold studs in his ears. Certainly there's an oversized ring on at least one finger - like Liberace. I'm picturing that he's just slightly over the top. There's

something more, though: are they getting closer? To each other? Is the gap narrowing? Queer Two's voice lowers a bit.

(Why are you - ?)

"So are you and Anthony busy this weekend?"

Oh God, Queer Two wants some quality time with the girlfriends.

"Well, Anthony's working, but I'm free."

Weyhey!

"Won't Anthony get jealous?"

Well? Come on! Won't he?

"No, of course not. He's far too mature. He's the better half of our relationship, by far."

Of that I have no doubt.

"That's not what I've heard, Lovey."

"Anyway, why? You're not thinking of making nice with me, are you?"

I can almost *hear* the eyelashes flutter.

"No, silly, I was just wondering..."

"Wondering what?"

Yes, wondering what?

"Well, if Anthony would be jealous."

In a *God, kill me now* kind of way this drivel is infuriating, but at the same time it's intriguing - as if there's a trigger coming. This drivel could in itself be enough to derail the entire plan, which was, by the way, to *escape* from all my shit - not to addle my poor brain with a whole different pile. This claptrap could conceivably cause me to jump off this bloody train at full speed, never mind the 'goodness gracious me!'

Bumpity-bump.

I feel Queer Two (*stop it!*) reach across the cabin. Oh God, they're going to have a moment. My skin is practically *crawling*.

And yet, I'm not really sure why. After all, wasn't that me on the other end of one of those long-fingered hands, back when I was -

Bumpity-bumpity-bump.

Eight.

At that thought I feel myself shift uncomfortably in my seat. I grunt a little, and adjust my head position, never varying my breathing. I *feel* the ladies look at me. No, really, it's like their eyes are *burning* into me. I feel suddenly flushed. Hot. Not from the Sun - it's a typical, cloudy, British day - but from a different place. A place I haven't thought about or even acknowledged in any real way for a very, very long time.

"Is he still asleep?" Queer Two.

Pause...

"Yes, I think so."

Shows what you know, I think, and in spite of myself I feel my brow furrow.

"Look, he's dreaming!" Queer One. "He's rather nice-looking, isn't he?" Long, affectionate pause. "Genteel."

"I s'ppose, if you're into Public School toffs."

Nice-looking? *Nice Looking?!* I want to jump out of my seat here and now, and thrash them both to within an inch of their faggoty fucking lives - perhaps even beyond. In my mind fists are flying, hands clasp harshly around bony, peacock necks, air most determinedly withheld. In my mind faces are turning blue, tongues lolling and hanging out of gashed-wide mouths like useless lumps of gristle on a plate. In my mind rage explodes, with all the furies of a lifetime of rude awakenings and lascivious interventions sitting right *there*. I can see them, feel them, smell them, *touch* them. I can even *taste* them, like blood, swimming around between my teeth.

"Well, some of those toffs are nice-looking," Queer One insists.

I ought to be pleased with this, but I'm not. It's a compliment, but it's not. After all, that's what *he* used to say. All the time. Back when. *He* used to say things like that, too. *You should be proud, Michael. Lots of boys your age are delighted to catch my eye!*

God, I haven't thought about him for years! What was his name again? I can still feel their eyes on me, but I must be fooling them well enough. They resume their drivel.

"Anyway, come over if you like - check with Anthony first, of course - but do come over. I've got a new Cribbage board - it's one of those raunchy ones. You know - there's a bloke bent over and the scoring holes run all the way up his legs like stockings and the winning point is right in the middle of his - "

Bumpity-bump.

"That's funny." Queer One seems genuinely amused.

Oh yes, this'll make headlines at the Man Hole, for sure.

Creston. No, Cranston. No, Carstairs. Yes! *Carstairs*. That was the old bugger's name. The Diddler. He thought nobody knew but us boys, but *everyone* knew. Sworn to secrecy? That's when a boy talks the loudest! Even in school I regularly spoke to every other boy he got at. Funny thing is, most enjoyed it. I'm sorry, but now that I think of it again - god, it's been years! - I can't deny it. No matter how I felt about it - how I feel about it now - it was something I enjoyed at the time.

Now that's got me thinking.

"So anyway, will you come?"

"Of course I will. What time?"

"Seven o'clock?"

"Sounds good."

Bumpity-bump. Bumpity-bump.

Carstairs - randy old sod - lanky chap with dark, dark hair (almost black!) always with his tie undone, always with the food-stained (I think it was food) trousers, the deranged, outrageously ticklish moustache, the beginnings of an ugly goatee - just the *beginnings*, mind you - like it had only just got started. Carstairs, who half the time smelled like yesterday's toast - with the pilchards still on top - except when he was sexing me up. Then there were the fragrances - probably just to confuse me.

Jesus!

The Queers (*stop calling them that!*) are still quiet. Makes me wonder what's going on. Are they - ?

Carstairs wasn't very big on love-making - at least in the beginning. His idea of foreplay was '*ready?*' Perhaps that's why some of the other boys didn't like it. Perhaps he was rougher with them. I imagine it pleased him to no end that I was only too happy to consummate. Damn it, but how the hell is this only coming back to me now!?

The urge to open my eyes is very strong. The ladies are still silent - as if working up to the invitation has run their conversation well dry.

"What would you like to eat?"

Fine. Prove me wrong.

"Whatever you make will be fine, Lovey. You're such a good cook."

"Oh, thank you. I try hard. I went to school for a little while, you know."

"Oh?"

"Yes, a culinary *academy*."

"Do tell..."

Oh, yes please do tell. Share with us all your vast culinary experience. I'm sure you were one of those little twats the rest of us boys used to despise (*Jesus, I'm doing that thing again!*) - carrying your little pinny into Home Ec, with your little sewing kit tucked into a pouch, sucking up to the bitch teacher who was very kind but who, if she was completely honest, probably didn't know quite what to make of you.

"What's the first thing you ever learned to make?"

Yes, we absolutely must hear about this!

"Chicken Casserole."

Of course!

"Oh, that's one of my favourites. I love chicken."

Naturally. Wait...

"Oh, me too."

"I expect you took a bit of needling, though, didn't you?"

"Well, some tried, but - "

Do tell.

" - I told them to fuck off. And I reminded them that some day they'd be eating baked beans on toast, while I'd be eating something very interesting indeed, and probably attracting a wonderful husband to boot, thank you very much!"

"You never said that!"

"No, of course not, but what I did say implied as much. And I wasn't wrong, either. The fact is, cooking is a good skill to have, so sod the rest."

A very good skill to have.

"Of course it is."

Carstairs couldn't cook for shit.

I remember the times I went round to his place on a weekend. Honestly! You'd think that if he was going to entertain boys for

hours at a time he'd at least learn how to cook something that they like. But no. He really couldn't. Not at all. So, we always wound up going down the Wimpy's after, or the chippy.

After, not before. Can't have the little bugger falling asleep now, can we?

Bumpity-bump.

Flashes of light. Even as I'm sitting here, the sounds of the track have changed - a sudden shriek and a rush of air, a compression, an equalization as another train blasts by, going the other way. We're in a tunnel. My eyes clench involuntarily against the flickering light, then settle again.

"So what you cooking today?"

Oh yes, do tell.

"Fuck, I don't know, do I? I never make that decision 'til I get home." A pause. "Well, no, that's not completely true. I decide on the way home, when I'm walking past the butcher's."

Never known a queer who didn't love the word 'fuck'.

"But after I get the meat I spend the rest of the walk up the High Road and through the Borough, formulating the meal in my mind."

Well that makes perfect sense.

"Yesterday I made rabbit. Donnie had a lovely fresh one hanging up, all nicely prepared, so I got a few cuts of that."

You ate Bugs Bunny.

"God, I haven't had rabbit in years." Queer Two. "My Nan used to make it so nice, with a nice, silky sauce. It makes the absolutely best stew."

"Oh, I know. My mum taught me how."

Queers have mothers? Grandmothers? Who knew? No, that's not fair.

Bumpity-bump.

Carstairs didn't have a grandmother. He didn't have a mother either, from what I could ever tell. There were certainly no family pictures in his house. The only pictures were of us - the neighbourhood boys. In the box. He was such a strange old sod.

Bumpity-bump.

Time to stretch. Bum muscles hurt and I'm starting to feel tight in *that* muscle - the one on the left side at the back of my neck. I've had headaches there all my life - as long as I can remember. Even before I met Carstairs I had headaches there. I remember a woman I knew - just before I met him. I had a terrible headache one day and I was crying - and she lay me down on the floor and told me to relax. She worked my shoulders a bit and I did start to relax, then suddenly she took my head and twisted it hard to the left and up and I heard and felt a most violent and satisfying 'crack' in my neck. I was surprised, even a little frightened, but it helped. I always got the headaches - I still do - but now I know what to do about them. My wife knows what to do, too. She's done that move on me a few times herself, and she -

And suddenly I'm wondering what the wife is doing. She with the screaming kids, the curious parents and the ugly storm of problems that I'm so selfishly willing to her.

What time is it? I can't look. To open my eyes is to give up on the plan, which is everything. Let's see, by interpolation, we left Reading and we've talked about (well, they've talked, I've listened) Anthony, jobs, cooking, Home Ec, and - well, nothing else really. That's, what - ten minutes' worth on its own, but it feels longer than that. The 4:15 from Tiverton to London has already blasted by, which means it has to be at least five o'clock by now. Adjust that for whatever time I've lost, thinking about the old sod, Carstairs - and I'm thinking it's

probably 5:15 or so. That being the case, the wife is already cooking, already staring out the window at Manor Road, wondering where I am, because ordinarily I'm home by now, washed, changed and sitting in the living room with a snifter of brandy in one hand and a silly ciggy in the other.

Bumpity-bump.

But today's not an ordinary day. Sorry darling, but you'll have to do without me today, and perhaps from now on. I'm lost, you see, and I'm off to Penzance, to the ocean, to the end of the line, to see if I might possibly find myself there.

There's that twinge of guilt again. I shouldn't be doing this. This is not responsible, and it's not kind. I love my wife. I love Kathy, and the kids - Robert and Ada. I love them with all my heart. But the plan - the plan is so good, and just at this moment it feels so bloody right! To get away. To leave. To know the ecstatic joy of... escape. At last.

And still they're talking. The Queers. They're nattering along like a couple of schoolgirls, completely and utterly engaged: boyfriends, television, work, love, sex (yes, even sex - even with me sitting right here!) and still dinner. Always dinner.

Have I mentioned that Carstairs didn't cook? It must have seemed odd to the chippy man that this old sod was in there every day - and almost always with a different boy. But who's he going to tell? Things were different then. People weren't paranoid. People didn't *assume* something was wrong just because something *looked* odd. It was not considered a bad thing for a man to associate with boys, although I admit that if I'd seen him with a different boy on his arm every day I'd probably have begun to speculate a little. Of course, I bring my own experience to bear, don't I? Besides, maybe the chippy man had a boy or two of his own in the back of his shop, tied to all those boxes of cod, waiting for the off. Not only that, but think that had the chippy man alerted the bobby to it all, he might well have lost one of his very best customers! And that would've been foolish, especially if no one was being hurt, which the ear-to-

ear smiles on most of those little faces would have told him in spades.

That's another thing that's different today. Everyone's so *on guard* for the sanctity of childhood (whatever *that* is) that they actually use paranoia to corrupt the child they're trying to protect. What other reason could there be for scaring children with the vagaries of the touches, good and bad?

Carstairs used both kinds. Even the first time I found myself in his house I knew them both. I can safely say that even though I'd never before had a lesson, I knew, instantly and intuitively, what was what.

Bumpity-bump.

Bumpity-bump.

It's not my fault I liked them both.

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Stop, Temple Meads.

Temple Meads

It is possible, with your chin down and your eyes closed and your breathing regulated and controlled, and your cabin-mates fooled, to listen very closely to what's going on around you in a train when it pulls into a station. It's a bit of a rough ride, really - the engineer up front is obviously no limousine driver. Brakes apply harshly and at intervals, as if jerking back and forth will somehow reduce wear and tear on the parts, and the noises and shouts that escalate as the station approaches - sorry, *as we approach the station* - are acrimonious and all but unnatural to the silly man in Cabin Seven who's pretending to be asleep.

There are fits of steam or air, and squeals from without, grunts and other expressions of apoplexy from within as people prematurely stand, grab luggage, bump into each other and apologize at every turn. It's a real racket when you've got a plan to stick to.

Then there's that pregnant pause - after the cabins empty and the outer doors open, and after the car shakes as bodies jump off that bottom step. And then the train waits patiently for the next stage of its journey as the people leave. That's the way it is on commuter trains: everyone gets on at the start, and the train becomes but a silent actor in the process of attrition as time passes and, stop-by-stop, people get off and start walking toward the butcher's.

No one leaves this cabin. No one talks either. It's as if both Queers are shy in the new silence - as if talking in this holy vacuum will actually break something. The cabin - the train - feels like a crematorium or a library, or a church - where the main rule is silence and respect. And obedience, above all, to the priest who's waiting in the wings.

A whistle blows and somewhere off in the distance a man shouts something indistinct. It sounds to me, phonetically, like "*haul ho*" but I know from many years riding the rails that that's not right. But it doesn't really matter, because this is the chaotic

moment when the train lurches on again. Queer One leans forward in his seat. I hear (or do I mean *feel*?) him whisper something into Queer Two's ear, but I can't hear what he says, and this annoys me to no end. Why on earth would he need to whisper when he must *know* that I'm asleep and that I can't hear him?

Carstairs used to like whispering, too. What is that - a queer thing? Back when I was eleven and we were out in public together he'd put his tremulous old arm around my little shoulder, slip his hand down to my bottom, pull me in to him, and smile his brown-toothed smile, whispering in my ear little words of love and encouragement and admiration, like:

"Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you when I get you home?"

Yes, those are the things that always make a boy feel special.

Now Queer One has stood up. I can feel him stretch his arms up high, facing the window, then he sidles past me and leans forward, evidently looking outside. I wonder, is this for my benefit, or for his queer friend? My eyes are closed, still sticking with the plan, but somehow I just know that there's an arse game going on - like some kind of mating ritual. Wiggling. Wobbling. How many species of bird, I take a moment to wonder, are so unfaithful to their mates as to wilfully flash their feathers at only a moment's notice?

And that also makes me think of Carstairs. Now that I'm remembering, I can't count the number of times that he was out with me, feeling me up, talking me up, but ogling other boys we saw in the street - openly, unashamedly, unabashedly. There were even times when I thought he was wishing I'd go away or something, so he could have a proper go at some fresh bit of meat. Or was that just me? Even eleven year olds can be paranoid, you know. They're very perceptive, but they can be jealous too, when they feel threatened. They know when they're loved, and they know when they're not loved anymore. I wonder what was harder for me - being loved by Carstairs (*loved-up?*),

or being passed over for another. I remember that moment like it was yesterday too. Like the first time he fucked me - the special moments you just don't forget.

Queer One sits down again, and unless I miss my guess he's corrected the inadequate distance between us. They're talking, but I don't know what they're saying. The rush of wind and air from outside and the scream of thoughts in my mind obviate them and their petty shit from my consciousness. I feel pressure again, from within. The train is back to speed, but now I feel like *I'm* grinding to a halt.

His name was Peter. I had seen him around the school. He was younger than I by a year. He was very pretty, and yes, I'd noticed him, but I'd never really given him a thought. I'd heard rumours about him, but had put no stock in them - at least, until I showed up at Carstairs' place and found them both together, naked, on the bed - the very same bed that I had thought was reserved only for me.

I was angry. Definitely angry. I didn't like *everything* about my friendship with the dirty old man, but I did like the *idea* of exclusivity. Sharing - fooling around - felt wrong to me. I mean me sharing him, not the other way around. But obviously I didn't have to worry about that. When Carstairs looked up from Peter's wet bits and saw me standing there in the doorway he flew into a furious rage. He grabbed the telephone - one of those heavy, chunky, old, rotary things - from beside the bed and threw it at me, in the process ripping its cord right out of the wall. It screamed through the air and smashed into the door jamb, causing a terrific gouge in the wood. It made me jump, too, but I stood firm, glaring at him. This seemed to enrage him even more, and he got himself up to follow it - snarling at me, naked and ugly, flagging now, like some kind of werewolf in transition, as if *I* was the one who'd done something wrong. I ran downstairs, and as Carstairs followed me, cursing and shouting, stopping only to throw on a housecoat, I could hear Peter back in the bedroom, bursting quickly into tears.

I got to the front door of his house and waited for him. I knew he wouldn't hurt me there, in full view of the neighbours - if there's one thing a man like Carstairs enjoys it's the veneer of propriety. That said, I've since learned that the neighbours already knew well enough about him - and frankly, I don't know how he got away with all his little visitors for as long as he did.

I felt my lips trembling as I waited, but I was doing my *damndest* to hide it. After a moment or two he showed up in his big, blue housecoat, still visibly angry, but controlled now and no longer shouting. I was shouting, though - at him. I shouted so that everyone could hear, if anyone was listening. I shouted about constancy (obviously, I didn't use such words at that time), about faithlessness, about decency and then about contrition and guilt and betrayal, and about what's right and what's wrong. I don't know why I shouted about all that, but it felt right at the time. I felt like a jilted girlfriend, a cuckolded wife. It was *my* arse he was supposed to like - so who was this other chippy to come in and take my place? How could he possibly like Peter, who was smaller and younger and..

And then it hit me. I looked at him. He looked at me. And his eyes told me that I was right.

"You're too old, Michael," he said, hanging his head in a beaten, beleaguered way. "You're just too... fucking... old."

Bumpity-bump.

In a moment all the pictures I'd seen, the ones on his walls and in his books and in his great big box of magazines and yes, even the Polaroids in his personal albums, flashed through my mind and I realized that yes, at eleven now, about a month away from twelve, I was no longer what he wanted. In that one, blinding flash of a moment I realized that he had moved on from me by moving back, to Peter and to what Peter had that I no longer did. It was a lesson in time. It was a sudden understanding that time passes, that every second of every day,

every beat of the heart, every moment, with someone or alone, is another moment in the bank, another comprehension gained, another pearl of wisdom polished. It was the first time that I - as a child - had bothered to give *time* any thought at all.

But what was it that he liked? Innocence? Smallness? Was I now handsome and intelligent where before I had been cute, and pretty and stupid? Was I now a sure thing, where before I'd been a challenge? I'd always wondered about Carstairs and his thing with me and others, but now, with this vicious rejection, I think I understood something new about it - about him and his grey hair and his penchant for the little ones. And at that moment, on his doorstep, the Sun beating down on my shoulders, my shouting stopped, my breathing slowed. I looked at him after a while and said: "I'm sorry I'm too old for you now. It's not my fault."

And he said, also calmly, and with resignation, "I know it isn't. It's not mine either."

And this isn't my fault either. Sitting here on this train with my chin down and the queers nattering on idiotically beside me. They must know by now that I'm awake - that I'm faking the whole thing. And yet, no. They are still talking quietly to one another, apparently not wanting to disturb me in my slumber.

But come on. How can anyone sleep through two stops on a bumpy, rickety old diesel train with all the noise and stink that goes with it? They *must* know! And yet, how could they? It's the plan. I'm sticking to the plan. I'm doing this thing, and by now - at least until my two queer mates are gone - there's no undoing it. I'm somewhat pleased that they aren't (probably) going all the way (oh, that phrase brings back memories!) to Penzance, but until then I'm stuck.

I remember walking away from Carstairs' house that day, feeling absolutely rotten. For a split second, in my anger and my sadness, I even thought of running home and telling Mummy all about what the nasty, horrible Mister Carstairs had been doing

to me. But there's no way *that* could ever happen. First, I couldn't deny that once I'd gotten into it I found I actually enjoyed it; second, I wasn't built that way - I wasn't going to grass on someone I considered a friend (yes, I still considered him a friend), no matter what; third, I thought it might be rather hard to explain to my mum why, if I was so terribly upset, I had not reported the nasty Mister Carstairs until the third year of our connection. Additionally, I can't deny that it felt rather petulant of me to have these thoughts *simply* because Peter had come along and usurped me. I mean, it wasn't his fault, was it? And finally, I felt bad that Peter had had to witness that little scene from his own future - the violence of the telephone hitting the door jamb, the shouting, the running down the stairs, and the screaming naked peacock of an old man suddenly exposed as more than just the sum of his lies. So rather than running home and telling anyone who would listen, I held up in some bushes in the garden of the corner house at the end of the Road and waited for my competition to walk by.

And soon enough, he did. He was still crying, too, although *snuffling* is probably more accurate. I saw him rub his eyes as his pouting little lips stuck out what seemed a mile from his face. Then, as he walked by, I stepped out from the bushes and said:

"Hey, Peter, hang on a mo'."

Bumpity-bump. Bumpity-bump.

They're still whispering. Lovey (isn't that what Queer Two called him?) is leaning in. I swear he's got his hand on Queer Two's knee. There's only one way to be sure of that, but that would spoil the plan. There's some kind of epoxy on my eyelids now that I simply cannot break.

Suddenly they're laughing. Out loud. 'Hysterically' is as good a word as any. Someone said something funny, and in my thoughtfulness I missed it. I shuffle, shift, and they quiet down again. I can almost feel Queer One putting his finger to

his lips, shushing Queer Two, showing his teeth in a big, wide grin and pointing at me. There's an air about us all of suppressed laughter now. Queer One, trying not to giggle. I sit absolutely still and wait for the frivolity to pass.

"I'm starting to wonder if this bloke really is asleep," whispers Queer Two.

That's ok, keep wondering.

I feel the train slow down a bit. There's a kind of expectancy about us, as if the train is waiting for a chance to speed up again. And then it does.

"So what if he's not," rejoins Queer One, and then, lasciviously, for dramatic effect, "it's not like we're doing anything *naughty*, is it?"

I all but *feel* the wink. It will soon be time for another stretch. Except no, that would be more evidence of wakefulness, and of deceit. Not that I'm deceiving them - not deliberately, anyway. I'm just not letting them in on something that I know so as to maintain my imagined strategic advantage. Surely, that's not deceit.

Although, it's not really about them at all, is it? Two basically innocent queers (God knows how long they've been that way) have merely - and completely inadvertently - opened a window to parts of my mind that have been firmly closed for a very long time. That's all. It's not about them, it's about me - and all the tawdry things that went on, way back when.

Very queer things.

Bumpity-bump.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying?" I asked Peter.

"I'm not," he grumped. But he was, and as if to both prove and disprove it at the same time he used his little fists to rub the moisture out of the corners of his eyes.

"Yes you are. What happened? Did he hurt you?"

"No, he didn't. He never has. But - "

"But what?"

"Well, I didn't like him throwing that phone at you and shouting at you, and..."

"Yes, well..." Even at eleven I felt very mature compared to this little sprite. "Don't worry about that." I felt the need to appear strong. I remember looking at him and feeling somewhat drawn to him - maternally, you know, though I didn't think of it that way at the time. I wanted to reach out and take him in my arms and reassure him, (*very queer things*) but of course I didn't. Instead I let the air hang heavy with my last remonstrations - the direction not to worry. Hypocritical, of course, because worrying is exactly what I was doing. Whoever's *fault* it was, the fact remained that Carstairs didn't want me anymore - that I'd grown past his interest - and that left a big hole inside me that just at that very moment I couldn't properly reconcile.

I looked at little Peter. He was trying desperately not to show weakness - that damnable determination of every English boy never to allow his boyhood to supplant his manhood. His lower lip was twitching and I saw the barest beginnings of an Adam's Apple jumping up and down in his throat. It was one of the other aspects of the code of the schoolyard - the need to impress older boys with prowess and courage and understanding - even when it didn't actually exist. Peter was trying very hard indeed.

"Did he - do something to you?"

"I just want my mum," he said, turning away and walking quickly down the hill. I didn't know where he lived, but I followed him, and watched him go into a red-bricked house about a half mile away. I remember I stood there for a few minutes, just looking at the house. Then the door opened again and Peter came outside and sat on the front step. He put his head in his hands and he cried, and cried, and cried.

The train is slowing down again. It's funny how taking this trip every day ingrains a knowledge of expectations. What do they call that – when you know what *should be*, even if it isn't? Intuition? Foreshadowing? No, something else. When you know something should be happening now, and then it does. I've made this trip so often that I know, without even looking at my watch, that we've just crossed the boundary into the Highbridge area, and that we're about five minutes out from the station, and from another mass passenger *exeunt*. Wait for it... There! The *clack-calunk-calunk* of the track-switch. We'll be going in today *on...* Platform 2. Platform 3 is under repairs.

"What's the time?" Queer One segues seamlessly from one conversation to another. Quite honestly, I haven't heard any of their riveting dialogue over the last little while, but now that the train has slowed down, I'm getting it all.

"Five-twenty-nine."

"Bloody hell, it does take a while, doesn't it."

"Sometimes I get so sick of commuting. I wish I could afford a Lamborghini and that London parking space every day."

"No mate, buy British. Get a Jag."

"But I do love the Italians!"

"I know, they're far more sexy, but the Brits are better built."

"But are they as nice to ride in as the Italians?"

"Of course. And they're better in tight places."

Pause.

"Hang on a mo' – are we still talking about cars?"

For some reason their laughter grates on me. Fingernails on a chalkboard. And yet, they seem less repulsive than they did an hour ago, and I find myself suppressing a smile.

The train stumbles and lurches and shrieks to a typical British Rail stop – somewhere a woman cries “Oh!” and it sounds like someone else has banged their head on a wall.

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Stop, Highbridge.

Highbridge

The wife, right about now, is working in the kitchen, preparing a lamb stew (it's Tuesday, after all), getting ready to ladle out generous portions for me, and for the children. She's worked all day; she's tired; but she does that sort of thing. She got it ready last night – marinated it and seasoned it and loaded it into the ceramic pot. She left it in the fridge overnight and doubtless put it in the oven the moment she got home.

She's an excellent cook. She's an excellent person. She's an excellent mother – caring, concerned, but not the helicopter kind – she doesn't hover and judge. She mothers beautifully from a respectful distance. She knows that children must be supported and guided, not constrained. They must be loved, not smothered. They must be free to form their own little sense of self – to establish who and what they are in the fullness of their own journeys. She knows and understands that experiences can be good for them, no matter what kind – and that a parent can't live a child's life, no matter how much more they think they know. She's a good woman. And right about now she's wondering if my train is on time.

We've left Highbridge. There was plenty of going, but not very much coming. We stopped for about four minutes, all told – technically long enough to boil an egg. Now we're clacking again (*bumpity-bump*) and the wind is once more whistling its noisy way through a little gap in some distant window.

The girls have gone quiet. Not even returning to speed has re-stimulated the chit-chat – as if the act of joking around before has utterly tired them out. We are three, now – three silent people on a train.

Bumpity-bump.

I never saw Peter again. Shortly after he sat down on his front step and cried into his hands, his family moved away. I have no idea if that was *because* of Carstairs, but if it wasn't, it was at the very least coincidental. Don't worry about Carstairs, though. He moved on to an even younger and smaller boy - a seven year old simpleton, as I recall, named Drew. I knew it, but I said nothing. After all, it wasn't all bad. And besides, who was I to complain?

I moved on, too. Soon after the telephone thing I actually found myself a girlfriend of sorts, and started hanging around with her. Laura. She was pretty, kind, and smart, and she was an absolute mystery to me. Coming to girls from Carstairs' clutches felt strange to me, and to be honest, even though I didn't really know why, I wasn't totally sure if she or any girl could ever offer what Carstairs had.

Well, she did and she didn't. She was kind enough to spend time with me, but she never gave me the impression it was anything more than that. She certainly never expressed any of the fascination in me that Carstairs had. She wouldn't, though, would she? He was obsessed - frantic. She was tolerant, perhaps curious.

I often wondered about Carstairs - why he was the way he was. He had never talked about it with me. At the height (or the depth) of our connection he would sometimes say things that caught me (and him!) off guard - things like "You're just like I used to be," or, "God, I remember this!" and suchlike. It made me wonder if I wasn't going to turn out like him too - doing what he did. Of course, he'd say other things, too. He'd tell me how pretty I was, something I confess I didn't mind hearing. I attached no denigration of my masculinity to the use of the word 'pretty' - rather, I enjoyed it as a compliment - as a puppy enjoys a 'good boy' without quite understanding why. I enjoyed the attention, and my little narcissistic self loved being complimented, even if he knew in his heart that the compliment was fragile and disingenuous.

The fact that he was what he was, was at that time useful to me. My own father had run out on us (literally a midnight move), so I suppose I was over-compensating by allowing this other man in so easily. Nevertheless, I had let him in, and I had embraced what he stood for and had revelled in what he did for me. And in this I'm not even talking about sexual things – I'm talking about the attention he paid me, for even in his weakness for the flesh and his fixation on my most feminine masculinity I'm convinced that he really did feel some kind of love for me, even if it only really amounted to a kind of love of his own little self.

Bumpity-bump

My wife – Kathy – was, when I met her, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. We met at a convention we'd gone to for work. She was stunning. Astonishingly beautiful. I hope I'm not waxing hyperbolic here – she really was a looker. I was twenty-three at the time. I'd long since moved on from Laura, but that doesn't mean I'd been busy since. In my schema there was Laura, and then there was Kathy.

She was an absolute beacon to me. She lit up the room! Her smile radiated so that in my imagination it looked almost as though people around her were shielding themselves. When I first saw her she was alone, standing between a tableful of *hors d'oeuvres* and a small group of serving staff. She was slightly separated from them, and she had a glass of white wine in her hand. Somehow – I'm not sure how – I got up the courage to go and say hello.

With Laura I'd stumbled badly. I'd flubbed my one and only well-practiced line and I'd had to resort to a disarming smile to get me through the resulting dismay. But with Kathy, once I did find the courage, I was completely natural. I glided over to her, held out my glass and, imitating the bloke on *The Shining* with the axe in his head, said "*Great party, isn't it?*"

She laughed, clinked my glass and said, lapsing into her own imitation and checking the watch on her wrist, "*Yes it is. Forever. And ever. And ever.*" We both laughed, and thus the ice was broken. The conversation was started - the dance begun.

There was none of that with Carstairs. Or was there? Perhaps, at nine, a boy just doesn't recognize the signs. Perhaps at that age he just doesn't know he's being romanced. I remember seeing Carstairs from a distance, picking roses from the bushes in his front garden, and wondering about him. I remember being curious about him. At the time I felt needy in a way I didn't fully understand, but which I now know was irreducibly intertwined with the need for a male in my life and my quest for independence. I remember all that, but how it got from that distant curiosity to my actually winding up in his house I'm not really sure. And how we then wound up in his bed is an absolute mystery.

Great, now I've got to stop and think.

Bumpity-bump.

The train is stopping now, and rather quickly too. Rather a bit too quickly, I would say. I feel myself pressing forward out of my seat. Newton's Law flashes through my mind and I immediately and accurately counter the stopping force with just enough energy to remain seated, and to remain composed, without seeming to do so. The girlfriends don't notice. They're too busy saying "what the fuck!" and otherwise checking each other's muscles.

There I go again.

Queer one is indignant. "What the hell was all that about?!"

Queer two is breathing heavily.

It doesn't occur to either one of them to stick their head out in the corridor to see what's what. They stay here, in the cabin, where it is safe, all but licking each other's wounds. Somewhere once - I can't remember where - I heard that the

queers are delicate that way. I don't know if it's true or not, but it occurs to me just now.

To be honest, my heart rate has also picked up after the quick-stop, but I at least contemplate getting up to find out what has happened. I plan this, visualize it, experience it in my mind, but that's all. Getting all twisted up over petty annoyances isn't part of the plan. I *must* stick to the plan. Whatever has happened, no one is dead – certainly no one in here – and that's a knowledge with which one can measure one's responses.

Bumpity.

Bump.

I think it was back in the playground that I heard that thing about queers. "They're soft, mate. *Pooftahs, the lot of 'em! And all they want is what's in your trousers.*" (Boys are cruel, even as adults are, but they're cruel despite their adult influences, not because of them.) As a rule I didn't put much stock in that kind of blather – not even as a boy. I thought it unenlightened, and because of my interactions with Carstairs I considered myself rather well qualified to speculate on the subject.

Carstairs was not a 'pooftah', by any means. Who can explain why he wanted what he wanted – from me and the other boys? Who can explain why anyone wants that sort of thing? I often wondered, even when he was the fly and I was the honey, what he got from it – what he gained from doing such - *odd* things. Were there misfiring synapses in his brain? Was there a genome out of place? Was it revenge, psychologically speaking, for something that happened to him, or for something that *didn't* happen? Perhaps he was looking to correct something that was out of place in his life – if so, well, clearly there was something missing, and if he could have I'm sure he'd have looked for it in the trousers of every little boy on the planet. I often wondered why he thought he'd find his missing *whatever* in my trousers.

That need of his was the only 'queer' trait he displayed. In every other way – right up to and including the way he threw telephones – he was all man. It was, perhaps, exactly what he said: it wasn't his fault. I now regret never having asked him about it. I was just content to let him do his best because, well, there was something in it for me too. And besides, what's your average needy eleven-year-old going to ask? *"Um, Mr Carstairs, sir, why do you like to spend so much time down there? What inner ache is it that you're massaging when you do that to me? And why do you think that the medicine you need to mend your sorry existence is hidden inside my trousers?"* Right. No boy is going to ask that. Well, maybe nowadays, but not back then. We weren't so sophisticated back then.

And that's something else, isn't it? Kids were more innocent then. Today they're victims as soon as they're sentient! They're taught almost immediately – even sometimes *before* they can talk – the difference between good touch and bad. But doesn't teaching that just make them conscious of it, curious, and desirous? When's the last time you met a child who actually *didn't* do something that you told him not to? Kids' natural contrariness almost *forces* them to do what they're told not to. Like me – I had the lesson too – *'don't let anyone touch you there until you're older'* – but did I listen? Of course not! If anything, the wondering made me appreciate the value, transactionally, of what I had down there, and it made me even more resolved to make use of it. After all, my lack was a loving father, so as a curative I deliberately sought out an obviously interested man and ignored all the directives I'd been given since the very beginning in order to bend my own existence back into a shape that I liked. I was stubborn like that.

Carstairs, the pervert, the dirty old man, the scourge of society, never hurt me – at least, not until the day he threw the telephone at me. But that wasn't physical pain, it was emotional. It was a shock. He hurt my feelings when he did that, after all, in the throwing I was suddenly just 'out' – alone again, untouched, unadored, manless, dadless – and I had to deal

with it. All by myself. The hardest part was figuring out what I'd done wrong, because in my mind I *must* have done something wrong. The sudden lack of adoration led me to curse and grumble and whine myself into a rather protracted state of distraction, and completely unsatisfactory results in school. Ultimately, processing it all, what I came up with was quite simple, and undoubtedly accurate, yet to me also quite surprising: I'd found a hair, down there. One single, solitary, lonely hair about a half inch long, and quite dark. And obviously Carstairs had seen it too.

I suppose that that was all it took for him to tire of me.

Bumpity-bump.

Oh great. Now I'm feeling sorry for myself.

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Stop, Bridgewater.

Bridgewater

That didn't last long. It was a moment, nothing more. A twinge. A flash. There's no profit in self pity. Self pity is a waste of time. Of energy. Not introspection – definitely not – but self pity, yes. That's what this is – the plan. It's introspection, pure and simple, and what more valuable exercise could there possibly be than leaving your wife and children to fend for themselves while you pretend to sleep, riding the smelly rails all the way to the end of the earth. Well, they call it that, don't they?

Bumpity-bump.

Carstairs had chosen and lost someone else now, just as I (I now saw) was probably the 'someone else' to another boy when I'd shown up. He was the man – the predator – finding, baiting, and trapping his little fawns. He didn't kill them. No, he only played with them until he decided it was time for a new one, at which time he released them – or should I say 'passed them over'. For him that was the cycle of life. He, the cowardly lion, moved gracefully, quietly, deliberately, knowingly from one grazing fawn to another, not killing, not destroying, but taking what he needed and moving on.

It would be useful to be able to say that he destroyed me in the process, that his needs and wants were overwhelming to me and I suffered through like a good little soldier. After all, that would download all my problems on to him and his kind. But he didn't, and for me to say so would be inaccurate. People make far more of it than they should. People get uptight about things. Even beautiful things vex them. But not me. I've never lost my perspective on what happened.

Until now.

Bumpity-bump.

I've all but forgotten the ladies, though I'm vaguely aware that they're talking about me.

"Should we check if he's alive, d'you think?" Tittering.

"Oh God! Don't talk that way!"

"But what if he's not?!"

And so on and so forth. Queer One: something about checking to see if I'm on drugs. Queer Two: should they call the police. *Jesus, that's the last thing I need!*

Queer One: "What time is it, Lovey?"

"Quarter to six."

"Oh my God, these trips are never-ending!"

Thankfully, they move on to other fascinating discourse – hair, men, dancing – and I let them fade once again into the set.

Carstairs had said that once. He'd taken me out to the country in his little sports car, for a picnic. Naturally enough we wound up on the side of a hill, the Sun slowly wending its way left to right, the long grasses swayed back and forth by a nice, warm summer breeze. We'd set up the blanket under a massive oak, kicked aside a few dozen annoying little acorns, and had our little picnic – the sandwiches weren't bad: cucumber. He let me have a bit of his beer. Actually, he gave me rather a lot of it and for that kindness I provided the dessert – which is to say that I let him have the morsel that he wanted – right there on the hillside, under the tree.

He did like it so. I remember watching him for a while, then looking off into the valley at the sky, the trees, the grass, the village cozily nestled away beneath a tall, rocky arête, and I lay back in quiet contemplation as he prayed at his chosen altar. I wondered again why he needed that from me, but I also wondered why I allowed it. It couldn't just be because it felt nice. There had to be something more to it. Other boys fight it. Other boys resist, struggle, moan and submit only with the

fiercest protest, with great sadness or rage. But let's face it - to me it seemed like a really good thing.

Bumpity-bump.

The wife is checking the clock again. Dinner is half ready and she's keeping on top of the time. She knows exactly where I am. She knows my routine because it's also her own. She's home from work - she always gets home first because she works locally - she's cooked the dinner, she's set the table, and now she's on to the next part - my return and expressions of my love.

She needs that. She has stuff of her own - from her development. She needs to hear that I love her, and I'm not afraid to say it either, because I do, and because I understand how important it is that those words be used - often. A lot. Most of the time, people don't use them anywhere near enough. They just don't.

She's my wife, and the mother of my children. She's filled a role in my world that has been very important to me. I always knew I'd get married and have children, even in the middle of the worst of it all - there was never any question about that for me. There was never any real worry that I might be permanently '*turned*'.

And that brings about another question, doesn't it? Why are some boys apparently deflected from their course by such things, while others are affirmed? Why are some traumatized, and others reinforced? A shrink once told me it really was 'an assault on masculinity', and while I can appreciate the perspective, at the time I never looked at it that way. I saw it rather as an *affirmation* of my masculinity and of my boyhood. Carstairs liked me and wanted me precisely *because* I was a boy, not in spite of it. He wasn't looking for 'a warm body' to play with - he specifically wanted a boy. He wasn't looking for anything feminine in me at all. He wasn't '*unable* to get a woman' therefore *settling* for a boy - a boy was what he wanted. Unequivocally. My masculinity, budding though it was, was

precisely what he sought. It completed *him* somehow to explore *me*. It helped fill spaces for him - gaps in mind and heart. I was therapeutic for him - I was a good thing - and how could that ever be anything but exciting and pleasant and self-affirming for a growing youngster like myself? As far as I was concerned, there was no assault. There was only affirmation. There was no pain, only importance, need, intensity, pleasure, and the oddly twisted little ego that sprung from it all.

Maybe for some boys it's about force, but Carstairs never forced me to play. He often *convinced* me to, but that's not the same thing, is it? I can see that if he'd forced me to have sex - if he'd taken the decisions out of my hands entirely - I would have worn it badly. *That* would have been an assault on my autonomy, and any assault on a person's autonomy is much worse than a few fumbling exploratory twitches at a bodily organ.

In another context, when a man forces a woman to have sex, that's also negative, but when he woos her and seduces her and makes it nice for her, it's enjoyable, not traumatic. It's positive. She takes emotional pleasure from being desired, and it builds her. It's not a destructive thing to be desired, and to be treated as someone special, so why is it considered bad if a man so affirms a boy? Why is it that wooing a willing boy is abuse, but wooing a willing woman is not? Why is it that loving a boy is anathema, but loving a woman is the natural order?

Bumpity-bump.

Bumpity-bump.

Even though we hadn't seen much of each other for some time, the day I found out that Carstairs was gone was difficult for me. I remember it well: I was riding past on my bike - I was thirteen. I saw strange people in his house - a woman and two men - and I stopped, sitting on my bike, and leaned up against a lamp post on the opposite side of the road. I sat there, watching what was going on.

They were carrying things out in boxes and putting them into a little hatchback parked on the street. They were very obviously not police.

The woman looked over at me. She looked inquisitive, as though wondering about me. I thought she attempted a smile, but she didn't wave or anything, so I didn't acknowledge it.

Just then, from inside Carstairs' house I heard a loud exclamation from one of the two men.

"Oh *FUCK!*"

I could well imagine what he was "oh fucking" about. I still didn't know what had happened to Carstairs, but these people were obviously clearing his place out, which could only suggest two possibilities.

"What's wrong?" the woman shouted, turning to look toward the house from the over-stuffed rear of the car.

"*Oh, Fuck me!*" the voice inside exclaimed again and I heard something smash violently into pieces. It reminded me of the telephone.

The woman stopped what she was doing, leaving the box on the car's bumper and dashing inside. In a moment there were shrieks and cries at all pitches coming from within. I could guess what it was about. It was almost comical to me, standing there on my bike, one of the proud players, one of the idols, to hear the incandescent vexations of the faithless. Carstairs had been rather enthusiastic about his collection of magazines, as well as the Polaroids he took, and I was pretty sure that's what they had found.

He'd kept it on the top shelf of his clothes closet – way up high, out of reach of all but the most determined, and certainly out of reach of we little sprites. I'm pretty sure that to that point only he knew about it – along with every boy he'd ever played with, of course. When I'd first shown up there I think it was only half an hour before he had me next to him, thumbing through his precious pictures, showing me what he wanted me to

see of his previous lovers. And it was but half an hour more before he was happily adding his newest butterfly to his little collection.

Standing there on my bike, despite everything that had happened, I didn't yet fully understand the backlash. I knew that many in society had difficulty accepting such behaviours, of course, but if it was the magazines he'd found (*of course it was*) then what was the big, bloody deal? Doesn't everybody have those urges? Doesn't everybody do that kind of thing? Isn't sex natural?

The woman came back outside, holding her head in her hands. She sat down on the front step, buried her face in her hands, and cried. She reminded me of Peter. I thought I heard her wail something along the lines of "Oh, Daddy," the depth of her exasperation shown clearly in the flood of tears that surged from within.

Daddy? How could that be? My young mind positively boggled at the notion that the man who had done so much with me, so often, and with uncountable other boys besides, should also have a wife somewhere, and children of his own. I felt almost annoyed by it - like he'd been keeping a dirty little secret from me - and standing there then, leaning on my lamp post, I felt certain that if I'd known he was married I would never have helped him cheat on his wife. I really felt like that, I swear! But how could I have known? As I think I mentioned before, there were no family snaps, albums, or portraits on the walls to suggest anything like family. How could I possibly know that he was leading a double-life?

The woman looked up at me then - she looked right at me.

"Can I *help* you?" she shouted across the road. She sounded annoyed, almost indignant - as if by watching I was intruding on her misery and she'd finally had enough. She had no reason to presume anything - I was just a boy leaning against a lamp post - but I got suddenly quite scared, and whether it was her brusqueness, or the situation itself, I became nervous. I was

there by curiosity, not complicity. I was there to learn, not participate. I wanted to know what the drama was, not become embroiled in it.

Without a word I stood up, balancing, on my bike, paused, looking at her, then pedalled hard and fast up the road. After about ten seconds I turned around, glanced back, then skidded to a stop. She was standing at the end of the footpath into the house, watching me. Clearly, her mind was in high gear - she was trying to figure something out.

I pedalled around behind a privet hedge and leaned out, observing her, now unseen. After a few moments she gave up on me and turned with a tearful shrug to look again at her overstuffed motor car.

One of the two men then brought Carstairs' box out from the house and put it on the ground. They hugged for a long time, then she disengaged and said something, pointing idly up the street in the direction I had gone. They both stood and looked for me together.

The idea of discovery terrified me. I wanted desperately to know what was going on, but not if it meant I had to answer any of their questions. I watched as they searched for me, then breathed a sigh of relief when they seemed to lose interest and give up. Then, after a few moments, they both set about unloading the car completely and reloading it to try to find a way to fit everything in.

Eventually, my curiosity overcame me and I pedalled out from beside the hedge a few feet and waited. It was the man who saw me first as he was catching his breath and popping a mint or something into his mouth. He poked at the woman's arm and she turned and looked, and nodded. The man pointed at me - right at me - and gestured for me to come near.

This, of course, is what I wanted to do, but I also didn't. I was still terrified. I resisted.

"We only want to talk!" I saw him shout, though to me it was like a whisper in the suddenly stiff afternoon breeze.

I hesitated. I remember it perfectly. It was exactly the same feeling I'm having now as I sit in this train. It was exactly the same because I was suddenly aware, conscious, alert, that any movement in their general direction would necessitate total compliance with any and all of their directives. As with Carstairs, to go even two feet down the hill toward them would mean I must once again go... all the way.

The moment was, and is, agony. Me, on my bike, locked in eye contact with two clearly vexed adults. Me, here, now, sitting in this train, afraid, stuck, not wanting to engage in any way with the world around me - pretending to be asleep. It sounds cliché, but I'm pretty sure that as I stood there looking at them I bit my lower lip so it bled.

Eventually, of course, I steeled my courage, puffed up my chest, grabbed hold of all my budding masculinity and headed down the hill. I coasted slowly and quietly and deliberately down on my big rubber tires, pulling up about twenty feet away. They looked at me, and after a moment I became aware of a third set of eyes on me, too. I looked, and saw the other man smoking a cigarette, watching me from the doorway.

I became indignant. It was my way of confronting them. I chose my words carefully before I opened my mouth.

"What are you doing? What's happened to him?" I asked.

"He's gone," the man said.

"What do you mean 'gone'?" I insisted.

"Dead."

Bumpity-bump.

The word hit me like a gunshot. I think I actually tried to retreat a step as I stood there on my pedals. Nobody said anything until I asked:

"How?"

I don't even know why I asked that, I mean, what did it matter? Who the fuck cares how a pervert dies? But it seemed important at the time.

The man was about to answer, but the woman reached out and touched him on the arm. Whatever words he was about to use died in his throat.

"Did you know my father?" she asked me.

"Yes. What did he die of?"

"How did you know him?"

"We were friends! *Answer my question or I'll fucking fuck off right fucking now!*" Even to me this kind of talk felt very rude. But I felt I needed to get their attention.

The man at the door started: "I really don't see - " but the woman quickly interjected:

"He took his own life, love. How did you know him?"

I said the only thing I could think of.

"He - he - he... he helped me with my homework."

Bumpity-bump.

Bumpity-bump.

What a fucking liar I was.

"I've got to go," I said, holding that big lump down deep in my throat, and stood up on my pedals, balancing myself perfectly with little, twitching movements back and forth, looking at them. There was more coming, I knew there was. There was more coming, and I had to stay there until it did. The moment - for that it surely was - seemed to last forever. Finally, the man in the doorway with the cigarette shouted out:

"Did he ever touch you, lad?"

The woman uttered a horrified and disapproving "Tsch," but she didn't object, and she never took her eyes off of me.

I held my breath. I'd known it would come - and all I wanted was to not answer, to run away, to turn around and bike my arse down the hill and gone. I felt tears welling up in my eyes - I still don't know why. My throat tightened and my mouth turned dry - I felt as though I might explode at any moment - like there was something significant to unload, and yet - I didn't want to betray my old friend. Then I remembered all their exclamations from inside the house - all the swearing - and it was like tumblers clicking in the locks of my brain. They already knew the answer; they had the box, and they'd probably seen me in it - younger, yes, but still quite recognizable. And in that moment I saw no sense in keeping my secret any longer. If he was gone - if he was dead - then the secret could die too.

Bumpity-bump.

"YES!" I screamed, and immediately pushed off, pedalling as hard and as fast as I could down the hill, around the corner, and up toward the High Street. I didn't see it, but I *felt* them step after me, hands outstretched, following me briefly, frantically down the hill. Were they concerned? Did they want to help me? Or did they want to grab me physically and drag me down to the station for a most-deserved date with the magistrate? Whatever. I was too fast, and before I even knew what was happening, I was, at least for the time being, out of their reach.

I must have pedalled my legs off for at least ten minutes, every fibre of my being screaming at me to keep going - desperately needing to be somewhere else. This place and this time were a threat to me. I needed to be somewhere else right now. I pedalled and pedalled, pushed and pedalled until at last I reached the Old Barn Hill Park. I entered the park at a pedestrian gate at the top of an arête, and coasted down the path to a rough wooden bench I knew very well. I crashed my bike - practically threw it, really - into a thicket as I jumped off

and ran over to collapse onto the bench. The wheels kept spinning as I sat there and let it all flood out. Father, Mother, Carstairs, Carstairs' Family, Kathy, George - truly, just at that moment, it was all so utterly confusing, and I cried and cried, and I cried, and still I cried, heaving and spluttering like a loony, until I thought it might very well kill me to stop.

As I cried I was shaking and it seemed that every thought and feeling I'd ever had was replaying itself in my mind. Was I afraid of my most unwise confession? Would there be consequences? What would those people do? They'd come to deal with his house and they'd found his big old box of secrets, and now they'd also met me - one of his living secrets and a veritable stamp of truth on their shame. What would they do with their new-found knowledge? Would they take it to the police? Would they go to the local school to try to find out who I was and where I lived? My teachers knew me. They knew my mum. Would these interfering busybodies thus work tirelessly to find me - so that they could ruin what was left of the rest of my life with the disastrous interference of the terminally caring? They certainly had that power, if they cared to wield it.

I didn't want to be found. Carstairs had made a point of saying, after finishing himself that first time, that I'd get in as much trouble as he would if I ever told. He'd told me that I'd be taken away from my mother, from my home, and that I'd be sent to a place where the boys are beaten and forced to work in rocky, rat-infested gardens. I'd be interrogated, he'd said, and he'd gone well out of his way to paint a bleak if somewhat hyperbolic picture for my benefit of a dark room, of me under a light bulb, and of interrogations being conducted by a big bloke with a curlicue moustache, knee-length leather boots and a blood-stained riding crop. I don't think he'd intended to actually scare me, but, of course, he did.

Or perhaps they wouldn't bother. Perhaps they'd rather burn the box - get rid of the evidence and save the family name from so much infamy. All at one go - a fiery conflagration in a great

big smoky barrel under the bypass, or in the kitchen hearth of their oh-so-fancy country estate - the one I had somehow conjured in my mind from the incontrovertible evidence of the rusty little Morris Minor they were driving. I could well believe that for them the cremation of their father's most impure thoughts - their father, the loner, the dirty old man - would be more important, even, than the cremation of his lecherous, sinning old body.

Yes. Go on: burn it! Please! Only fire could thwart the pain of discovery. And only then would they be able to put it all behind them without having to worry about a lifetime of apologies and explications. And isn't that the most important thing?

I sat there on the bench for the longest time, eyes clenched shut, trying to visualize just that, trying to will them to do it. *Burn it. Burn it. Oh God, please just burn it all.*

Bumpity-bump.

I must have cried on and off for two hours on that park bench, my still relatively small form heaving with an effort of releasing so much agony. What it boiled down to was this: I didn't need anyone asking me questions. He was gone - as gone as gone can be - and I saw no point in dredging it all up again for the benefit of strangers, for that is surely what happens. And I had no desire to be shipped off to 'the system' and made to feel bad - stupid - about it all. I already felt bad enough.

But I was most sad, sitting there in the park, to realize that my old friend was gone. Carstairs had broken my heart - no, he'd taken it in his great big hand and squeezed it to mush when he'd kicked me out and then later betrayed me. But right or wrong, he was still my first lover. He had indeed cared about me once, even if only for a short time, even as others did not, and I missed that caring and all the raw, emotional excitement that went with it. People say it's wrong, what we did, but my little mind just couldn't see intimacy as a flaw. I had soaked up his adoration as a sponge does water. An unbalanced boy needs,

desires, demands some kind of stability, and when Carstairs came along and gave me all that love and more, and the excitement of being wanted, and asked nothing in return but contact and sharing, I gave of myself most willingly.

I suppose I must have known what I wanted. And surely that made it all my own fault.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Stop, Taunton.

Taunton

*Every way of man is right in his own
mind, but the Lord ponders
the heart.*

Proverbs 21:2

A sudden jostle of the train wakes me again. Well, 'wakes me' – since I'm not *actually* asleep it can't do *that* – but it *alerts* me once more to the empirical. I feel a rush of air as one of the silly sisters stands up.

"Well," she says, "this one's mine."

"Alright, Lovey," says the other. She gets up too, and I hear them hug. Isn't that sweet.

"Look after sleeping beauty," the departing ducky says.

"Oh, I *shall*. As far as Tiverton, anyway."

"I wonder what he'll do when he wakes up."

"Who cares?" Ducky leans in and drops a decibel or two. "You know, I'm not so certain that he hasn't been awake this whole time."

"Tch! Go on!" says Queer One before quickly changing the subject: "And you'll come for dinner?"

"Yes, if you're absolutely *sure* that Ants won't get jealous. I mean, he's got *such* a big – truncheon!"

"Oh *you!*"

They laugh, then join at the hip and become one quivering mass of queerness. I can see all this in my mind's eye, though where the judgments are coming from I'm not really sure. I don't know why I'm being so unkind. Do I feel outnumbered, surrounded, threatened by the queers in these dank, nasty tunnels? Am I afraid, alone in that cramped little space, with busy queer hands fluttering all around me, tongues wagging, hair flipping?

Is it - are they - perhaps, Carstairs once more, behind the curtains, hands-up, claw-like, waiting, *in flagrante delicto*, to leap out and drag me to my doom?

But that's a little unfair. I never felt that way when I was with Carstairs. Despite all the disparities in all the things they tell you are terrifying to a child, I always felt like I was in charge *there*, like I could say no if I wanted to. With Carstairs, even though he had thrice my power and ten times my passion I always felt like I could put a stop to it. Perhaps it was fear, perhaps sadness, or perhaps it just wasn't who he was, but there was always something holding him back from being totally dominant. I think that certain caring was what drew me to him. He was passionate, yes, but he was never cruel. Even on the day he told me to fuck off, I know he felt bad about it. I know he only said it because I'd interrupted him in his worship.

Of course, why would I ever have said no to him? I enjoyed the attention. I enjoyed feeling wanted. Appreciated. It was nice for me to feel special. Oh, my mum *loved* me, but she was supposed to - it was a law, or something. And besides, she could never step out of herself long enough to compliment me except on stupid things like doing up my tie or polishing my shoes. She was fine with the tangible, but terrible with anything that really mattered. She never touched me - never even hugged me as a boy - whereas Carstairs... Well, hugging me was Carstairs' absolute favourite thing, so I suppose I found my compensations there. Needs met. While others treated me like a shit stain, Carstairs, in his way, made me feel special.

Bumpity-bump.

But here, on the train, I have clearly been outnumbered. I'm an adult, but I've felt pressured, and it's puzzling why that should be. I mean, why should the sisters bother me so, while Carstairs and all his homosexual ministrations never did? Am I homophobic? Of course not. How on earth could I be? But there's something there. Perhaps this is the anxiety coming through at

last. I hear it in the words I use. There's no respect in them - only ridicule and disdain. Even calling them *sisters* is disrespectful - even if they are effeminate. I ascribe to them no honour or decency, and yet intrinsically I know they are just people, like anyone else, with needs, aims and desires. This puzzles me, most especially because in my heart I know that in different circumstances they might well be a lot of fun to be around.

Bumpity-bump.

Kathy's probably in the living room about now, reading. She's sitting, since it's raining today, in her chair beside the little ceramic gas fire. She's working on one of those Durant books, about civilization - I don't know which one - she's about half way through it. Other wives watch the telly after work, or do their nails, or natter with the neighbour across the fence, but my wife is too smart for that. She has a driving ambition to understand as much as she can, and a determination to make it happen. She's far smarter than I, and yet somehow she stays with me. I suppose that must mean there's some redemption in me. She's far too smart to lumber herself with anyone unredemptive.

I know who I am. I know what I'm about. I know my body of work, and I know how responsible I've been - at least, until *now* - in the way I've lived my life. But I also know what I'm *not*. I know where my issues lie. And I know that sometimes I'm good at managing them, and sometimes I'm not.

The car settles into silence. This is Taunton. There's always about a ten minute wait in Taunton, when the train is on time, which today it is. I think. It's been quite a while, now, since I saw a timepiece.

I hear people getting on and off the train. I hear conversations, started inside, continuing as people walk at

different paces along the platform toward the exit. Even though the window is closed, I hear snippets as they pass by..

"...and when are you going to get a bloody job? That's what I want to know!"

"When we get home you're going to go straight up and clean your room..."

"I am so fucking sick of this rain!"

"Are you up for the promotion then?"

"Perhaps later, after it's all done."

"Well, now that's done, and I'm glad it's over."

Everyone has a life. Everyone is on their own continuum. Everyone responds to their own circumstances working within the general rules, and within the specific rules which apply only to them. Everyone feels what they feel, knows what they know, believes what they believe - because that's what they're bound to do. It's singular: not even evil people actually believe that they're evil.

Queer One is still there beside me - I can hear his breathing, and every few minutes I hear a page turn. That's nice. At least I know that he's ignoring me completely, and that suits me just fine. The dynamic isn't as one-sided as it was - I actually *feel* more relaxed, now that it's just me and him. But at the same time, perhaps contrarily, I also feel more tense as others flash through my mind who also caused me stress.

The train starts up again - a sharp lurch and a slow *accelerando* - resolving at last into a long string of rhythmic, clattering as the wheels dance across the steely joints of the rails. In my mind I leave my pink-patterned cabin-mate to his spit-cornered book and return once again to the park bench.

The encounter with Carstairs' offspring brought home to me, for the very first time, the notion that what he and I had got up to

for those two, glorious years was not appreciated - as in, 'ascribed any value' - by our judgmental, moral society. By this I mean the uneducated and unconcerned world, not the specifically pig-headed and obstreperous. That's undoubtedly why Carstairs had put the fear of God into me about telling anyone. He knew society's repugnance for him even as he unwrapped me that first time, and he wanted, in some contrary way, to try to keep himself safe by transferring his fear to me.

That's not very loving, now that I think of it. Laying that pressure on me - at my age - wasn't a very kind thing to do. Of course, I now know how much the world scared him, and how important it was to him that I remain most diligently silent about our dalliances. But he was the guilty one, wasn't he? Even if I was complicit in his crime.

Of course, because I was enjoying myself, I had no intention of telling anyone anyway. I had an intuitive sense that if my mother had found out about it she would have put a stop to it, and I didn't want that. I didn't want to cede any additional control of my life to others. I had little enough to say over my own existence as it was. To me, the sex thing was my way of asserting myself - of establishing my own domain. My body, my mind, my choice. If the 'no sex' clause needed to be exercised, then *I* wanted to be the one to do it. I didn't want parents, or teachers, or police, or social workers, or *anyone* telling me not to do what I really, actually, rather enjoyed doing.

You think I was unreasonable. You think that in this specific instance society actually did know best. Well, let me give you a non-sexual example of the same thing so you understand what I'm talking about. It's like going to the doctor: as soon as you go you become subjugated to what *he* wants. By going, you agree to give your body over to him and his influence. You take the tests, you take the pills, you do the exercises, all so that *he* can feel better about *himself* - whether or not it all works out for you. And then, once you're under his thumb, you're in his control. And once you're in his control, well, you may as well just kill yourself, because now you're living the life *he* wants

for you, not the one that you want for yourself. Child or adult, if you live only to make other people happy, you're really not living at all.

So in the interests of my own autonomy - of maintaining my ability to make choices for myself - I kept Carstairs' secret. I didn't want other people swooping in to demonstrate how much smarter they were than I. I didn't want to lose what I thought amounted to control over my life.

I knew that mum could not - absolutely *must not* - find out about us - or my whole world would be in ruins.

No pressure.

Discovery is a do-over for a parent. I picture the cuckolded progenitor towering over, leaning in, arms out, hands up, clawlike, terrorizing the little one with corrective kindness:

"Alright, I wasn't paying attention before, but I will now, and now I will totally devote my life to keeping you 'safe'. From now on, you will go nowhere and do nothing without me. I'm going to flit about beside you, under you, and over your vulnerable little head for the rest of your days - just to make sure you never again make such terrible mistakes. Clearly, by doing such things you too must be a filthy, sleazy little pervert, so I will also - must also - re-double my efforts to protect you from yourself, and to protect others from you! Seriously, now that I know what's been going on - now that I know that you've been enjoying yourself in some strange man's bedroom, and that you've been getting real emotions and sensations from someone else that you should rightly have been getting from me, I'm gonna be on you like flies on a carcass. I'm not gonna let you out of my sight. Oh, you're in so much trouble. You are so grounded. Here, put on this leash. Tie yourself up to that post and walk around in front of me for the rest of your days. The dirty old man who had his hands in your pants may be dead or in prison, but you - who are totally, one hundred percent innocent of everything even if you did get more love than I've had in all my sexless fucking

days - are going to be in a prison of my making for the rest of your miserable little life."

It's not really all that surprising, is it, that I kept the secret? I was a wilful boy. I had a mind of my own. I suppose I'll live and die with the consequences of my decisions. I suspect that, ultimately, we all do.

No, there's no more formidable foe than a parent's guilt. After all, a parent's job is to be guardian and stay of the mind and body that they helped bring into the world. But beyond that, greater than that, is their outrage at learning that someone else has been enjoying their property. The child, as property, is doomed, because any attempt to short circuit the chain of ownership in our capitalist world is a very serious matter indeed. "That's my child." "He's mine." "You're my son." "I'm your boy." These are examples of the way conversations go. You can call them expressions if you like - simple epithets - but they are emblematic of the real relationship of parent and child. The ownership thing. Why do you think that children rebel? Because they get sick and tired of being owned. They weary of being told no. They get sick of being thought an idiot, of getting zero credit for instinct or understanding, and of constantly being denied the chance to grow that understanding.

Carstairs never used any of those words. He knew - even if I didn't - that our connection was temporary. He knew that the decisions I was making were going to affect me for the rest of my life. He didn't look on me as 'his boy'. He looked on me as 'a boy'. He worked to instil in me a belief in myself, and a firmness in my own purpose. Of course, my believing in myself in this way served his purpose, so I suppose I should acknowledge that he might, possibly, have had an ulterior motive.

Parent anger, too. When someone takes it on themselves to interfere with their raising of *their* child, it's like an actual, physical assault on a parent. This applies not only to the Carstairs' of the world, but to government, too, or anyone else who 'gets in the way'. It's an assault on belief systems

and on their God-given 'right' to take steps and make decisions on the child's behalf. This makes them feel weak, and that makes them angry.

And sadness. Because, well, they've lost something, haven't they? When someone interferes, they lose their chance for a perfect life - the societal ideal. The hopes and dreams, they think, of a perfect life for their child - and by extension a more successful do-over for themselves - are gone. The interference costs them the opportunity to help their child do life - in their mind - *better*, and this makes them sad. A child has but one life to live, but a parent has as many lives as they have children.

Bumpity-bump.

Is that snoring? A gentle *snirk* of glottal air, moist with saliva from the well-used throat of the ducky beside me. I want to look. I need to look - I could use a laugh right now. But I can't. Looking would kill the plan, and the queer might be faking his snooze. No, he's fallen asleep. It happens a lot - the motion of the train, the steady, rhythmic sounds, the warmth of the wooden cars and the heady dust of a very well-worn carpet, and outdoors, if you happen to look, the well-ordered blur of grass and trees and crops and hamlet after hamlet of English tranquility, and you've got yourself a very high nod-off potential. Add the heady tedium of a Harlequin reader or the latest edition of *Studs Monthly* and the after-glow of a really hard day's work, and sleep becomes very likely indeed.

Sometimes life itself is a soporific.

The door to our cabin opens. There's a pause. *Nuttin' in here but two sleeping faggots*, I think. Why did I think that? The sliding of the door has woken one of them, though. Ducky stirs. I can actually *hear* him looking around, fluttering his eyelids to focus, then turning his head to look. I hear his neck click as he turns.

Bumpity-bump.

"Well, 'ello there, little man," he yawns. "'Ow are you?"

"'m alright."

A squeaky, perky little voice - syllables quickly, impatiently offered - an economy of language that betrays the age of the deliverer. Yes indeed, a most spare retort. Shy, surly - defensive adventurousness - a willingness to talk, to engage, but a reluctance, yet, to completely ignore Mummy's incessant warnings, no matter how much of an encumbrance they are. There's processing going on within. I can hear the gears turn. I can almost smell the smoke. It's an encounter. A meeting of two disparate minds. A measuring of everything known, everything heard and understood and believed, countered, perhaps trumped, by the unquenchable urge to explore, to experience new things. There's belief, but there's questioning. Just as there was when I first met Carstairs.

I made those assessments, too. I weighed the evidence in the room. When I met him he was well-dressed, well-combed, and clean. I remember his cologne. I didn't know it at the time, of course, but now I know it was like lavender, or lilac. One of the L flowers, anyway. I later learned it was a bottle of French stuff - it was blue, sitting on a small shelf in his water closet.

Carstairs had smiled most widely at me for that first meeting. It had felt so achingly genuine at the time. I was only a small sprog, only slightly past his belt. I was intrigued by him - captivated - even before he said, in his most polite, least frightening, most loving voice...

"Well, hello there little man. How are you?"

What is that - some kind of pickup line?

Carstairs had followed the script, and of course, because I was needy he got almost instant results. He told me how nice I looked (I think I was wearing my school uniform at the time),

how nice my hair was, and how strong I seemed. Compliments all but guarantee an in, but, fatherless as I was, I was receptive before he even opened his mouth. He asked if I'd like to walk down the High Street with him for a while, then waited half a second for my happy little nod, before we strode out together, into our collective future. He gave me a Mars Bar from his inside pocket, and took my school books from me to carry them himself. I didn't see it at the time, of course, but now I know I was being romanced.

We walked down the street together and he asked me all sorts of questions about myself, and of course I loved that because nobody before had ever asked me about me. I was in awe, because all of a sudden, as if out of nowhere, there was this tall, (relatively) handsome, aromatic man taking an interest in me - as though I somehow mattered, and as though he really, really cared! Such an amazing thing to a lonely boy! To have an adult treat you as more than a mere child - to all but grant you adult status in his sphere - to carry on proper conversations - to seek your opinion, to listen to you as though all your jabbering actually *meant* something - to grant you an honorary intellect above and beyond your actual years. Kids know that they have trouble expressing themselves, but they feel most successful and content when they find someone who actually listens anyway.

I think in the four or five hundred yards between where I met him on the High Street and his house off Crofton Street my little heart had already attached itself to his. There was an instant emotional connection with this man. He obviously liked me, and that's some serious catnip for a fatherless boy. We crave self esteem - especially those of us who have none. He was the pied piper - I, his little rat. And from anticipation alone at that moment I would have followed him to the ends of the earth.

Bumpity-bump.

The clincher for me - and this I now know must have taken immense personal strength on his part - was when we got to his house. He didn't ask me in at all. He simply announced his arrival, thanked me for my most pleasurable company, and suggested I toddle straight home because of how chock-full the streets were of strange and dangerous men. I know now that in doing this he was letting out the line a little so he could land me properly, but at the time I glommed on to it as indisputable proof that there was no danger here - and that I'd made a new friend. My little heart beat hard and fast as I scampered away, fully and irreducibly assured that a new chapter was opening for me, and with my little shorts pockets stuffed full of his sweeties and a less than subtle hope that I would return soon, I counted myself the happiest little boy in all of London.

I remember I turned and ran back down Crofton toward the cinema near my flat. It was about half three, maybe four. Mummy wouldn't be home from work for quite a while, so I had some time to kill before I had to make my way home. I had a coin in my pocket, as well as Carstairs' sweets, so I stood in a short line-up of boys and girls I didn't know, and made my way inside.

I don't even remember the name of the film. I remember there was a lot of *ooing* and *aahing* from all the pint-sized viewers, but the film's title escapes me. I spent the whole time thinking about the man I'd just met, wondering if he was real, and if he really did like me, and what it would be like for a boy like me to have a man for a friend - a real friend, like a father ought to be, or even better because he wasn't obligated. This phrase, I remember, echoed through my mind throughout the film - *he likes me, he likes me, he likes me*. What a marvellous thing indeed, for a small boy trying to find his way.

Bumpity-bump.

Little Squeaker is still hanging on at the door jamb.

"And what's your name, Lovey?"

"Adam. What's yours?"

Delightful impertinence!

"I'm Patrick. And how old are you?"

"I'm seven. How old are you?"

This could go on all night.

"I'm twenty-seven, Lovey. Twenty whole years older than you are."

"That's *old*," says Squeaker, most matter-of-fact. He means nothing by it. I think I hear him gnawing on something.

"Whatcha got there?" Patrick must be reading my mind.

"Drum stick," I hear.

"What, is it dinner time already?"

"No, silly, it's a snack Mummy gave me."

"What a kind and thoughtful mummy you have."

"She's alright, I s'pose."

Bumpity-bump.

More mastication. More inanities - munchy boy talking back in a droll, yet delightfully polite and confident way. Methinks little Adam likes the Ducky.

There's a clatter from the hallway, followed by a blast of eau de toilette at the door.

"Oh my God, Adam, I wish you wouldn't run off like this!"

I hear a cuff, as if on the back of the boy's head.

"Sorry, Mummy," says the boy, evidently embarrassed. Or, if he isn't, he should be. "I thought you were asleep."

"What difference if I was? You stay put, young man. And what have I told you about strangers?"

"To not, Mummy."

"So sorry if he was bothering you gentlemen," she says, evidently noticing us for the first time.

"No bother at all, Ma'am," says the ducky. "A very polite little chap he is."

"Well, thank you," she says, then turns with a flounce back to the hallway, dragging the little mite behind her, most likely horse-whispering not-so-sweet nothings about strangers and perverts and dirty old men and did he really want to get fucked before his time? I mean, what's a boy supposed to do? Filled with terror almost as soon as they can think! Far better in my view for a child to be taught: *by all means, talk to the nice man, learn from him, gain self-esteem in spades, but it might best for now not to actually go anywhere with him!*

But what do I know? I found my nice man, and I went with him. Over, and over, and over again.

Bumpity-bump.

My mum was not at all concerned with who *I* spoke to. She never asked. No, that's not quite true, and this is just now coming back to me as I recollect. There was one time. It was after an afternoon with Carstairs. It was the cologne. The L-flower stuff. He'd put so much on before I got there that even I almost couldn't breathe as he worked on me, and when I got home and went into the kitchen the first words out of my mother's mouth were "Good God, Michael, did you fall into a flower patch? What on God's green earth is that *stink?*"

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about, and I was just about to reply, most automatically, that it was Carstairs' perfume, when I remembered that *he* wasn't something I was supposed to talk about outside of *his* house. I invented something - rather cleverly, I thought - about a woman in the sweet shop on my way home from school, and while mummy looked at me strangely, she seemed to reluctantly accept it as an explanation.

But then she looked at me again.

"Where do you go after school, young man? What do you get up to?"

"I hang out with friends, Mummy," I said. And it wasn't a lie. I considered Carstairs a friend, though in truth there wasn't much hanging out involved once he got started.

That was the one and only time she asked me what I did. I didn't put that down to a lack of caring - only to a surfeit of trust. She had no reason to think I was doing anything wrong. The police had never knocked on our door so I was obviously not breaking windows or painting walls, and that was good enough for her. In her mind, good little boys stayed good little boys, and thus, to her dying day, did she believe in her heart that I remained.

One of the last things she said to me before she died was how sorry she was that she'd never re-married. She said she knew how difficult it is for a boy to grow up without an appropriate role model, but she was very proud of me for how I had made my way in the world without one.

So no, I never told her about Carstairs. Even the day that his family came and found the box, and challenged me - as stressful as that was - I kept it all to myself. I could have dashed home, my terrified heart still throbbing painfully in my chest, and tearfully revealed all, but what would be the point of that? The fear was real but the tears would have been for the loss of a friend, not for regret. And anyway, what would be the point of telling mummy anything? She couldn't change it, and she certainly couldn't stop me from growing. And remember, in his fruited, lascivious, boy-hungry way, Carstairs had been good for me. I knew it then, and I know it now.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and gentlemen, Next Stop, Tiverton Parkway.

Tiverton Parkway

Christ, now it's real. This is my station. Tiverton. At this very moment I'm a mile and a half from home, from my wife, and from my kids, who are even now hopping up the front steps, kicking off their shoes and flopping themselves down in front of Blue Peter, or Doctor Who (*Daleks! Daleks!*). Certainly not the news.

I don't watch the news, but Kathy does. Kathy sits at her kitchen table, turns her little tube on, adjusts the rabbit ears, and pushes the buttons 'til her talk show comes on. Then she sits there, playing cards - multi-tasking - as she watches the events of the world play out. It's worth the extra telly fee for her to be content in that way.

But she's not always serious. She also likes her soap opera thing - Cross Street, or whatever it's called. There, she loses me. It astounds me that someone can go from *Durant on civilization* to *Cross Street* in the space of about five minutes. But she does. She calls it 'an interest in human behaviours', but I think it's less than that. I think, once in a while, she just likes to wallow in other peoples' problems.

Should I know what her show is called? You'd think, after ten years of marriage, two kids, countless meals, hugs, kisses and opportunities for support taken and missed, that I might know what bloody soap opera she watches! But no. I've been preoccupied. I've been preoccupied for a long time now. Always that one thing - the events of my youth - sweet and sour, hot and cold - all at the same time.

The train slows down, and shrieks to a halt. A few people get up - about half as many as at the last stop, but now I know I'll soon be alone as I feel Ducky stand up to fish his valise out of the overhead basket. Ducky evidently lives somewhere near me. Funny we've never met. I can feel the car moving as he works, and as he opens and closes the door, and then as he recedes into the distance (without even so much as a tip of the hat), the last subtle flounces of the rail car signal his departure.

I'm happy to be alone now. I feel suddenly safe. Tension practically *drains* from my neck and shoulders. Then the realization hits me: I can open my eyes now, if I want to. I can rub my eyes, look around - see the world, see the station platform, the massive *Ribena* ad plastered, purple, on the wall. I can watch the last of the people walk by, hunched over, heading for the exit. If I want to I can even stand up and stretch - get that bloody knot out of my arse and magically restore circulation.

But that wouldn't be right. This isn't about fooling anyone. It's not about winning. Of course, I'm not one hundred percent certain what it actually *is* about, but I know it isn't about that. I'm not out to flummox the fags - after all, who gives a shit? It feels like it's about escaping: getting away. Substituting somewhere kind for this difficult place and time. This is - what? Memory work? Sorting? It's figuring some shit out - defining and resolving things that have long been bothersome. Too bad it's happening with a loving wife now very close by, soon to wonder where the hell I am. Too bad that in an hour or two as my kids are heading to bed they'll be asking where their father is and wondering what's going on. Too bad that before long they'll all start to worry.

But the eyes stay firmly closed. If this is about figuring things out, then figure I must. If I'm on a hunt for comprehension, for perspective, for understanding and elucidation then every single fact must be chased, ordered, and organized toward that end. Every line of thought *must* be followed to its logical conclusion. Nothing can come between me and the resolution of the things that have brought me here.

But what things am I even talking about? What on earth has brought me here, to a place where it seems I must stop everything, just to somehow hold on? It seemed important, earlier on, but now I don't know. Now I can't even remember what's going on.

Wait.

Oh yes...

That.

A conductor shouts and the train lurches forward once more. *Clang, clang, clacka-clacka*. It's on now. Now I'm pulling away from home. Last chances are gone. There goes the wife. Whereas before she had an idea of my whereabouts, now she hasn't a clue. Now she knows where I should be, but not where I am. Now that I'm officially missing, she's looking nervously at her dainty little watch, and over at the door as she tends lovingly to the pot of stew bubbling gently on the range.

Now I feel despicable. I'm leaving her in the lurch. This could even frighten her - uncertainty can be a terrifying thing, and Kathy, though strong in so many ways, has an orderly mind which prefers the predictable. She wants - no, she *needs* - to know what's what all the time. Uncertainty riles her. It tears her up inside - I've seen it, I'm a witness. I've spent hours at one time or another reassuring her that the occasional simple deviation is not a disaster or a debacle. But this - this might just...

I've often wondered what made Carstairs think it was okay to manipulate his way into my underwear. He did it, and I let him, but how did he ever come to the conclusion that it was something he should do at all? I mean, what's the process, upstairs, for him? How does a grown man get all the way from an idle appreciation of a fellow human being to a prepared, coordinated, perfected and enacted plan of attack? And what was it that made him feel it was okay in the first place? I'm sure that lots of men think about it but never act - that's the difference between them and Carstairs, who was clearly habitual. Maybe it *is* a habit. Maybe it's chemical in nature, like smoking or booze, or drugs. Maybe the need is innate, and satiety demanded. Maybe, the first time meets the need so extraordinarily well that every

time after that acts in competition against it - trying to better it, to beat it, or just to live up to it?

Again with the first time.

I: "What are you doing?"

He: "Oh, you'll like this, I promise."

I: "But what are you doing?"

He: "I'm going to make you feel good."

I: "What do you mean?"

He: "I'm going to show you new ways to feel good - in your body."

I: "But I don't - it's - I just... What if I don't want to?"

Of course, I was already curious, but I remember he lifted up a bit, dropped his claws to either side of me and, with a deep sigh and a shrug of his shoulders said:

"Well, you don't *have* to, of course. I would never force you."

"Okay, but - "

"Good, we're in agreement then!"

It was just that quick. From reluctantly reading me my rights to overcoming whatever resistance I had left and doing the first bloody crime in about a second and a half. Of course, he was right about the physical feelings, but I wondered even as he was hunched over me, taking what he so desperately needed, what truly made him think it was okay. I was pretty sure that my Mummy wouldn't approve.

That worried me a bit. I'd already lost my father - obviously I'd fucked something up so badly that he decided he'd rather live elsewhere - so what if doing this thing now was going to cost me my Mum, too? She'd be disappointed if she ever found out. This was gay stuff. This was homo shit. This was male-male, hot, sweaty, muscle-flexing, mind-bending physical and mental sex, and if I knew her at all, I was pretty sure that she'd be mortified, and she'd probably disown me completely.

Or perhaps she'd be jealous. I don't think she was getting any - I mean, if she were I probably would've met the man at some point. And if she were, and if I had met him, and if I had liked him, then maybe I wouldn't have had to go toddling off to Carstairs for attention and approval in the first place. Or maybe I would have anyway. I mean, yes it would have been nice to be approved of by an officially certified 'mummy's friend', but let's face it: Carstairs was mine, and mine alone. He was my naughty diversion, my own guilty secret. More than that, he was my independence. He was the one thing I did on my own say-so. And, deciding to let him do adult things with me made me an adult too. Didn't it?

Anyway, if she had found out that her little son was 'getting some' whilst she was wholly and substantially frustrated, she probably would have burst a blood vessel. She certainly would have punished me, and possibly gone after Carstairs down at the prison, setting his bedclothes on fire or sticking a frozen scalpel in his eye as she pretended to be his barrister or his priest, or so I fantastically thought at the time.

No, he was my secret. She *must* not know.

She must never know.

Bumpity-bump.

I don't really think she would've been jealous. I think, like any normal parent, she would have been outraged. I've never really figured out what I feel on this subject. Is outrage justified if no one is hurt? I've never really understood the whole "no sex" thing. I supposed even at that time - if kids are smart enough to say no, why aren't they also smart enough to say yes?

This makes me think. If I'm completely honest with myself - and sometimes I am - I take the totality of my experiences and I think that even though I wasn't physically hurt by Carstairs I might have been happier with a man (like George) who wanted me

as a person rather than simply for the contents of my trousers. I rather think that I did all that other stuff because I needed *something*, and *that*, at any rate, was what he was able to give, and after all, *something* is better than nothing, no matter how twisted and depraved it may seem to some. One way or another, a boy needs a man, and if a man also needs a boy, well, doesn't it seem like a kind of synergy? Surely, corresponding needs will ever a happy marriage make.

Mother worked hard for me. It was just the two of us - I suppose she could have gotten away with two jobs instead of three, but she wanted me to have some of the things she never did - that old line. She worked as a secretary during the day, then came home and made dinner, then went and did something part time in the evening. That was five days a week. On weekends she worked in a supermarket. She was diligent and firm of purpose. Even as a boy I admired her work ethic, but it created another lack for me, and isn't lack at the root of all sadness? Lifetimes are spent - *wasted* - compensating for what we think we should have had, and things are done, behaviourally, to fill the void left by what was never there in the first place. Funny how nothingness can take up so bloody much space in a life.

To me, mum was often a bit distant. I would occasionally see her looking at me with a face full of what looked like disdain - though of course I was too young to label it so. To me she looked annoyed even though I hadn't - to my knowledge or hers - done anything wrong. Later on I asked her about this and she sort of explained it: she said that she loved me very much, but as I grew I started looking more and more like my father - her husband - the man who had fucked off and abandoned us. Sometimes it made her sad, sometimes it made her angry. She loved me, but sometimes I reminded her of him, and she hated being reminded of him.

When the parents split I was very small. I felt bad. At first I blamed myself (all kids do that, don't they?) for the break-up.

It must've been something I'd said or done - everything had been fine in my life, then suddenly he was gone. So when I was very small I absolutely *knew* it was my fault that my life had changed - it was my fault that my father had left. Of course, as I grew I started to understand that other things had also been going on, but I still held firmly to the perfect guilt that came from knowing it was all my fault. It soothed me, I suppose. It gave me an out. The high of feeling bad was almost drug-like. Maybe I even enjoyed it.

As I grew I also started to feel anger toward the man who had left. Even if I'd done something wrong - wasn't it reasonable for him to tell me what? Couldn't he at least have said goodbye? Couldn't he have explained what I did, then castigated me in a focused way, rather than just leaving me with a general sense of misery and an all-absorbing self-loathing to take into the rest of my life? I watched a television program once - the father left, but he took his little boy aside and said, "*listen to me - it's not your fault. You did nothing wrong!*" He was quite forceful about it, and I cried. I cried at the kindness of that good daddy, and I cried at the badness of mine for not making any effort to reassure me. And I cried at my badness, because obviously - by that standard - if I hadn't been bad he surely *would* have been like the good daddy and stopped to explain things to me. It reinforced my poor opinion, not of him, but of myself. It never occurred to me that I ought rather to be judging my father based on the standard of the good daddy. No, I judged myself. At bottom I was me, therefore it had to be my fault.

Mummy never brought any men home. She wasn't the kind to do that. She wouldn't force her friends on me - ever. I suspect she'd heard, or seen, or read about how boys sometimes recoil at having a new man in their life, and she didn't want me to have to go through that. That was undoubtedly noble, but I can't help but wonder what ills I might have avoided if she had. And that's the real tragedy: that a little communication at that time, on that subject, might have precluded a whole world of angst.

This kind of thing haunts a boy. Fuck, everything haunts a boy. The good things in a boy's life create expectations and potential, which are burdens, and soon enough drain away his happiness. The bad things distract him and rob him of the tools he needs to get things done, and the energy he uses to process them is wasted in recovery and correction rather than in progress. A boy who is always digging out from shit devotes his energies to that process, which energies cannot then be focused on better things, and because he directs his energies to defence and recovery ("*Maximum shields, Mr Spock!*") he never quite gets to develop his good offensive game. To use a football analogy, you can't score any goals if you're always lumbering around in your own end. Defense is tiring and debilitating, and negative. A boy - a *man* - can't keep running around saying "NO!" all the time. It's such a negative thing.

I've often thought that people who say yes all the time must be very happy indeed.

Bumpity-bump.

If I know Kathy, she's started looking at the telephone by now. She's expecting a call - or at least, hoping for one. She's starting to wonder what's going on with me. Bugger that, she's been wondering what's going on with me for ages now. I suppose I've been labouring a bit, lately.

I have a lot of advantages. My mother, from all her hard work, did ultimately leave me a little nest egg - which, when she died, I put into investments for my own children. When they grow up their educations will be paid for - as far as they want to take them - and they'll be comfortable enough that working all the time will be an option not an obligation. I think she'd like that.

She loved her grandkids. In retirement she spoiled them rotten, of course. She finally learned how to take time and be there for the little ones. I was happy for that, but it wasn't lost on me that she spent far more time with them than she ever did with

me. It wasn't lost on me that if she had spent more time with me, growing up, I might never have fallen into the clutches of Carstairs and his kind at all. If she had been there more often, I might have been buffered enough that Carstairs couldn't work his charms on me like he did the day he told me to run along home to Mummy.

And that brings something else to mind. At one point, about a year after he started fucking me I was feeling quite encouraged by the way things were developing between us (we did a lot of laughing and giggling and so on) and I thought it would be a wizard thing for me to introduce him to my mother - like meeting a school chum or something. I suppose I had something strange cooking in my mind - along the lines of "if he likes me so much he'll absolutely love my mum because after all I'm just a boy and she's a woman and men are supposed to like women".

I know, stupid shit. I was still naïve at this point about his interest in me and the other boys. I thought we were dalliances for him while he waited patiently for his true love, his devoted wife. To this point it still hadn't occurred to me that we were his endgame. Remember, this was before that day on my bike when I learned that he had a whole family.

Well, as I'm sure you can imagine, he was less than enthusiastic about my idea. As I recall, "Don't be stupid, boy," were his exact words, and, somewhat shocked by his callousness, I pouted, and determined never to bring the subject up again. I didn't like being called stupid.

From his response I learned that he was utterly serious when he said I must never tell anyone about *us*, and I recalled our initial conversation in which he assured me that I would be blamed as much as him if anybody ever did find out. I know now, of course, that this was his way of controlling me, of reinforcing his fear, and I don't suppose I really blame him for that. *Loose lips sink ships*, as the old saying goes, and I imagine with so much for him to lose he'd want to be assured somehow that his little sex dolls were going to keep their

fucking traps shut. Now, of course, I well know what happens to men like him who are found out - but back then I just thought it was a matter of general distaste in the unenlightened.

Bumpity-bump.

And just like that I'm thinking about the box again. The big box in the wardrobe in his bedroom - the one that led his offspring to vex so ferociously. I was in there. Of course I was. The box was like his own little Hall of Shame, and I remember clearly the day I was inducted. I remember he let me - or is that *made* me - hold his camera. Perhaps he was wearing down my resistance with trust, or perhaps he wanted to create complicity in me - to be used against me at some later time should I ever decide to rebel. I remember looking at the camera - a Polaroid - thinking how cool it was, how remarkable a thing it was that could spit out a memory on paper all by itself. I thought it was cool, but I had no real idea what it meant for me, personally. Now I have. The box is gone, but Carstairs shared his Polaroid recollections with others of his ilk. And then, of course, there was Kenneth.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Exeter.

Exeter

It's a short stop in Exeter. I'm surprised. Of course, I seldom go this far - I usually stop at Tiverton, get out, go home, hug my wife, have my dinner, play with my kids and go to bed.

Today though, it's different. The train is quiet now. The platform is quiet, though I hear machinery clanging in the distance - and the dull, slow thud of massive pistons at relative rest, waiting for the off. I hear a couple of distant voices, the gentle thwack of a door, some footsteps. The urge is stronger than ever to open my eyes and reconnect with the world which carries me - the very world I use for breath and for the beating of my heart. But I resist, and it fades.

There's a whistle, a call, and the train lurches forward once more. It's a rhythmic musical work - and suddenly I'm thinking of Richard Rodney Bennett, of *Murder on the Orient Express*. A blinding headlight, a bank of fog, a blast of steam and the departure music snaps into focus. I remember it note for note.

The ornate sumptuousness of those premium rail cars reminds me of the simple sweat stink of this one - this clanking, over-used, under-loved mess of iron, vinyl and carpet which realistically was long ago better off retired. I think of my own perspiration. My forehead is wet, dripping from the effort of sitting here, of remembering. My arm pits are sopping too, from sitting so long - deodorants just aren't made for such long-tail challenges. My head feels hot now. I'm tiring at the exertion of recollection. It's such a simple thing, to remember - just cast your mind back and observe - but dealing with what you see when you get there is not so simple. Even when events blow in without emotion, somehow the act of looking back on them creates emotions which defy understanding.

The first time Carstairs got me I was a little confused. Upset is too strong a word. I was fascinated. It was new. It was different. I didn't cry, though I think I instinctively wanted

to pull away. Perhaps its inherent strangeness is what caused that. I didn't really feel anything about what he was doing at all, except that in a strange, illogical way it met a need which I had previously identified. What I had to give up to meet that need was not a concern at that time. Now, of course, the world tells me that it should have been, but it wasn't.

I had tunnel vision when I was boy. I had to work far too hard to secure something that should have been mine by right of birth. A boy should not be expected to go through his fundamental development without the guidance of a loving man. A boy should not have to finesse ways of being to somehow grant himself his basic needs. There are no guarantees in life, but a little boy should be able to expect that the basic tools are provided, and a boy knows instinctively that the most basic tool for development is the man who helped create him.

I shouldn't have had to need Carstairs. At the end of the day, that's the tragedy of my existence - that I subjected myself to the whims of a broken man to get the basic masculine instruction that I needed - what most other boys took for granted - along with the sense of self that comes from being wanted.

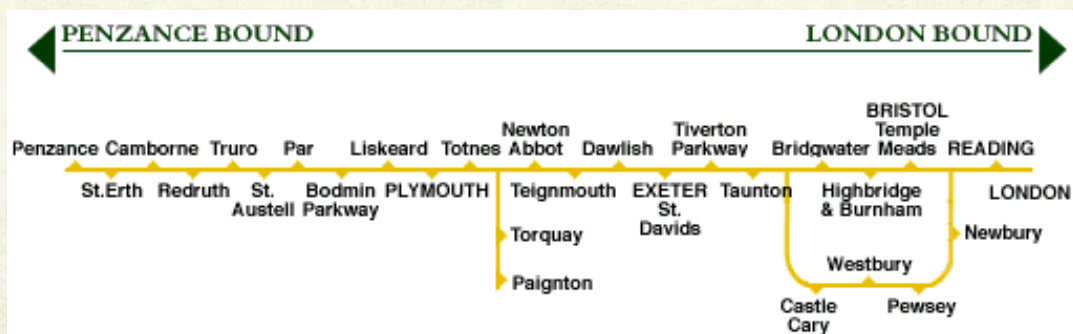
Bumpity-bump.

Kathy knows all about this. When we were courting I told her briefly what I'd been through, growing up, and she's winkled it out of me, but by bit, since then. She's very determined, and I suppose in some ways I'm still needy. I don't mind talking. Generally speaking, her family are surface dwellers - they never delve very deeply into anything, and they don't tend to talk of such things, preferring to relegate them to the dark corners. But Kathy is a little different. She's far more determined to get to the information that she thinks she needs to know. She's not like them, for whom confusion is the enemy. They run, not *out* of fear, but *from* it. They would rather wade in the shallows than swim in the depths.

Bumpity-bump.

The train lurches forward once more. Next stop - what the fuck is the next stop? Eyes tight. Think. Reading, Temple Meads, Bridgewater, Taunton, Tiverton, Exeter and - DAWLISH!

The only reason I know these stations at all is the number of times I've sat here, staring up at the schedule, reading the station list out of sheer boredom. For a short while I could even rattle them all off from memory.



Gathering speed now.

Bumpity-bumpity-bump.

I'm the only one in here, I know I am. The dearies have left, the boy has toddled off with his mummy. Surely I can open my eyes now and orient myself, take in what surrounds me. Surely it's okay now to re-seat myself in the real world! Can't I? Does this... *state*... require that I be completely unhinged from reality?

Yes, for now it does. It's a moment - a thing - and I don't want to spoil it. This perfect, sublime moment of raw connection to everything - to memory, to sense, to emotion, to feeling - everything which has brought me to here and now. And to myself. How often are we so connected to ourselves that we almost seem to be floating overhead? The mind's eye. The limited sounds. The power of interpretation and supposition. Don't you see? Add even one more sense and it all blows apart. The perfect state self-

deconstructs. Add just one vision of one thing, and suddenly there are too many cues. View, decipher, decode, understand, explain.

Add sight, and there's just too much to manage.

Carstairs. At the root of it all. Ironic word, that. To listen to the rest of the world I should be angry with him. I should hate his fucking guts. I should already have gone to his grave, whipped out my dick, and pissed all over him. But why is that? Why does the world hate his kind so much?

There's running in the corridor again. Stomping. Probably that youngster, Adam again. I suppose he's still on board after all. Don't tell me his mother's gone back to sleep. He would be the only reason I would break my connection to the infinite. If he came in and wanted to talk I would reset everything - I could never be rude to a boy. Boys carry that kind of thing with them. They blame themselves - irrationally - for what happens around them. A boy ignored is a boy deflated. A boy whose company is desired builds an ego - an appreciation of his inner self which only works *for* him as he grows. But a boy hurt is a wilting flower. Reactive. Negative. Sad.

That old saying pisses me off: *Children should be seen and not heard*. No! Children should be invited to participate, to actively be, and to enjoy learning. Children see things differently, and the very simplicity of their thoughts should be most highly prized in the duplicitous, dishonest world of adulthood. Instead, too often, they are shut down and devalued.

Carstairs never did that. He liked the sound of my voice, especially that first year. I never asked him, though I often wondered what it was that made him like to listen to me. He wasn't like other adults - hearing a child endlessly prattling on, just nodding their heads, offering noncommittal '*mm-hmms*', or faint, thin, obligatory smiles of acknowledgment. Carstairs sincerely and genuinely enjoyed listening to me talk. I remember so many times at the table in his kitchen before our games, as he was fussing with tea or juice or cucumber sandwiches and I

just talked and talked and talked, and he would finish his work and sit at the table opposite me and just look at me. I'd keep talking and he'd just look at me, leaning his elbows on the table and resting his chin on fingers pressed together as if in prayer, just looking at me, studying me, listening, ever so closely. It was like fascination, and I can't begin to express how amazing that felt.

He wasn't pretending. He was actually hearing my words. I knew this because he kept asking questions which made sense, and which pushed me off in one direction or another. Mummy never did that. Most of the time if I got into high gear with her she'd sit down in her arm chair, lean her head back as if suddenly feverish and exclaim, "Oh, for God's sake, Michael, Mummy needs some quiet!"

Little moments like that are the foundation: "You're growing like a bad weed." Negative. "Snakes, snails, and puppy dogs' tails." Negative. And, "Michael is being absolutely nonsensical today, don't you think?" Negative. Horribly, horribly negative.

That was the first word I ever looked up in the dictionary - *nonsensical*. It had felt like a slap to me - even before I knew what it meant. I remember I was trying to make a point about something, to interject in a conversation between Mummy and someone else - I forget who - I was speaking my mind, as Carstairs had allowed me to do, but to these *ordinary* adults I was just being silly and argumentative - sticking my nose in where it didn't belong. The *official* adults in my life didn't just fail to hear me, they denigrated me for speaking up at all! That, more than anything else, is what convinced me to keep Carstairs' secret. Gratitude, for his willingness to listen. He could do whatever he needed with me because he was willing to listen.

And isn't that what life's all about? Filling the void. Everybody has a void. Everyone has a gap in their happiness which requires filling. Nature abhors a vacuum. Fools rush in. Over-compensation is rife - it's one of the great flaws of the

human condition. Too much anger. Too many jokes. Too much determination. Too much focus. Never the middle line, always the excess. And, almost always, too little kindness.

I was too little, when it started, to see Carstairs' ulterior motive. His kindness, which at the time seemed so spontaneous, did have a price, but I didn't know that at the time. All I saw was Carstairs - the caring man who loved to hear me prattle on, as long as he could play with my doodle while I was doing it. At the time it seemed a small price to pay, but now I'm seeing those extra costs - a kind of VAT. I actually started to realize this when I met his offspring at his house that day - they were so angry! And that was also when I first realized that most kids don't actually have someone who will play with them that way.

Bumpity-bump.

The boy, Adam, (I presume it's still Adam) is running up and down the corridor as the train trundles along. He's an energetic little sprite, I'll give him that much. Part of me hopes he'll pop his head in at the door again - and give me an excuse to end my little short circuit - after all, just like Carstairs, I love talking to boys. Another part hopes against hope that he will stay the hell away. Something's gnawing at me today, and I haven't yet worked round to exactly what it is. What I do know is that an adult would have to punch me to get me out of this reverie, but little Adam could do it just by saying hello.

My mind reaches, strains for an answer, my shoulders warm, then the focus fades and I'm alone again. No more stomping little footsteps outside - perhaps he's gone back inside. Funny, I didn't hear his Mum calling him. Perhaps she leaned out of her compartment and glared at him. A mother's glare can really do wonders for a nonsensical boy.

There's a snick of sound from the doorway. Just the lightest, quietest indication of activity.

I all but hold my breath.

The door slides open, then closes again - I know this because the sounds in my cabin change and a soft rush of air tugs at my forelock. Footsteps. Soft padding, sock-feet hie toward me, then toward the seats that face me. Then there's the unmistakable squish-whoosh of a small bum settling into a soft, supple, padded leather-substitute chair.

I redouble my pretences, tighten the placement of my lips, one against the other. It's decision time. I'm really not ready to 'wake up' yet. I haven't finished thinking it all out. I would love to talk with this boy, but it's not done yet. The plan is still afoot - I've not yet come to a result.

I can feel him looking at me. I want to open my eyes and see him. I want to look him up and down, assess him, judge him as I was so often judged. But I don't dare. Not now. Not ever.

It was shortly after Carstairs kicked me out - at eleven. I noticed at school how other boys liked 'checking out' the girls they saw. They'd do it in different ways - some starting at the face and working their way down; others starting at the bottom and working their way up. I did neither.

One of my last views of lover Carstairs, of course, had been with him on the bed with Peter. Well, I now know that even then - even in that horrible, violent moment as the telephone came hurtling toward me - I had checked Peter out. Just a quick scan, top to bottom, to see what the competition was like. It was the same kind of feral posturing that my horny schoolmates engaged in - that's the only way I can describe it. On the bed, in that briefest of moments, seeing him in Carstairs' clutches, I wasn't looking at his face - I didn't care who he was. I wasn't wondering about his personality. I was looking for his bits, as if even I, at eleven, had some silent longing for, or at least curiosity about, what he, the eight-year-old still had. Or, perhaps, if I'm kind to myself, it was that I was wondering what he had to offer that was so much better than me. And then again, when I caught up to him at the corner, I did the same thing.

I never copped to it, of course. I was never really interested in that kind of thing - I was never in danger of becoming like Carstairs. But now, today, perhaps, with little Adam (I'm sure) sitting across from me I seem to have that urge once again, to open my eyes and *check him out*.

Of course, if I did open my eyes I could invite him to come and sit beside me and start a conversation. I could perhaps protect him from the angry mother, and from any other threats to his happiness - as if I somehow held some kind of monopoly on that. Yes, I could hold him tight and all but guarantee he'd never want for anything. I could...

No. Eyes closed is the best approach. No matter what I want, it's not what I want, because it can't be. It just can't be. Well, it *can*, but it *can't*, if you know what I mean.

The train slows and again I hear that 'squiff-swoosh' sound from across the way, then, soft, padding footsteps, the snick of the door, open, close, then sock-feet once again running down the corridor. He's gone. And I'm quite sure it's for the best.

What's the matter, boy? Don't you like it? It certainly looks like you like it.

It allows me to stay focused.

Bumpity-bump.

Of course, me being kicked out by Carstairs wasn't the end with him. It was difficult, and I was angry as hell, but when I saw him walking toward me one day down Edgware Road about six months post-split I didn't hide or try to run away. I stopped there on the path, standing astride my bicycle, wanting him to see me. And he did. It was a very tense moment. I was ready for anything. Flight? No - *fight!* I was still angry, but I remember exactly what he said:

"Michael! How are you, my dear boy? Are you well? I do hope you're well!"

I was, quite frankly, astonished. My last contact with this man, several months ago, had left me feeling bitter and bereft. He had spurned me horribly. He had left me alone, absent one of my most basic human needs - the need for animal contact - physical touch. In the three years I'd known him I'd gotten used to all that. It had become something I'd depended on, looked forward to, but with him, and Peter, and the telephone, I'd lost it all. And I had definitely noticed the lack.

I'd spent so much time since then figuring out how to cope, how to do without. I worked hard just to be a boy again - not a worshipped thing, but just one more unloved sprog in a schoolful. I endured all that locker room 'checking out' business - and spent a great deal of time and effort trying to figure out why Carstairs had tried to replace me with Peter at all. My astonishment had slowly faded into resentment.

"You look very well indeed," he continued, checking me out for old times' sake - remembering me like I was a mountain range he used to ford. Then he glanced up the road and, seeing so many people coming and going (it is a very busy road), he leaned in a bit closer and breathed: "Meet me 'round the corner, Michael darling, on Crofton. You know where. In the Park. Ten minutes. There's something I want to discuss with you."

Well, there's nothing quite like intrigue to get a lonely boy's heart pounding, is there? I nodded, and I doubt very much that I could have suppressed the smile that spread across my face even if I'd been conscious of it. He strode off toward the Tesco, doubtless for his weekly supply of tea biscuits (for him) and CurlyWurllys (for his fawns) - and I rode my bike in the opposite direction.

I knew exactly where he wanted to meet me. On Crofton Road there was a small park, with flowers and benches, ornaments and pottery and such. It was quite close to his house, but well away from the Edgware Road. It was pretty, and because of all the flowers it smelled nice. The benches were hard, of course, but that didn't matter. A person wasn't supposed to sit there for

long - he was just supposed to rest for a while, enjoy the roses, and move on.

I went straight there, leaned my bike up against the back of the bench and sat down on it, waiting. The Sun was glass-hot on my shoulders. It felt good. There was no breeze, but that was okay - I was just looking forward to chatting again with my old friend. Perhaps we'd rekindle what we'd had. Perhaps he felt bad about what had happened with Peter, and he wanted to take me back. I mean, Peter left, right? So now maybe Carstairs needed me again.

I envisioned him, going home from the Tesco, putting a big bottle of orange squash in the fridge and stashing the crisps and chocolate bars away in his kitchen cabinet, smiling to himself as I had so often seen. I remember I was very careful to craft my fantasy so that the only conclusion I could reach was that it wasn't just any boy that the old man needed, but me. The impossibility of it all was off the charts! Perhaps he wanted to play with me again? Perhaps this time he'd do it right, meet my mum, take her to the pictures, and marry her so we could be together all the time!

My heart raced at the prospect. I was surging. I was so anxious to hear him tell me how much he regretted his mistake that in my excitement I almost threw up. I don't know how I managed to sit so still on that park bench for the twenty-seven-and-one-half minutes it actually took for Carstairs to show up. (Yes, I was checking my watch.)

He walked up behind me. I pretended not to hear his footsteps. I exhibited an air of pleased surprise when he put his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little rub.

"Sorry I'm late, love," he said. "The lines at the Tesco were longer than I thought they'd be."

"'s alright," I said.

I slid over to the left a bit on the bench by way of inviting him to sit down.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" he said, stepping around in front of me and placing his two semi-full Tesco bags down on the bench. He sat down on the wall of the rose bed before me.

"Yes," I replied. "Very nice."

I wanted to hear those words from him. I wanted so desperately to hear him say them, but somehow I managed to stay quiet. This was something that *he* had to say. I couldn't initiate it - even at eleven years old I knew that much. So I stayed quiet, choosing instead to savour the moment.

"I've missed you," he said, and my little heart surged again. I wanted to sit up and wrap my arms around him and kiss him so hard, like before, but it was a public place, and I still had several months' worth of pain to resolve. I didn't think of it in those terms, of course. I suppose I thought in terms of making him come to me - forcing him to find the right words to make his earlier rejection and betrayal go away. "Very much," he continued. "Do you remember our last chat?"

"Yes, I do," I answered, moping now.

"I cried that night, you know. After Peter left. But it wasn't for him, and it wasn't for me. It was for you. You didn't deserve that. You deserved better from me."

"It's not my fault I'm growing."

"No of course it's not - and by the way I should tell you that you've grown more handsome than ever..." The look on his face was akin to pride as he sat on the wall and checked me out like old times. "Look," he said, turning toward me. "I know I can never hope to make you understand it, but it's me and it's *all* me. None of it is your fault at all. All it is, all it will ever be, is that I'm most especially wired to appreciate boys of the age you were when I first met you, and when Peter came along, I realized that you'd grown past me and I didn't need you any more." Then, "for *that*," he added.

My heart sank again.

"You told me many times that you love me," I said. "Was that a lie?"

"No, not at all. I did and do love you. Yes, very much. Completely. And that's why I want to talk to you about something."

Surging again. This was it.

"I'm listening."

"Well, I felt bad at the way it all happened. I know it was a shock for you to find me like that with Peter, and when I finally stopped to think about it I felt just rotten that I hadn't first made an effort to let you down more easily. It was my wild side - it got out of control. Can you forgive me?"

I had forgiven him, of course, the very day that it had happened. Not that I had ever told him that.

"Yes."

I heard him exhale. "Wonderful! Thank you so much. You're an angel!" He looked around the park, then reached down to me as I sat and wrapped his arms around me, hugging me with brief, but definite force. He continued:

"Anyway, while I was feeling bad about the way I'd dropped you I happened to mention you to a friend of mine, and he mentioned you to a friend of his, and well, if it's alright with you, *that* friend would very much like to meet you."

"What?"

"Well, he'd like to meet you. Take you to the pictures, a chippy, things like that."

"Not you?"

"No, no, ducks. His name's Kenneth and he lives up near Oxford. He's coming by tomorrow to see me on another thing. Is it okay if I tell him you'll meet us at my house?"

I stopped to think for the longest time. I know it was a long time because while I was thinking I had time to watch as a bird

swooped, a dog ran, a toddler stumbled in the grass below, and as the shadow of a fair-weather cumulus crossed from the scraggly old oak tree at the southern edge of the park on the left to the tall, almost menacing elm reaching skyward the other way, to the north. Finally I answered him. Somehow in all that time Carstairs knew not to speak.

"So you don't love me after all."

"*Of course I do!* But it's different now. Now I love you for you - not just for playtime. Now I love you because you're Michael, not just because you're a boy."

Peter had moved on, but I didn't want him to know that I knew that.

"Because you're still with Peter."

"Oh Lord, no. Peter's gone. His parents moved away soon after you met him. It happens. Now a little Northern Irish chap named Patrick keeps me company - just like you used to." He paused. "So can I tell you a little bit about Kenneth?"

I waited, a long, pregnant wait, then nodded briefly.

"Well, he's a bit younger than I am. He also adores boys like you, but his needs are less specific - less narrow - than mine. He likes all boys. Little, big, it doesn't matter. He would absolutely love to meet you." He leaned in again, conspiratorially. "And would you believe it, he tells me that he's never played with a boy before."

"You mean sex," I stated more than asked, probably a little too loud. Carstairs shushed me with his hands, looking both ways in case anyone had heard.

"Yes. Can you imagine? To go through so much of your life knowing what you want but being unable to take it? *Crazy!*"

I shook my head, again briefly. For some reason it felt to me as though this conversation was taking me in a direction I wasn't sure about: somehow I felt more like a commodity than a friend. But, he described Kenneth a bit more for me and I

confess I started to find the idea of this other man rather appealing. It wasn't my fault I wasn't small any more, but it would seem that that particular flaw was in Carstairs' makeup, not mine. And not Kenneth's.

Ultimately it was love that I sought, so it wasn't long before I found myself giving in. I had known those special words from Carstairs, and now I thought I might hear them again from another man. A boy only wants validation, after all, from whatever source. And here was another chance for me to get it.

After our talk I biked my way home through the park, exiting at the bottom where the footpath bleeds out onto Manor Road. It felt like a new chapter in my life. I doubt that I had ever been so excited in my life. Not even when I had first met Carstairs did I think in terms of opportunity, and with the exception of wanting to be wanted, on that first day I had carried no ulterior motive. But now, with the rejection still stark in my memory I saw meeting someone new as being full of possibilities. In my advancing years (yes, that was my thought process) I was starting to think in terms of comfort - of self-interest - and I wondered if, just perhaps, this Kenneth fellow might somehow launch me into the next phase of my life.

And by God, so he did.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Dawlish.

Dawlish

The stop at Dawlish is very brief. It's a small station, in many ways grubby and unkempt, yet historical and scenic. I know this from a hiker's guide I carry in my briefcase. It is right on the Channel, so the smell of the ocean fills the air. That, and paint. I can hear workmen outside the window; they must be laying another coat on.

I keep listening. Barely two or three people is my guess, either on or off. *There's nothing much in Dawlish*, I thought rather disparagingly, *but retired pirates and seagulls*. Off in the distance there's a bell ringing - the *clang-clang-clang* of a jittery buoy. The weather is good here today. For now there's no wind, only cloud, though I do remember mention of thunderstorms in the forecast. From the clanging of the bell I surmise that there must be vessels passing nearby, but I can neither see nor hear them. Once again I want to open my eyes to have a look, but I can't. I just can't get into the noise right now. The extra layer of info - the bombardment - that comes via the eyes. And the feelings of others. The understanding. The anger, the sadness, the concern.

All that noise.

I was to meet Carstairs at his house at half-three. Kenneth was supposed to be there - they were apparently making some arrangement or other related to a contract. None of that, of course, was of any interest to me. What I wanted was friendship, and I was looking forward to meeting someone who might like me once again.

The six months I'd had to go without the attentions of Carstairs had been taxing. Believe it or not, boys, like anyone, can become addicted to contact and intimacy, and I was looking forward to lying back once more as Carstairs had taught me, and just letting it happen. His delight had always been in looking

after mine. "Just lie still, Lovey," he'd say. "I'll take care of everything."

I arrived most punctually at Carstairs' place, opening the door and bellowing into the house at about 3:28. Truth be known, I'd been there already for forty minutes, but I'd hung out nearby, behind the same tree where I was hiding when Peter had walked by, crying.

The memories that flooded back as I smelled that place again! The stairs to the right, the tiny kitchen up ahead, the living room off to the left. It seemed brighter now, as if there was somehow more light in the world than there used to be. I half wondered if Patrick, his new mate, would be there, but quickly decided not, since this meeting was about me.

"In here," I heard Carstairs say. His voice unwound from the living room with a timbre that I did not recognize.

I walked around the corner into the living room, and stopped. Suddenly I was shy. I don't know what it was, but suddenly I felt nervous. The hope I'd had not five minutes before of an exciting new connection was gone, replaced now by a feeling I couldn't really explain. I felt numb. Cold. I felt as if the whole room had suddenly grown dark. The smile I had physically plastered on my face as I came around the corner stuck as I'd meant it to, but I doubt it showed in my eyes, and even as I tried to figure out why, I knew in my heart that I'd made a mistake in coming here.

I saw Carstairs sitting on the couch over beside the gas fireplace. He was smiling at me, and sporadically at someone who was sitting with his back to me in the big Elizabethan wing chair I remembered so well. I could only see the top of his head as I came into the room. Carstairs was smiling, but he, too, seemed distracted. He was talking about some contract or other with the other man, but I couldn't make out anything more.

"Here he is," said Carstairs, standing up and putting his arms out wide, enthusiastically. He looked a bit like a jumbo jet. "How are you, Lovey?"

"I'm a-alright," I stammered.

The other man stood up. He was very tall. His arms were like tree trunks and his shoulders looked as wide as a house to me as he slowly looked me up and down. There was a look on his narrow, angular face when he first stood up - lascivious and judgmental. He appraised me in that moment, checked me out, his eyes all but accusatory - but in a moment the judgment was replaced by a big, crazy-toothed grin which caught me off guard. I think I must have stepped back a little, because I saw his smile falter before it snapped right back into place.

He towered over me like Big Ben, and as I looked at his hands and noted how bloody big they were, I had a quick thought that scared me a little. It wasn't much, but it occurred to me in that moment that a man as big as him would probably not let a boy be in charge of the, um, rituals. He held out his two large hands and cupped his thumbs and forefingers together in a square before him, then he looked through the square at me and moved it up and down.

"Am I right?" said Carstairs, "or am I right?" I could hear it in his voice again: he was trying to curry favour.

"Oh, you're right," said Kenneth, still studying me through the little square of fingers. I wasn't sure what he was doing, but then he said:

"He'll look absolutely *fabulous* in a pin-up."

Now, I'd heard about pin-ups. I'd even seen a few, on Page Three of The Sun - the one where the woman sat with her tits hanging out. I didn't think much of that - at all - but that's not what I was thinking about. Rather, I was wondering why and how they could think of me in terms of a Page-Three pin-up!

Then I remembered the box. And right after that I saw the box, on the floor beside the new man's chair, open, with a few of the photos on top. And yes, they were mostly of me.

"He's incredibly photogenic," said the new man.

"Bloody right, he is," agreed Carstairs, emphasizing his enthusiasm as if he were trying to build up value in something. "So, do we have a deal?"

"Oh, definitely. Most definitely. As long as the young man plays along nicely. Have you...?"

"Only briefly. I thought that you would..."

"Oh, right then."

Kenneth turned to me again, smiled, and said:

"Young man, how would you like to make some money?"

This, I was not expecting. My instinct was to say "Yes please," but I surprised myself and managed some fairly respectable restraint.

"What would I have to do?" I asked. Most pragmatic.

"Well, that's easy," said Kenneth, "Only what you've already been doing for your old mate Carstairs here." He paused, "and perhaps just a little bit more."

The Devil is always in the details, but I didn't think to ask what he meant by that. I suppose I focused on "a little bit" and decided that in strictly quantifiable terms it meant more arse shots, or some such - and I was pretty sure I could handle that.

"Of course, our photos will be much better quality - no offence, old man - "

"Oh, none taken, no indeed. Those were just for me."

"And they'll have a much wider audience - here, Europe, and you know, you may even become famous..." he paused for effect "...in *America*."

"America?"

"Oh, I think definitely. Definitely in America. In fact, if you want me to, I'll see to it."

"You mean people are going to see my arse all over the world?"

"Oh God, yes," breathed the new man. "If I have my way your arse is going to become very famous indeed."

"How much you gonna pay me then?"

"Well..." He turned away from me and said, "Standard union rates are twenty quid a week and tuppence per magazine sold. But how about if I make it twenty-five a week plus the tuppence per? Does that sound fair?"

How was I ever going to argue with that? I didn't know any better, but I was absolutely blinded by the prospect of twenty-five a week.

"How many magazines will you sell?"

"Here, and in Europe, hundreds. If it goes to America too? God. Thousands."

I remember I tried to figure it out, but I was rotten at maths at the time. Kenneth must have seen this, so he helped me out.

"It's enough to set you up right proper, my little mate, and for you to help out your mother an' all."

My mother? Then Carstairs must have told the new man all about me.

"I can't tell her anything, though, can I? And won't she wonder where the money's come from?"

"Oh, yes of course, you're quite right," corrected the new man. "Well, we'll just put your money away in an account somewhere and you can use it later on when no one will be any the wiser."

Of course, I now know this 'accidental' reference to my mother was quite deliberate. First, he was letting me *know* that he knew all about me, and second, he was playing on the good part of me that would have delighted in being able to help my hard-working mother. Third, in retrospect the dropping of my mother's name could have been some kind of threat. After all, there's no way I wanted her to know about any of this.

Putting the money away made sense to me, except, I thought, if I wanted to use it to buy my mum a little Christmas present or

something. I could always tell her I'd saved my pocket money. It was like keeping two sets of books!

As it turned out though, I didn't really have to worry about any of that.

"Now, off with your kit and let's 'ave a look at you."

I did as I was told, feeling the new man's lecherous eyes on me as I stripped down.

"Very nice," he fussed. "Very nice indeed. Turn around for me? Lovely. Lovely." He did the square thing again, then reached into a bag beside his chair and actually took a few photographs. I wondered momentarily if he would be paying me for them.

"They're for light purposes," he said, as if reading my mind. He sounded to me just a little bit annoyed at feeling the need to explain himself, even though I hadn't said a word.

You know, I don't care who you are, but everyone likes to hear how nice they look, and I was no different. But that's the trap, isn't it? What you first like ultimately ensnares you. What is at first exciting soon becomes mundane. And thereafter, a horror.

Bumpity-bump.

Someone's opened a window. I can feel the difference in the cabin, as slowly the fuggy old British Rail car is overwhelmed by salt and sea. We've slowed down a bit. A yellow light? Something on the track? Perhaps we're ahead of schedule. Not bloody likely.

The train is quiet now - so quiet that I wonder if I'm not completely alone. Surely it's been ten or fifteen minutes since little feet ran up and down the corridor - before the last stop. Perhaps mummy has little Adam under control now - back on a leash, under her wing. Perhaps she's woken up at last to the reality - that once in a while it's a good thing for a mother to tell her child what to do.

This is the conundrum. And it's the basic argument: whether parents should govern every moment of a child's life, and so, supposedly, keep them safe from harm, or whether the child should be allowed his space, his judgment, his autonomy. A child can fuck things up, I suppose, but then, so can adults. And they frequently do. *Why is it so fucking hard to make good decisions?* Competing demands, that's why.

Back up to speed now - *clackity-clack*. Out the window, the incessant squawking of scrappy birds. Makes me think again of Kenneth.

Kenneth was not the nice man that Carstairs had made him out to be. He was not kind to me. He didn't allow passivity, except as it applied to doing what I was told. He wasn't inexperienced, either, as Carstairs had said, in the ways of corporeal contact. I soon found out that not only did he know exactly what he was doing, but his greatest joy in life seemed to be figuring out new ways to make us boys feel small. Whereas with Carstairs I had been allowed to lie back and be adored, with Kenneth I learned how to serve. It wasn't the same thing at all, and no, I didn't like it.

Once the introductions were made, Carstairs essentially disappeared. He wasn't interested in me anymore, after all - I was just too big for him. Kenneth smiled a lot to begin with, but after an hour or so he lost the will to do so, and it wasn't long before I began to dread seeing him. I remember the moment that happened. It was the same moment that I realized that I wasn't in the movie business for my pleasure, but for his. It was also the moment I realized that I would never see a penny of the money he'd promised. Oh yes, I'd been neatly strung along on that score.

The first time he hit me it actually was my fault. I was being a little full of myself. Strutting about. Cock-of-the-walk. I was feeling sure of my value because Carstairs had instilled it in me. He had taught me by sheer sexual repetition how beautiful

I was - that I was the valuable one - that I was the one whom people wanted to see. But things were different now, and it was that swinging, stinging, back-handed slap to the side of my head (not the face! *Never the face!*) that first hammered that reality home. It was a shock. My eyes watered, and even as I wondered what had happened I realized that my world had inexorably changed. Who knows what personal journeys take men to that place - to the place where they can exult in the abuse of others. It wasn't my fault I was pretty. It wasn't my fault everything worked the way it should. So why was I rewarded with pain? That was on them.

The first few sessions were fairly benign. They took pictures. Then other things - and other people - started being introduced into it. The other boys were almost always younger, and I was expected to 'bring them along' - to teach them how it was done. This was difficult, not least because I wasn't really sure myself. I mean, to that point the only other person I'd ever played with was Carstairs, and as I mentioned before, he'd done all the work. But with Kenneth there was no lying back and letting it happen. The only submission involved was when the plot was to get rough, when tools were used, or when the other person was much older.

I didn't enjoy that. I'd always enjoyed it with Carstairs because he made an effort. He wanted it all to be a pleasant experience for me, and he did the little things that made it so. For one thing, he was clean. He bathed. He bathed for me. For another, he smelled good because of that French stuff he put on. But Kenneth, and the men he brought on board, didn't bother with any of that. To them, kindness was an oxymoron, and the worse they smelled, the better they liked it.

The sessions all happened at Kenneth's flat - which was only a half mile from my mum's place. It wasn't actually where he lived. It was a place he'd rented especially for the 'work', as he called it, and in particular he had rented it so that it would be easy for me and the other boys to get there quickly after school.

Of course, there wasn't much furniture. There was a wing chair in one room, and a bed and bedside table in another. I thought I recognized the wing chair, which looked just like the one from Carstairs' living room. In a third room there was another bed, with ropes on it.

After the first time with Kenneth I went home and cried. What had been a loving thing with Carstairs was now anything but. It was punishing, and unpleasant. It was hard work. It was a horror of sights and sound and smells and emotions that I don't think I'll ever forget. In those moments I remember thinking how lucky Peter was that his family had moved away.

Somehow I knew that I would do what I had to, but even as the set started on that first night, for the first movie, I wondered how on earth I had managed to get myself into this. I remember going home that night in absolute terror for the future. I had thought there was a new horizon opening up for me, and I'd been right, but not in any way I could ever have imagined.

When all this began with Kenneth, feeling the need to talk I tried a few times to go and see Carstairs. I only saw him once, though, just walking hand-in-hand into his house with yet another boy I'd seen at school. I thought about going and knocking on the door, forcing him to talk to me, but the memory of the last time I'd interrupted his worship convinced me not to. I thought I'd come back later.

Quite honestly, I don't know why I thought talking to him would help. If I had been thinking 'big picture' I would have remembered that Carstairs was no longer interested in me. I would have sussed that his velvety-soft words at the park were only his way of handing me over to his maniacal friend - that his words had stroked and caressed me intellectually, emotionally even as his hands had, physically. If I had been paying attention at all I would have recognized the machinations of two men discussing contracts, and if I had had any business acumen whatsoever I would have realized that *I* was the commodity

of note in the contract, and seen the true savagery of my old friend's betrayal.

But no. I was still convinced that Carstairs loved me. Yes, he had told me to fuck off, but that was my fault. Yes, he'd moved on to smaller, prettier boys for his play, but that was just because I'd got some hair down there, and hair, for whatever reason, was an absolute no-go for him. He loved me. I believed it. I believed it because I wanted it to be true, because it *had* to be true. He loved me, but he was done with me now. And even then I recognized that the sooner I wrapped my mind around that little nugget of truth, the better.

That's the most miserable part of it all for me. That even as Kenneth and his cronies stretched my mind in unspeakable ways I kept on believing that Carstairs loved me, and that I was doing all this for him, or at least for the hope that his memory offered. Probably because I didn't want to face the alternative, I clung foolishly to the notion of affection from a man whom, it became gradually more and more clear, had made money by selling me into slavery. It didn't occur to me at the time that he had turned me into a porn star - a prostitute. We kids didn't really have names for such things back then. But becoming quite well known kept me distracted from the nuts and bolts of what I was doing. You might remember me, if you ever inadvertently wandered into that dark, dark world, as Winston.

As I said, there was money in it, but after the first session I never saw any. After Carstairs' introduction, Kenneth kept me to himself for a while - I now know this was to make sure I was suitably trained and motivated. He taught me how to do everything - and I do mean 'everything'. He taught me at first with kindness, then with coercion and finally with brutal, back-handed force. He used physical and psychological means to get me to do things that most boys would never even think of, and then he taught me how to secure other 'talent' for his nasty ring of '*free spirits*'. He taught me the lines, the approaches, the smoothness, the sophistication. He gave me a little pocket money - about ten pounds, which was a lot back then - so I'd look

'flash' to any little boy I was working, but that was only to be used in an emergency. The emphasis was to be placed on appearances. "Show it to 'im, Michael," he said. "Just whip it out yer pocket and flick through the wad like you love it so much, then put it back away. He'll be so impressed: he'll do anything to be just like you."

That's the part I regret the most - the part I played in getting other boys into his films. I was the insider with skill. I was the one that tipped their scales of trust even as the rest of their brains and minds screamed no. Seeing me there, playing along, good-looking (I was), smooth and sophisticated, rich, was intended to help cancel out their defences - kill their resistance. They'd be reassured by my presence, by my youth, my prettiness, my coolness, and they'd let down their guard, and submit.

Stupid, really, that they fell for it, and stupider still that I did. I let myself be used for two years. *Winston*. Active in the industry for two whole years. Set after set of photographs, magazine shoots, videos and for a while there *Winston's Bits* had to be just about the most famous on the planet. Kenneth must have made thousands off of me - not only the publications that I starred in, but the money he pulled in by 'loaning' me out to friends, and by doing the same with the other boys I dragged in to his despicable web of horrors.

I knew I was wrong to do that recruiting stuff, and for that I've never forgiven myself. I felt bad every time I landed one. I didn't like what I was doing, so why was I cooperating and bringing other boys into this horror? Didn't I care? Or was I just afraid not to?

Every boy I brought made the same journey. It was all but predictable precisely when they would make the change from innocent, trusting, open-hearted, sparkly-eyed little angel, to fearful, untrusting, scared, fight-or-flight-focused animal. And each and every one of them took my role in their detention, in

their sequestering, very hard. I got many a dark look from a boy who had finally concluded how I'd taken him in.

What I didn't know at the time - in fact, I only really figured it out after Stewart - is that some of those boys never saw their families again.

And that just makes me feel even worse.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Teignmouth.

Teignmouth

The train rattles some as it approaches Teignmouth. Loose tracks? Hard to believe that, and yet, the sound is different. It's an old station, after all. Maybe that's why the train slowed so abruptly, all but throwing me off my seat. Or perhaps the driver nodded off at the stick, woke up and had to slam on the brakes. There were floods around here last year, weren't there? Perhaps they weakened the track.

I've lost track of time. Kathy's back in Tiverton, but what's she doing? How long has it been, anyway, since we passed Tiverton? If I could look at my watch I'd be able to answer that, but I can't - because I'm doing that thing.

No, I'm still not ready to open my eyes. Perhaps if I listen closely I'll hear what time it is. I'm guessing after six, but it could be even later than that. I tune in, for a while, to the world around me.

"Adam! How on earth did you get chocolate on your..."

"I'm actually quite tired, you know. I've been pushing very hard lately, and I..."

"The little woman's got sausages an' mash on t' burner t'night. She definitely knows the way t' me 'eart, you know."

"Why must these blasted trains always run behind their time? You would think with all the money in the world we give to British Rail they'd be able to figure out a way..."

"...ten minutes or so, Sir. Yes, sir. It's about fifteen minutes behind time, sir. There was a short disruption up at..."

Just when you want someone to talk about the time, no one does. But of course that can be counted as a positive, too. After all, it's the lack of cues that I appreciate right now - it's the blissfully non-specific that's spurring me to clarity - it's the white noise - the substance of the thing - and everything else around it - that's making me free. If I were to do some quick maths (I'm better at that nowadays) I could probably figure out

the approximate time, but the need to do so doesn't last long, and I return to my cogitations.

To Kathy, specifically - my second main cogitation. We met at that convention, but we got together - and stayed together - because of her determination. She was the chaser - I, the chased. Ironic, really.

I don't know what she saw in me. I was a slow fellow when we first met, dim-witted. Unconscious. Life, as you're no doubt learning, had pushed me around a little. I don't even remember how I scored an invitation to that event - I'd only been with the school for about six months and I hadn't a clue what was going on. I played it up, though, dutifully clinking glasses, smiling, and laughing with all and sundry until I saw Kathy, standing alone on the other side of the room.

I had to look twice. She was incredible. I couldn't understand for the life of me why she was alone. I saw a young man from another school wander over and shake her hand - all very professional and respectful, but it made me feel jealous. *Stupid!* I had no claim to her affections - hadn't even met her yet - but I was jealous of that complete stranger, of his ability to communicate freely with that particularly beautiful creature! Ridiculous! Astonishing! But he had touched her. He had smelled her. He had felt her heat.

I remember frowning as I looked at them together. There were no bad memories around her. Nothing ugly in my sordid past stuck to her. I could look at her and *not* be reminded of aromas and flavours and sensations of countless other bodies. I could look at her legs and *not* suffer the twinges of anxiety that came when I looked at men. I frowned not at the lack of *her*, but at the excess of *others* in my life. I frowned at all the courage I'd wasted on people who didn't care, knowing that it should - every ounce, every *erg* - have been reserved for an introduction to one who did.

Don't ask me how I knew that we would marry - I just knew. It was as if I'd seen her in a dream before - I knew just by

looking that she and I were destined to be together. There was no doubt about it.

It took a while for me to figure out why I wasn't scared of her, but it did come. Kenneth, for his profits, had arranged all sorts of trysts for me and his cronies, but none of them had ever included females. That was a line that he drew in the proverbial sand. He was as deviant and perverted as anyone could ever be, but females in any guise seemed to violate his personal code of conduct, and that was something he just wasn't prepared to do. "They've got fleas, Michael," he'd titter. Or "I much prefer the milk to the cow." To one of his silly friends - one who supposedly liked both boys *and* girls - he used to say "stop fooling around, Randall: stick with boys."

So there was no physical *thing* to overcome when I thought of Kathy. There was no revulsion. No supreme attraction. There was no built-in defence mechanism to get in the way of my loving her. I could love her, and make love to her, knowing that I had never hurt her, or anyone who even looked like her - and that I never would hurt her. I had met her, and wooed her, and learned about her, but it had never felt like a recruitment. There was none of that pressure on our connection - and that was incredibly liberating for me. She could bear my children (yes I looked that far ahead) and, despite everything that I'd been through I would only ever see her as a vision - a vestige - of purity and light. She, with her sunshine smile, her wavy locks, her glimmering ivories, was the very encapsulation of the innocence of my childhood. And how could that be anything but alluring?

She was kind and understanding at the party. Even when I started getting a little tipsy, she didn't judge. She didn't find (or invent) excuses to try to get away. She stayed with me, looking me in the eye, talking to me and - and this was big - *listening* to me. (Carstairs.) She was perfect for me, and even as I think of it now I tremble with the same intense satisfaction that I felt that very first night.

She was my friend first, my partner second. Once I had told her my story - even as briefly as on that first night - she understood completely that where I'd come from as a boy was a large part of who I was. She understood that I was going to have days when things felt complicated. Days like today.

She didn't *like* to talk about it, but she would if I needed to. She knew when I was struggling - even when I didn't express my pain - and I now know that she always recognized my angst and, seeing it, stepped forward, touched my shoulder and allowed me to laugh, or fume, or wrack sobs into her luscious frame and so bleed out just a little bit more of my shame.

Kenneth never did that. Kenneth wasn't concerned with my mental welfare, or my emotional health. Kenneth busied himself only with the corporeal me. The body. To Kenneth, I was little more than a sex doll. On good days I was a good investment in time and money - since he got paid so well by what I did - but on bad days I was a little shit who was lucky to be alive. Strange how this stuff comes back to you, once you start thinking about it.

Bumpity-bump.

As part of my on-camera activities I met a lot of other kids. I spent time with them between shoots and we'd talk. I was (*how shall I put it?*) convinced by my circumstances that what I was doing was okay. Carstairs had got me started and Kenneth had worked his inhibition-killing magic from there.

It never bothered Kenneth, of course. Meat was meat, and he didn't care what its story was as long as it got to work on command. But I *did* care, and the fact that an increasingly large number of the boys I was to play with were being coerced or even threatened into cooperation was really starting to bother me. There were always promises: '*Alright, love, right after the next one*'. It was always '*just one more*', or '*do me a favour, darlin*'. Just as Kenneth could string me along on the idea of getting paid, he strung the other boys along on the promise of actually finishing their work. "Just one more movie, mate," he'd

say to them. "Hey, mate, this one might be your last, eh? Let's make it special."

Inside, I believe he knew that some of the boys would never go home, and sometimes, if I watched the work from some dark corner of the studio, I could see in his face the fate of this boy or that.

That was where I discerned the code of the monsters. It goes something like this: "I do solemnly swear that I will do every boy I can in every way I can, at least until he's too fucking old for me and I'm no longer interested." Some took an additional oath to let their quarry go when that point had been reached - often with considerable re-training and mind-bending - threats and the like. But others went a different way.

I saw that happen once. Kenneth didn't know it - I certainly wasn't supposed to. As far as I know he still doesn't know, but I saw it with my own two eyes. It was Bruno who did it. He was appropriately named, since he was a big, hairy (almost shaggy) brute of a man. He was not a kind man. He was rough, threatening, violent, both in private and on set. He derived great satisfaction from causing pain. He'd done this to me, and he did it to other boys. There were times when I stood at the side of the room, in the dark, behind the cameras, watching him as he did this or that, as he went out of his way to cause physical pain or humiliation. It was obviously part of who he was, pushing farther, harder, to see what it would take to make a boy squeak. It wasn't enough to deflower him or otherwise separate him from his masculinity - he had to make him cry too, or even scream. If he got through to a boy enough to make him weep, wail, shriek - if he managed to get Kenneth and Ron the shot that so many monsters like of a boy with his eyes shut tight, his mouth wide in a silent scream, then he could have a fine *little death* for the camera and many more besides.

Well, pushing the envelope was a nasty business. I remember it like it was yesterday. I've tried not to think of it, but it won't go away. The boy's name was Stewart. He was twelve. He had

some looks to him, but he was absolutely useless in bed. He would cry even as he worked. He'd curl up in a little ball on the bed, just sucking his thumb like a toddler and staring wide-eyed at the monster who was railing at him. He didn't even like being undressed, it seemed, because every time he was told to get ready he looked around the room as if trying to sort an escape. I talked to him. I tried to convince him, pointing at big, brutish Bruno, that as much as he disliked what they were making him do, it was still better than being beaten up. I tried to be gentle with him on set, to teach him - *because I was so fucking good at it* - but he just couldn't learn.

Perhaps he believed that if he was terminally useless at this sex thing they'd just get sick of him and tell him to piss off. But that's not what happened. What happened was, as I suspected it would be, far worse.

I saw Kenneth talking to Bruno after a particularly difficult set with Stewart. No one had accomplished anything - I'm sure you know what I mean - and Kenneth was very unhappy with the amount of film he'd used. "*Film is expensive!*" he roared. "*I cannot afford to waste film for an incapable little fuck like him!*" They went to a corner and talked hastily and in a low voice as Bruno put his clothes back on. I heard Bruno ask if he wanted to film it, but Kenneth shook his head. "No, just get it done. He's fucked me around long enough."

I, of course, thought this meant get him drunk and drop him off in a gutter somewhere, so once Bruno had grabbed Stewart by the arm from the dressing room and pulled him out of the flat I slipped out too, and followed along discreetly at a distance. My incomplete plan was, I think, to watch as Bruno dropped Stewart off, and to swoop in after he was gone and take the boy somewhere safe - I honestly had no idea where. I followed them out the door of the flat, down the hall, out the back door of the building and down the footpath through the trees to the deep, cold, night-black river. I got behind a bit, but I caught up just in time to see Bruno's big hand, holding a big rock, come crashing down hard on Stewart's head.

The sound of that collision, hard on soft, dry on wet, haunts me to this day. The momentary yelp of shock, pain and surprise from Stewart, his little throat gulping in confusion, unable to breathe or swallow from all the blood that was suddenly gushing in, and the repeated thud of his spasming body on the grassy bank were horrible to hear. And then, just to make sure, Bruno's big hand held the boy's head under the surface of the fast-flowing river, long enough to feel whatever last twitches of his too-short life there were finally go still.

I wanted to throw up, but I didn't dare. I absolutely plastered my hands across my mouth as I watched. I knew that if I made any noise at all I would be next. It didn't matter to him that I had a mother, that I had hopes and dreams. He'd done Stewart - what on earth would ever make me think that he wouldn't do me, too?

I lay low, panicked, biting my hand, stifling my sobs in the long grass, watching through tear-streaked eyes as Bruno located some more stones nearby and stuffed them into Stewart's coat pockets. Then he took his own trousers off and waded out into the river with the boy, pushing the small body out in front of him. Finally, looking around, he pushed down on the corpse, soaking the boy's heavy clothing and letting the stones do the work of dragging him to his hiding place. He looked around again, then left the river, put his trousers back on and returned to the Regal. Half an hour later I believe he was back on the bed with another boy - bouncing away, this time no doubt to a more satisfactory result.

I sat in the long, moon-lit grasses for the longest time after Bruno left, crying quietly at the horror of what I'd seen. How could a man do that to another person, let alone to a boy? My mind zoned out for a while - it was too much to handle, too much to process. In my stressed and anxious mind I rushed to the man who'd shown me love and kindness in the past - to Carstairs. I felt the sudden need to go to him, to cuddle up in his loving, manly arms, to feel the warmth of his kindness encircle me. I also felt a concurrent urge to run - to get away altogether from Kenneth and Bruno and all the other sadistic bastards who used

the kids for their own satisfaction, caring nothing for anyone but themselves.

But I couldn't. I was next up on the schedule.

Bumpity-bump.

Kathy again. She's at home, checking the oven, turning it down even more, trying not to let the dinner dry out. The kids will already have eaten. She's checking the clock on the wall a lot, and the watch on her wrist. Finally, she starts thinking about calling the constable. But she doesn't want to get too far ahead of things - she knows that I won't appreciate it if she calls the police when I'm perfectly fine. But of course she doesn't know if I'm perfectly fine, and as time goes by, as miles pass, as the thoughts of my sordid, silly, perverted little life fly back and forth through my mind I become less and less sure of it myself.

By now, upstairs, the kids are sleeping. Little Robert, sweet and pure. I can see him in my mind's eye now, curled up in bed, blanketed, most likely in his Mickey Mouse pyjamas - they are his favourites. He's sleeping peacefully, recharging for tomorrow's adventures. He's recapturing his energies, living, without knowledge, without consciousness, without worry, at the behest of those who have worked hard to make it easy for him. He's a soft child, delicate in so many ways. I think of him and wonder if he could survive what I went through, but even the thought makes me shudder and I push it away. He's too innocent. Too gentle. The very idea of a Kenneth or a Bruno getting their clutches on my little Robert (ownership) sends shivers down my spine. Then, for the first time, I realize that by leaving in this way what I'm actually doing is betraying him, even as I was betrayed all those years ago when my own father left. After all, everything that happened to me happened because I had no father. So, what might happen to Robert if I were to leave? Would he be able to cope on his own? And, would Kathy be able to look after him? She was strong enough for a faltering man, but would she be

strong enough for a growing boy with issues? Yes, of course, but such a burden. It's making me think twice about the plan... On the other hand, if I were hit by a bus she'd have to find a way, so surely... this is just a different kind of bus.

I've never thought of myself in that way before - soft and gentle. But I suppose at one time I was. It's probably what attracted Carstairs to me in the first place. That and my desperation. I suppose it's part of what attracted him to all his little fawns. I suppose, too, somewhat presumptuously, that it was what made him what he was in the first place. The innocence, the smallness, the delicate heart and fair, soft skin. Most in the world don't understand it - they are rabidly and definitively *con*. But I think - I think that I *do* understand it. I think I encountered it often enough - as a boy - to understand what the attraction is. Frankly, for me it wasn't unpleasant, most of the time in those early years. I liked it. It was fun, and it felt good. In fact, it was a little addicting, if I'm completely honest. For the most part the unpleasantness of it was the understanding that I had even then that some boys are just not equipped to deal with such things. They aren't ready for it at all, the rawness of it, the depth of bodily passion, shocks them to the core. I think this is why so many people think of it as abuse. They see the one-in-ten blubbering, crying *victim* of this most intimate of activities and they abhor the stress, confusion and suffering that he's feeling. What they don't see, or even hear about, is all the boys who enjoyed it. It's the old polar argument, and it works, antithetically: the appreciative child grows up content with the part he played in a little physical exercise - remembering it, with its sensations and its emotional complexities with fondness and approval. He remembers such activities as building blocks to greater self esteem - as confirmation of his own power and worth. But while he quietly enjoys his memories, the rest of the world rends garments in sympathy with the loud one who just was not ready, and whose plight they all eschew as unforgivable,

unmentionable, unendurable. The one-in-ten becomes a victim of 'something that must be stopped', but the nine just stay quiet.

That was the difference, for me, between Carstairs and Kenneth. Carstairs loved me (I still believe this), Kenneth did not. Carstairs, indeed, even loved me the day he threw the telephone at me. I believed for the longest time that he would never have consigned me to Kenneth had he known what the other man actually had in mind - there's a vast difference between a box of pictures and the industrial production and distribution network that Kenneth and Bruno forged. But for that contract stuff I would still happily believe that Kenneth fooled Carstairs into releasing me into his clutches. At the same time, the contract might also have been for something else. After all, I didn't actually see it, did I? And anyway, can you really sell what you don't own? Yes, now I'm rationalizing. I'm sorry - I can't help it.

Seeing what happened to Stewart was the worst of it, and the sound of a crying child still sets me off to this day. Except no... The absolute worst of it was seeing how cold and inhumane was Bruno's response to what he'd done. He didn't think, even for a moment. He didn't say a prayer. He didn't shed a tear. All he did was get his trousers on and head back in so he could fuck a more cooperative kid. That was the worst for me because it devalued Stewart so much. It made his life, his breath, his emotion, his fear, utterly worthless. It rendered it a useless and pathetic thing, when in fact, it was - or, if given a chance, could have been - as noble and gallant and proud a life force as ever there was on the planet.

After filming ("*Slow down, Michael, where's the fire!*") I gathered my courage and told Kenneth I wouldn't be around for a little while.

"Oh?"

"We're off on vacation," I lied.

"Who, Michael?"

"Me and my Mum. We're going to - " I plucked the first place name I could think of out of the deepest recesses of my mind:
" - The Isle of Man."

"Oh? What's there then?"

"Just a hotel, I think. And a museum. Very boring," I cleverly added, "but it should be nice with mummy there."

"You love your Mum, do you then, Michael?"

"Oh, very much sir," I replied, possibly putting a suspicious emphasis on the word 'sir'. I flashed as bright a smile as I could muster - never had I acted so well!

He reminded me about my promised discretion, and told me to have a good time, and I left. I don't think I had ever been as pleased to be going away from somewhere as I was that night. I remember I kept looking behind me as I ran home, checking over my shoulder and such - mostly for Bruno. I had this vision of the two of them following me - tailing me, as those American cops used to call it on the telly - then coming up behind me and ensuring my discretion permanently.

Of course, there was no holiday. Mummy was still working all the time - there was no way she'd ever be in a position to take a trip somewhere. But I had a plan in mind that I thought involved me going to see Carstairs - to tell him what was going on. This was the time. Watching a child's murder would steel anybody's wool - or so I supposed. At any rate, this was the time.

I ran home from the studio, dashed up the stairs into our flat, waved and yelled at Mum as I blurred past, and blazed a trail straight to my bedroom. It was too late to see Carstairs tonight, but I had decided that I would go tomorrow - that I'd tell him everything, no matter what. I was comfortable with my decision. Carstairs would listen. He would be outraged. There was no way he had sold me into this kind of slavery knowing what it actually was, and he would be furious to know that his

friends were now transitioning to blood sports. I went to sleep easily, content with my intention. After all, because Carstairs already knew what I was doing with Kenneth it didn't break my promise at all - the one I'd made to keep the movie stuff to myself.

I slept the sleep of the supremely self-assured because I knew with absolute certainty that by the end of the following day I would be safe once more, in Carstairs' arms, and that I would never have to worry about Bruno or Kenneth again.

But then, at just after 4am, I woke with a start, and a terrifying thought cracked like a frozen river through my mind:

"What if Carstairs had known *exactly* what they were planning?"

I didn't want to believe it, but the more I chewed on it the more sense it made.

I pulled my blanket tightly around and over my head, and cried the rest of the night away.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Newton Abbot.

Newton Abbot

Now in this station I can hear all sorts of things. The train, of course, just rounding in, clacking slowly up to the platform; pedestrians clip-clopping along toward the exit, toward the stairs up the middle. Cars in the parking lot starting up, revving their motors and pulling away. Traffic is busy. Idling engines, grinding gears, even the irascible toot-toot of an anxious *Fiat* or *Morris* or *Austin* signify as much. And now, suddenly, probably because the light at the corner has turned green, it's all quiet. Now the thirty or so people who alighted from the train have all slipped into the stream of life to head home for the evening to their families.

Home. It's a magical word. It's where we live. It's where we feel safe, where we can curl up and just be. There's no pretence at home. There's no need to be anything we're not. No one is watching us - at home. There's little fear of putting our foot wrong, and in theory at least we can worry a lot less about loose lips there than we otherwise must.

That was very true with me and Kenneth and his bunch. I learned quite early about his temper. Even before the Stewart thing I knew the back of his hand, and that only made me want all the more to get back to Carstairs. I think Kenneth kept his temper in check most of the time - meaning, I think he would have been a lot more frenzied toward me if I weren't such a bloody good little performer. I was fearless, you see. And I did my part to teach the others to be fearless too.

For the first year it went like this: I went to school in the morning, doing my work (and getting some pretty decent marks, I might add) and on break sizing up some of the other kids for suitability - you know, for Kenneth's purposes. After school I ran over to Kenneth's place, did my job, then ran home. Usually I got home just before Mum, avoiding the need to explain myself to her, but occasionally the question came up of what I was doing with my time. In response to this I used various delay tactics. Sometimes I'd distract her from what she'd asked by

asking about her day, but mostly she was so tired and inattentive I could just ignore her and keep watching the telly.

Once in a while Kenneth would give me a bob or two - probably to keep me compliant. It went into my pocket, then into the shoe box in my bedroom, then onto the highest shelf in the closet. Over time, with my continued popularity, the box started to fill up a bit, and before long I had almost a hundred quid - a lot of money for a young boy at that time. It was a far cry from the twenty-five a week I'd been promised, but it was something. I was just starting to wonder what I might ultimately do with it when Kenneth started hitting me - both on camera *and* off.

The first time, I blamed myself. I'd been 'acting up' a bit - I was generally irritated that day and I'm pretty sure I had it coming. But that seemed to ignite something in Kenneth which I didn't particularly like, and it frightened me. I felt as if he had, at that very moment, thought of something new, and I did not like the wide grin of satisfaction and curiosity I saw in his face as he slapped me.

The beatings started to become more commonplace, and I knew I was in trouble when the adult actor I was scripted with came prepared with tools that were clearly meant for causing pain. I remember I walked up to the bed with the camera already rolling and all these things were laid out, and the man told me to pick one of them and hand it to him. I was then told to put the other items on the floor and as I did I felt the first sting on my body from the item I'd chosen. And the camera was right there, watching, recording my misery as the man beat me time and again with my own complicity.

I hated that. I longed for the loving attentions that Carstairs had once given me. But even as I did, my understanding grew even more clear that some arrangement or other had been reached between Carstairs and the men who were now hurting me, and I started to aim some of my anger at my former friend. Even as the blows rained down on me, even as the camera man filmed the welts, even as tool man descended on me like a grizzly on fresh

meat, I was directing my not inconsiderable indignation toward Carstairs and the deal he must have made to allow this to happen. That, and the fact that he never checked on me, really started to bother me. I started to see that he had probably never really cared, after all, and the lie hurt - even more than the wild, swinging slap of horse crop on my skin.

At that point it had been about six months since I'd even seen Carstairs. Remember, I'd gone several times before that but had never summoned the courage to actually talk to him. Well, now I was starting to understand why. Now I could see that Carstairs, with all his silken words and placations, was actually in on the joke. Even as tool man, whip in hand, rode me like an animal, I was playing back in my mind the first time I'd met Kenneth. What was that envelope, or package, that passed between them? It was consideration, I could now see, as part of 'a deal'. And now, at last, I was starting to understand what that 'deal' was.

Me. I was the deal. Carstairs had sold me to Kenneth. I was a commodity, wrapped up to look like a boy, with a nice blue bow on. I was adventurous, loving, high-spirited, reasonably handsome, and on that day - the day of the deal - I was the subject of an international trade.

I couldn't wait for tool man to finish so I could get away from the camera and go home. But Kenneth had another surprise up his sleeve that day.

"I think you should stay with us for a few days, Michael," he said. "We've got a lot of filming to get done so it'll be better if you just stay here."

"But my Mum will miss me," I replied, still wiping tears of pain from my eyes.

"No she won't. I've already talked to her and she's working a lot of hours and says she won't mind a bit if I babysit."

Well, I knew that was a lie. As far as I knew he knew about my mum but he had never actually *seen* her, let alone spoken to her. And even as I recognized his fabrication I knew it was a signal

that I had to gather myself and be ready for something. Don't ask me how I knew, but it was time to show my mettle. Still, I'd long since learned it was best not to argue with Kenneth - especially when he got that look in his eye. The serious look - the one he'd had before the Stewart thing.

I played along, but the familiarity of my situation suddenly disappeared. I'd had a small semblance of control to this point because I was the one they couldn't do without. But now it all felt different. Now, suddenly, remembering Stewart, I felt vulnerable, and decided I needed to be on guard.

It was a Friday. Mum was working her second job at the Tesco and she wouldn't be in 'til late. Then, when she did get home she wouldn't look in on me, sleeping, for fear of waking me up. On the weekends she knew I disappeared a lot - she was too busy working to know or care what I was up to. Quite often we wouldn't even see each other until the kitchenette on Monday morning - when she was on her way to work and I was getting ready for school. So I concluded that Kenneth had three full days or more before my Mum would even wonder if something was wrong. More than enough time for whatever he had in mind.

He parked me in the second bedroom of the flat, snicking the door shut behind him as he left. He smiled a bit as he closed it. Perhaps he thought I hadn't noticed it, or perhaps he didn't care, but his smarmy smile was something I knew I could not trust. I lay on the bed, my heart beating with a fear I had not yet known. I'd seen what had happened to Stewart once these men tired of him, and I was genuinely afraid that the same thing was going to happen to me. Perhaps I hadn't been enthusiastic enough in the masochism flicks - perhaps I'd cried too much, like Stewart, or not quite enough. My value was in my compliance, my apparent eagerness. I thought I was still convincing in that area, but perhaps not. Maybe in my performance I was somehow leaking information I wasn't aware of. Maybe my eyes had been screaming the truth my face could not acknowledge.

Kenneth brought me some tea biscuits and apple juice - that was my dinner. He told me he'd be taking me to his place in the country for the weekend - he told me he'd give me the weekend off "from all this" and he'd show me a good time. Perhaps we'd go for a walk with his dogs.

All that innocent man-and-boy shit.

He left me alone again after a quick grope, and even then I might have taken him at his word - even at that moment I could have been convinced that I was wrong to worry - except for one thing: when he left the room this time, he locked the door. He locked me in. He locked me in and stood outside the door, listening, to see if I would cry.

Did he think I wouldn't know? I could see the shadow of his fucking feet under the door! I could practically hear him breathing on the other side of the wood - he was that loud and obvious. If anything, I held my breath when I heard the key snick in the lock. I held my breath and waited at least a minute for him to walk away, down the corridor. Then I started to really get scared.

I shook, uncontrollably.

I looked around the room. There were no other doors. There were only the windows, but my heart sank as I remembered we were on the third storey. I'd never been much of a climber. I got off the bed as quietly as I could. The floorboards creaked a little beneath me, but not so much that I thought anyone would hear. Kenneth would have gone all the way to the kitchen by now, likely to make tea. The kettle would be starting to gurgle on the range, perhaps already whistling its steady warm-up as I made my way to the louvred window to look out.

I opened the window quietly with the crank and pressed my face up against it, looking up and down the street. A short burst of fresh air smelled like cruel hope. It was dark out already - the street lights were on. The ground looked an awfully long way down. To the right of my window was only brick. To the left was a corner of the building. Looking up, I saw a ledge - a stone

ledge that separated the third storey from the fourth - but it was only about eight inches wide and as I looked I didn't know if I could even get to it, let alone walk or crawl along it.

I looked down to the front of the building. There were hedges there, all along the perimeter up to the main entrance. They were in full leaf and they looked wet because of recent rain - it always rained in London. I could only assume that the hedges went under my window too, but I couldn't see them there, so it was only a chance.

I looked at the window. The louvered panes were designed to come out for cleaning. It wasn't easy, but I took one out to test it. The scraping noises of dirt on glass seemed very loud to me and I feared that Kenneth would come back at any moment and catch me. Slowly, though, I managed to get a second pane out, and to poke my head out and look down.

Sure enough, the hedge trained all along the front of the building and around the corner. Funny I'd never noticed that before. Even better, in front of the hedge, and only below my window, some non-native thick, green bushes sprawled out and into the grassy area. I think it was a juniper of some sort.

I tiptoed back to the door and listened to the rest of the building. Apparently they were making another film in the bedroom next door - the moaning and squeaks told me as much. I put my ear up against the wall between the two rooms and heard frantic thudding, and for the first time since any of this had begun I felt like throwing up. Was this a boy from school that I'd brought into this, or was it someone they'd found on their own?

I heard Bruno's voice - he was obviously the adult in this piece - and a chill of blood surged within me. If he was here and I was locked in, I didn't have a lot of time.

In the closet I saw a box marked "First". I knew from months of hearing the men talk about their 'business' that they were first copies of films that they'd made. The first copies left this place and went somewhere else for editing and duplication, then

they went to distributors. After that, the cheques came back. Beside the box were large white gallon jugs marked 'developing fluid'.

Thinking very quickly, (I even astonished myself!) I opened the top box and found a reel with a title which I knew didn't include me. I tucked it in the seat of my trousers and cinched up my belt as tightly as I could. Then I took a jug of fluid and opened it, pouring it directly into the box. I emptied all the jugs into the box and watched with a not insignificant satisfaction as it soaked into the films, ruining them all for good. Then, no longer worrying about noise, I blocked the door with a chair and a bureau (there was far too much crying in the next room for anyone to hear the scraping on the floor) and went and took out several more of the window panes.

It was a definite leap of faith, but I climbed onto the sill and hung myself down from the window. I held my breath, and forced my fingertips to let go, dropping me a good fifteen or twenty feet directly on to the hedgerow. I rolled surprisingly smoothly out onto the juniper then bounced up in the middle of the lawn and stood for a moment, wet and cold, but surprised and relieved for all that. I checked my arse to make sure the reel was still intact, then I looked up at the dimly-lit window of the studio. I remember thinking "I'm done with that shit. They can all go and fuck themselves." I was still only twelve years old, but I now knew that what was happening in that room was not right, and I was determined not to be a part of it anymore.

I must have stood there too long, though. It must have been between takes, or I'd made more noise than I thought because a moment later I saw Kenneth's head appear in the window I'd dismantled. He looked down at me.

"Oy!" he shrieked. I don't know what else he said - clearly he was shouting something to Bruno, back inside the room. I could hear the anger and I quickly knew that I had better be gone too. I took off running as fast as I could for the High Street. The shops were closed, but I figured I'd find somewhere else to

hide. I ran through my mind all the places that might be open - restaurants, corner shops - then I remembered the cinema. I knew I had a bit of a head start as certainly Bruno would have to stop to put his clothes on before coming after me. The darkness also gave me a bit of an edge, and I thought my knowledge of the streets might give me an advantage too.

I ran like a scared rabbit. I went straight to the cinema and straight into the WC. I hid there, with the door locked, doing everything I could to suppress my tears as I was sure the two men were coming after me. I was certain they would find me, too - Bruno had a nose like a bulldog - he'd be sure to sniff me out!

After a while when nobody came I fished the reel out of my trousers and hid it up high, behind the water closet, wedging it tightly so it wouldn't dislodge without deliberate help. I ventured out of the stall and tiptoed to look around in the lobby of the theatre. Seeing no one I started to relax a little. I looked outside through the theatre window. Down the street I could see Bruno peering inside various shops on one side of the road, and Kenneth staring up and down on the other.

"What's the matter with you then?"

It was the woman who sold the tickets. She shocked me when she spoke. She made me jump.

"I - um - " I hung my head. I had to think fast. "I'm trying to hide from some bullies."

She looked outside. She had a stocky build which made me think of a nanny.

"What? Them?"

I nodded.

"Why are two grown men ganging up on a little boy, that's what I want to know." A look of disgust and determination spread across her face, and at the same time a veneer of ineluctable grace. "In 'ere," she ordered.

She opened the door to her booth and pointed under the counter. I thought about it, but noting the two men now making their way up the High Street towards us, I darted in and cowered down behind a box on the floor. The woman closed the door to her booth and locked it. She sat down and I looked at her legs as they disappeared up her skirt. I didn't feel safe, but I felt better being hidden down there. I all but held my breath.

After a moment or two I heard footsteps outside.

"I'm looking for my son, have you seen him?" It was Kenneth.

"Oh, no. It's eight o'clock, Lovey - all the kiddies went home ages ago."

"He's got brown hair, about this tall. We had an argument. I feel dreadful."

"Sorry to hear that, Lovey," said the lady, "but he's not here. If he'd come in here I would know. I haven't sold a ticket in over an hour."

"Right. Well, if you do see him, here's my number."

"I'll keep me eyes open, Lovey, but 'ave you tried talking to the bobby? He's probably the best person to 'elp you."

"I'd rather keep this in the family if I can," said Kenneth. "Alright then, have a good night."

"Goodnight, sir. I do 'ope you find 'im."

I heard footsteps walking away.

"Not yet," she whispered, then "not yet" again. Finally, "alright, he's gone."

I heard her seat creak as she pushed back and leaned forward to look at me in my hiding spot. I'd been holding my breath, but now everything flooded out of me in a great expulsion of horrified air. I burst into tears, but worked furiously to keep quiet in case they came back.

"Now, what the bloody 'ell is going on 'ere?" she queried. "Is that your father? I could get in a lot of trouble, you know, if I'm 'iding you from your father."

I swung my legs out from behind the boxes, and sat back, knees up, against the front wall of the booth. I looked up at her. I remember I was shaking.

"No, he is definitely *not* my father."

"Then what on earth is going on? Why's 'e looking for you? You steal something?"

I thought of the reel, but lied to her anyway.

"No, I didn't."

"Then - "

"Look," I interrupted. "He's a bad man and I just don't want him to find me, okay?"

"Alright, alright." She softened a bit. "Don't mind me, I'm sure. It's not every day a boy like you needs 'iding from someone - certainly not in my life." She paused. "Perhaps we should call the police."

I scrambled to my feet and darted a glance outside through the window to make sure the coast was still clear. Then I looked at her, thanked her very much for her help, and left the booth. Once back in the lobby I turned around and looked at her.

"Please. No police," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because... well, just because, okay? No police."

"Alright, alright - if you're sure."

"I'm very sure."

"Alright then. Look, if you need 'elp, try me here. M' name's Flo."

"Thanks. Flo."

She winked and I ran off down the High Street in the opposite direction to Kenneth. I kept tight to the shop fronts as I ran along the road, ducking into one of the cold, tiled entryways every once in a while to stop and survey the scene. It was foggy out now, miserable. The autumn damp clung to me like fingers, clammy and uninvited. I was still wet and cold from the Juniper bush, and I felt dirty at the mere touch of that evil night, and I positively shrivelled when I heard Kenneth in the distance, and Bruno, calling my name as if they actually gave a shit. It was like ships' horns in the darkness: "Miiiichaaaaael! Miiiiiiichaaaaael..."

I made my way up Crofton and hunkered down in a painful hiding place deep inside one of the rose bush thickets in the King Edward Park - the one where I'd met with Carstairs. I pulled my little jacket around me as tightly as I could and tried desperately to remember if I had ever told Kenneth or Bruno where I lived. But I couldn't remember. As hard as I tried, I couldn't remember any of it.

Besides, if Carstairs had told them, it was highly likely that they were already waiting for me there.

Bumpity-bump.

And what if they bothered my mother? What if they hurt her? I mean, look what they'd done to Stewart, and the only mistake he'd made was to be scared. A bad man can smile all he likes, but his smiles don't make him good.

That was the tipping point for me. That was the first time I actually got angry. I felt myself puff up with indignation at the idea of those two men doing anything to hurt my Mum, even though *she* was innocent of everything. Of course, I didn't know that they *would*, but nor did I know that they *wouldn't*. And that was what finally made me leave the thicket. That was what finally taught me my strength. Destroying their films had been a gesture, but I'd run away as soon as I'd done it. This, though... this was different. This was the unmitigated rage of injured

youth. This rage - this courage - was the first inkling of an apoplectic manhood, surfacing early, in a boy sorely used. I *had* to go home. Even if they were there, waiting, I had to go home and be certain that they weren't hurting my Mum, and if they were, well then I had to defend her. To the death, if need be.

So that's what I did. Almost in terror I pulled myself from the thicket and ran all the way home. I was ready to run furiously into battle, but when I got there everything was quiet. No Kenneth, no Bruno. No problem. I fished in my shorts pocket for my house key, but it wasn't there. There were no lights on inside, which meant that Mum wasn't there. I looked under the mat for a spare, but there was nothing. I held my breath, and soon the sound of blood rushed through my skull echoing, even thundering in my head. It was a new level of terror, and it filled me so that I almost passed out. I tried to remember: had I told Kenneth where I live? What if I had once - even inadvertently - told him where I lived, and now he'd made his way to my home, found the key, and gone inside to wait for me? Now I was frozen by fear - locked outside my own home, my safest place, by the fear of what might be inside. Now I was not only terrorized in *their* place, but also in my own!

I almost cried. Indeed, I would have done, but for the last remnants of the rage I'd stoked up in the thickets. I suppressed sobs and sadness and substituted logic and function, so that in a flash I was climbing the drain pipe and shimmying my way quietly into my own bedroom through an open window. I knew this was a stroke of luck - usually my Mum closed that window before she went to work, but today she had clearly forgotten. Once inside, I closed it for her. Tight.

The flat was as dark as I had ever known it and I stayed as quiet as I possibly could. After a few minutes listening I stole through the upper hallway, checking every corner of every dark room for any sign of anything at all. Then I went downstairs, being especially careful to avoid the creaky steps (I knew where they were) and did the same there.

Nothing. No Kenneth in the dark with a knife and a big box of ruined movies. No Bruno with wet shoes and a rock, or a whip, or an axe. Nothing. I didn't dare move. I didn't even dare open the fridge, lest the little light bulb inside betray me as Carstairs had.

I sat down on the couch in the living room, just now allowing myself to weep quietly. Moonlight streamed in through the front window, bathing the dark room in a pale blue glow. Obviously the fog had lifted. That was their cover, and I started to relax slightly as I realized that I could no longer hear them calling my name.

I dared not hope, but I did exhale, and soon, despite all the tension and fear I could possibly endure, I fell asleep.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Totnes.

Totnes

I'm wondering if, when one is pretending to sleep on a train, pushing every subconscious thought into the conscious realm, it is even possible to *actually* fall asleep. Remembering that time with Kenneth now feels like a dream, or a nightmare, and the depth of perspective I get from these recollections makes this train's rough ride seem almost pleasant in comparison.

We're stopped again. The car is quiet. I'm not sure that anyone is getting on, or off. In fact, I can't even guarantee that I'm not the last bloody person left on board. But surely not. We're only half way to Penzance, and I can't imagine that British Rail would run a service if there weren't at least a few bums in the seats. Except of course, the luxury of freedom says there's a schedule. And because of the schedule the train *must* appear, even if no one uses it.

If a train passes through a station and there's no one to get on, is it still a train?

Bumpity-bump.

It's a short stop this time. I know Totnes. It's a little bump on a bend in the middle of nowhere. There's a little tea shop in the village that I've been to before - a tidy little place with knick-knacks and paintings on the walls. The tables are tucked tightly together there, snugged in like sardines in a tin, but that only makes the place seem more cozy.

Knick-knacks were the first thing I saw when I woke up at home. My Mum's knick-knacks. Nothing fancy - we couldn't afford much. A dog - a retriever, pointing - a cat, curled up and asleep, a duck crouched over with wings up high in a threatening pose like dark, frightful arms. Beside them, her books. They were nonsense to me - thick, hard-cover things with thousands of words but no pictures - but to my Mum they were precious. "You'll learn someday, Michael..." she'd say - "once you read a book, it's part of you. You can't shed what you've learned, even if you want to.

You can't turn off knowledge." Today, I understand this completely, but at the time, and at that particular moment, it meant nothing at all.

As I looked at the knick-knacks my thoughts came to me one by one and I started to feel as though I really had escaped from something. I thought back to the day before - to how I'd felt in the morning knowing I'd be going to school, and then to Kenneth's place for more of the same - sex, lies, and movies. I felt a knot form in my stomach, but then I remembered that this day was different. I'd gained my freedom at last. I wouldn't be doing any of that today. In fact, if I didn't want to, I never had to do any of that stuff, ever again.

This was encouraging to me - liberating - and I sat up on the edge of the couch. Mum was already gone - to work, of course. I don't know if she'd seen me there on the couch, but if she had she had left me alone.

It was Saturday. I decided to go back to the cinema, to see if I could find Flo and thank her again for sheltering me. Somehow that felt like the right thing to do.

So I started my day, late, with a hearty breakfast for a boy my age. I dirtied two pans - one for sausages and one for eggs and tomatoes. It occurred to me that Mum might be annoyed about this - usually I just had Weetabix - but on that particular morning I felt emboldened. I needed to do something unusual to celebrate the change in my life, and I thought food would answer the need rather well.

After eating I washed the pans and plates and left them dripping on the sideboard. Then I grabbed a second spare house key from the telephone drawer, slung my little coat on, and went to the front door. I pulled back a tiny bit of the curtain over the lite, and peeked out. Satisfied that there was no one there, I forced myself out into the world, and headed for the High Street. It was a bright and sunny morning - the air was fresh and clean. It felt appropriate, somehow, with all this incredible newness in my life.

As happy as I was at that moment, I was also still nervous about Kenneth and Bruno. I knew they wouldn't have given up on me after only fourteen hours, so as I went about I kept my eyes open. I looked over my shoulder a lot. Soon enough I found myself on the High Street and the large number of people there was reassuring; I thought that not even Kenneth would try to take me with all those people around! Bruno, maybe, but not Kenneth. Kenneth was a bully, but he was also a coward.

I walked along, and for the first time in my life I thought that I understood what it meant to have a song in my heart. I felt good. I felt strong. I felt brave. I was nervous, but I thought, if I could show the kind of resourcefulness that I had last night then there might just be hope for me after all.

As I went along the High Street I passed all the regulars: the butcher's, the baker's, the bike shop - *Messrs Weel and Andel, proprietors*. The owner of the bike shop had always seemed to like me, but as I peered inside I couldn't see him in his customary place, so I moved on. First there was the stationer's, the tea shop, the haberdashery, and the Woolworth's - what my mum called the poor man's Harrods. I loved the smells coming out of the baker's, but I had no money, so the smell was all I could enjoy. After that was Coleman's, for books, and then the cinema.

I always thought it was strange that the book shop and the cinema had wound up side by side. After school, let me tell you, there weren't too many kids dashing off the property and next door for a quick stop at the book shop. Indeed, every time I looked inside the book shop it seemed completely empty to me, and I often wondered how it could even stay in business. The one time I'd even bothered to stick my head in I noted that it smelled of dust and cleaning solvents.

I looked into the theatre and jiggled the door handle. Locked. Not surprising, really, since it was only nine in the morning. I jiggled it again, just for something to do, and was surprised when it snicked, and pushed in away from me. I stepped quickly back, away from the door, almost certain that the person behind

it would be Kenneth. I prepared myself for a fight. But instead, there was an older man standing there, looking at me.

"Oh, I'm very sorry," I said. "I didn't think anyone would be here yet."

"Are you looking for someone in particular, young man?" It was one of the theatre's ushers. He was dressed in his official uniform, brown with white striping, and a crisp, white shirt, but his tie was loose and the top button of his shirt was not yet done up. He was likely in his sixties, with straight salt-and-pepper hair and deep grey eyes.

"Oh, I, um, I'm looking for Flo," I stammered. "We spoke briefly last night. She helped me out." I didn't want to give up too much information.

"Well, she's not here yet, but she will be quite soon. Do you want to come in and wait for her?"

I knew the theatre as a show place - a place where deceit and subterfuge were not criminal, so the idea of seeing it in its real light was fascinating to me.

"Can I?"

"Why not?" said the man. "But don't tell anyone. You'll get me in trouble."

He gestured me in, and after a short hesitation I walked into the relative darkness. He closed and locked the door behind us and almost instantly I felt awestruck by the almost reverent quiet of that special space. In half a heartbeat it felt as if all the noise, the traffic, the conversation, the steam whistles, the shrieking children at the church playground, the abject misery of my life had dissolved into sudden and irrevocable silence. It was comforting, and it was wonderful. To me, it felt more like a church than a theatre!

I waited by the door as he locked it. I was in awe of this. Here I was, alone in a darkened area with a man I didn't know. But it was okay. I wasn't afraid. I wasn't expecting pain soon.

I wasn't wondering when I would be smacked. I knew in my heart that I was in a good place, with good people.

"My name's Sam," he said. "How d' you come t' know Flo, then?"

"I was here last night. She helped me out," I repeated. "I - I wanted to thank her again."

"Well, she should be here at about ten. Can you hang about that long?"

"Oh yes, that'll be terrific."

"Alright, well, I can't let you in the theatre itself, but there's a chair over there. Why not plonk yourself down and wait for her there."

"Wonderful, thank you."

"I've got work to do to get ready for the shows, but I'll pop back every few. Shout if you need anything."

"I will," I nodded. "Thanks ever so much."

I wasn't quite sure how to act, or what to think. Under normal circumstances I would have been a bit more than inclined to explore, but here I resolved to do absolutely nothing to ruin this new connection. He had said to sit tight, and sit tight I would. There. On that chair. Without moving. Quietly waiting for Flo to arrive.

The theatre was a wonderful place. It was dark, yes, but in a cozy, comfortable, welcoming way. It wasn't like a dark bedroom with cameras all about. The front doors were there before me: light streamed in, but it seemed to shaft into a bright pool just where the glass was. It was as if the light was trapped there, and focused, unable to filter through to the rest of the building. Perhaps this was a product of the paint on the walls - a very dark grey colour, even black - which seemed to absorb far more than it let off. In it I could see reflections of the foyer chandeliers, dull but bright pin pricks of light in the murk, but that was it.

The carpet in the foyer was of a dark, almost ruby-red colour. It was trimmed around the outside with a foot-wide path of such a glorious yellow-gold that I positively stared at the effect. My eyes followed that stripe all around the foyer, past the concession area, and up each side of the grand staircase to the cinema floor, above. I was so very tempted to go up there and follow the stripe even further. I'd been to films before, of course, but I'd never taken the time to look around, to think about what the magic was, or why it seemed so important. But I didn't. I couldn't. I wouldn't. I kept my promise by keeping my seat.

I thought about all the films that I'd seen - films about real life, real people, happiness, sadness, anger, and thinking about it made my pain flood back. Somehow, my pain felt different to that of the people in the movies. I wondered about that. Did those fictional people have nicer, softer, kinder problems to deal with than I? Or was it perhaps not the circumstances that defined them, but the way they dealt with them? For me, standing there, the pain all hinged on what Kenneth had said to me on the very first day, in Carstairs' living room: "My boy," he'd said, "I'm going to make you rich, and I'm going to make you a star."

Well, he certainly didn't make me rich. I shook my head at the memory. It sickened me. And I doubt very much that I was ever famous, except perhaps in the dank, stinky bedrooms of a few broken human beings.

Just then Sam walked by again - he had a couple of small rubbish bins in his hands. He stopped and looked at me.

"You alright, son?"

I nodded, still suppressing the lump in my throat.

He stopped a moment longer.

"You mind helping me out with these things? I can only handle two at a time and there are ever so many."

Brilliant! I was absolutely thrilled at the chance to get away from my thoughts. I smiled broadly and stood up, reaching for both the bins he already had in his hands.

"We've got to empty these and then take them back, and do the rest before we open. Alright? I'll get you a choc-ice after if you like - for helping me."

"No," I said, "that's alright. I'm happy to help."

It took about fifteen minutes. That's all. Fifteen minutes to rid the theatre of its rubbish, and to realize that work and effort and focus might ultimately rid me of mine. I could never undo what had been, what I'd been through, but I could put it in a bin every day and consign it to the appropriate place in my life. I could keep the things I wanted *in* my life - in my mind - and throw *out* the things I didn't. Kenneth was very much in the rubbish category, and I knew then and there that he and his horrible friends were something I would have to work very hard to purge from my mind. Of course, I had no idea that even though I'd banished him from my life, he would always be there anyway, guiding my thoughts and feelings, and feeding my sadness.

At the end of the fifteen minutes, Flo arrived, early, for her shift. She was surprised to see me, and she looked at Sam for an explanation.

"He said he wanted to see you," he said. "So I've been getting him to help me out 'round the place."

She looked at me kindly - again a look I wasn't used to. It made me feel shy.

"'Ello boy," she said. "How can I 'elp?"

I looked at Flo, then at Sam, then at Flo again.

"I, um, wanted to say thank you, again, for your helping me last night. That's all. I worried all night that I hadn't said it right, so I wanted to come back and say it properly."

"You're very welcome, Lovey," she said. "I've been thinking about you all night, too."

"Oh?"

Sam cut in.

"Well, I've got some other jobs that want doing, so I'll leave you two alone." He stuck his hand out toward me and after a moment I took it. It was the first time in my life that a man had touched me without some dark purpose.

Flo took me behind the concession stand, through a little black door, and into a small room with a coffee pot, a refrigerator, a table and a few chairs.

"This is the Staff Room," she said. "It's not up to much, but it's private. Why don't we sit and 'ave a chat."

I followed her in and sat where she pointed.

"Tea?" She looked at me.

I nodded, still not sure what to do with all this kindness. I thought I might pass out from the sheer pleasure of it.

"Milk? Sugar?"

I wanted so much to appear knowledgeable, but I couldn't. "I - I don't know," I said.

"What you mean? 'Aven't you ever 'ad tea before?"

"Um, no, I haven't."

She laughed.

"'Ow old are you, boy?"

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen year old and never 'ad a cup of tea. Phwoah," she breathed.

"Well, my Mum hasn't shown me how," I said. "And we can't really afford things like that."

"*Can't afford a cup of tea?! Good Lord, whatever's next in our jolly old England!?* Alright, relax and I'll give you the best first cuppa a boy ever had. Okay?"

She busied herself making the tea. I watched with great interest as she drained off some hot water from the coffee urn into a couple of cups and dunked a tea bag in each one. Then, after a while she stirred in some sugar and added a splash of milk. She placed it before me and waited, watching me.

I picked it up - carefully, since it was hot - and put it to my lips.

She seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as I sipped on it. I suppose she saw the look of appreciation pass over my face because she smiled as she turned away to the counter behind her. She came back in a moment with a package of biscuits and sat down in the chair opposite me at the table. In only a few moments I was merrily dunking the proffered Digestive into my wonderful cup of tea and eating it before taking more.

"Good," she said. "An Englishman is born."

I puzzled at this strange remark, but left it alone, and for a while at least nothing passed between us but the silence of appreciation.

"Now," she said at last. "I told you I've been thinking about you all night, and I wasn't lying. I must tell you that I've been thinking of going to the police despite what you told me last night. I want to know why you were so frightened."

"My name's Michael," I said, I suppose as some sort of preface. "I - " I hesitated. "I - "

I looked her in the eyes, and she looked back at me. For some reason I couldn't fathom I had the sudden urge to tell her things - to lay at least some of the facts out for her, so she'd have an idea of what had been going on and why I'd been running away last night. Even as my lips started moving I couldn't fathom the words I was saying. I told her most of it. About the men, and about the pictures - "a few pictures," I said. I held some things back from her - after all, I really had only just met her. But the story must've wanted out, because out it came, all on its own. When I was finished, when I'd come all the way

back around to being here this morning, thanking Flo for everything, I settled again into quiet. I knew there was more, but it felt good to unload even this much.

Well, you could have heard a pin drop. It was a moment that seemed to last forever, so long in fact that I became more and more afraid that my *true-life-story* had frightened her off for good. I was just coming around to rage at myself for laying all this shit on her and frightening her off, and I was just about to apologize and run, crying, from the room when Flo stood up from her chair, quickly closed the gap between us, and held her arms out wide.

I stood up automatically - fight or flight. At first I didn't know what she was doing and I braced myself as if for impact, but then she leaned forward and wrapped her big, motherly arms around me. She physically picked me up, feet off the ground, and hugged me to her breast. I felt her sobbing quietly, and this she did for several minutes before finally putting me down again and turning away. I was shocked. I loved my mum, but I'd never before had such a long, loving hug from anyone. For any reason.

She was rubbing her eyes as she faced the wall.

"That man, last night - 'e's the one who forced you into all that?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Well, I think we should both be going to the police."

"NO!" I cried. "I don't want any police involved. They'll take me away from my Mum. They'll call her a bad mother. They'll call me a bad boy!"

She turned around. "Oh, no, Lovey. They'll never call you that. They'll never call you that. They'll understand. They know there are bad people in the world - that's why they exist, Lovey. The police - they just want to get the bad people."

I thought of Carstairs. Despite his betrayal I still didn't see him as a bad person.

"No," I said. "There's someone else who'll get hurt too, and I don't want him hurt."

"Who?"

"Carstairs. The first. I don't want him hurt. He loved me. He never hurt me, and I don't want him hurt. Promise you won't call the police. Promise me, *right now*, or I'll leave here and you'll never see me again!"

"Well, that's all very arguable, but if you absolutely don't want the police involved then alright, I will make you that promise. But - " she paused - "there is someone I know who might be able to help. Will you allow me to contact him?"

"Who is he?"

"A friend of mine. He thinks - " Again she paused. "He thinks rather along the lines of that Carstairs fellow you talk about, but he's a wonderful man and he's very strong-willed and strong-minded. I believe he will know what to do."

I had to think about it for a while. I knew I couldn't fight Kenneth on my own, and I knew that sooner or later he'd catch up with me - as long as he was looking, anyway. But, having just escaped his clutches, was I ready to run headlong into a connection with another strong man? It was a battle that took place within for all of about seven seconds. A battle between accepting help and maybe paying yet another price, or rejecting it and perhaps never being loved again. I was young. Life was bound to be long - isn't it always, when you're miserable?

"What do you mean - *he thinks like Carstairs?*" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

She looked right at me: "I think you know what I mean."

I thought some more, then... the attraction.

"Yes," I said. "I do." I thought a few moments more - some decisions are best made quickly, others are not. I wasn't sure which one this was, but finally I nodded my head and said

"Alright. Alright. But I'd like to meet him here. At the theatre. With you. I feel safe here with you."

"Of course, sweetheart. I was going to suggest that anyway. You should be introduced to each other. It's best that you get to know each other in a safe way. And you're welcome to come here as often as you like if you feel that way."

"Thanks. For everything. What's his name, this friend of yours?"

"His name is George, and I know he'll fight for you. Just you wait and see. Before long you'll be wondering how you ever managed without him."

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued. I mean, could it be? Was it possible that there was a man here - this close - who might answer all my needs? Love? Manhood? *And* mentoring?

"Doesn't it bother you that he - um - that he likes - that he wants - um...?"

"No, Lovey. Not at all." She leaned in a bit, smiling. "You see... Unlike some people I know the difference between love and abuse."

She could see the grey areas.

There was so much going through my mind. I think I bit my lip as all the possibilities played out before me. Then it occurred to me to ask:

"Does - does he know about me yet?"

"No, Lovey. Not yet. But he will soon."

She put her arms out and I practically ran into them. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world to have her close them around me. And to think that just twenty-four hours before I didn't even know she existed. Honestly, I felt like such a little boy. Weak, needy, but also brave.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Plymouth.

Plymouth

I can't tell exactly how long we've been sitting here, but I'm getting used to the silence.

The footfalls have long since finished - on our platform anyway. In the distance I hear other conversations, other meandering - even the mechanical whirr of luggage trucks running back and forth. And now, somewhere, there's a child dashing about - its exasperated parent working hard to settle it, desperate for some kind of calm. It sounds like worry. Jealousy. But now it seems the child has conceded. Why do parents tell their children to grow up - they only regret it, later, when they actually do.

I do so want to open my eyes - to stand up. The windows are probably fogged up by now, and I want to stand and stretch, relieve my aching muscles. I want to put my arms up over my head and reach for the ceiling. I want to look outside, stretch my brain and reconnect with the world which I seem so effectively to have left behind. I want to feel my body again, and give my fucking mind a rest.

But there's still a lot of work to do.

George.

George was younger than I thought he'd be, but he certainly had an ally in Flo. She'd arranged it all. She'd sent me home, telling me to come back the next day when George would be there to meet me.

"But," she said, "you go to school today, and learn your lessons well, or this whole thing is off. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Promise?"

I promised. And I kept my promise, too, though it was very hard. I was still afraid - I didn't know what Bruno and Kenneth were actually capable of, now that I'd out-manuevered them. I

was pretty nervous on the journey to and from school, looking over my shoulder almost constantly. Kenneth knew which school I attended - he'd seen to that very early on - so, I couldn't help but wonder... That dark car over there, parked at the kerb: was that a man inside? Was that a puff of smoke from the slightly cracked window? Kenneth smoked. Bruno smoked a lot. The smell on Bruno used to make me gag.

As for George, well, in my mind I pictured a tall man, about forty, certainly mature, with perhaps a very slight wisp of grey, and a strong, contemplative face - a face worn, perhaps, by years of rumination and etched with the visible pain of effort, of struggle, of railing against the anti universe. In my mind he'd smell of aftershave, not cigarettes, and definitely not the drink. I wanted him to be clean - not for physical reasons, but because it was my experience that most men who 'like' boys have a low self esteem and don't care whether or not they're offensive.

Carstairs, I think I've mentioned, set the standard in that regard. I liked when he sprayed his French stuff on me too - that he cared enough about my experience to do that. It's difficult for me to reconcile that kind of caring with his later betrayal.

When school was done I backtracked over the same circuitous route to my home, dumped my books, hugged my mother who was home for a change, and ran to the front door.

"Oi! Where're you off to?" she challenged.

"Cinema, Mum. That okay?" Suddenly, I thought it would be a good idea to ask for permission. Perhaps Mum wouldn't mind feeling like a parent for once.

"Well, alright, if you must. What you going to see?"

I lied, of course, and I felt a little guilty about that, but not too much. It really was best, in my view, that she never know the truth; I mean, she'd tried so hard, and I'd fucked it all up so badly. Whilst waiting for Flo to get to work

yesterday, I'd noticed the posters for the films they were playing. I picked one at random and threw it at her with a question mark.

"Is it violent? I don't want you seeing anything violent."

God, if only she knew.

I shook my head.

"Oh no, Mum. In fact, I think it's going to be very good for me. Very good."

"Well, alright. Here:"

She reached for her purse and came out with a 50p piece. I think my jaw dropped.

"Really Mum?" I asked. "Can we afford it?"

"What do you mean, *can we afford it?* How d'you think you were going to get in?"

Oops. Had to think fast.

"A kid at school," I said, "told me how to sneak in."

"*Sneak in?! What, did I raise a thief? You don't sneak in, young man!*"

"Sorry, mum. But - can we afford it?"

"*Tcch!* If I couldn't, I wouldn't give it to you, would I?" She changed the subject. "What time will you be home?"

"Eight o'clock?" Again, seeking permission.

"Alright. I'll be working by then, but tuck yourself in and hug yourself for me and I'll see you tomorrow."

I smiled, opened the front door, and ran out into the bright, sunny afternoon. I sprinted all the way to the theatre, bolting past the ticket booth, glancing in and seeing Flo inside. By the time I got into the foyer, though, she was already waiting for me with arms out wide.

"How's my fella?" she asked, with a huge grin on her face.

"'m alright," I said, doing my best to be appear blasé.

She pointed at me seriously.

"I'm not buying that for one minute," she smiled, and I smiled too. For the briefest of moments I thought that I couldn't remember when I'd been so happy.

"I was just trying to play it cool," I said.

"Oh, I know."

We laughed. Suddenly it actually felt good to be alive. It felt like hope. I looked around the foyer, then looked back at Flo. She read my mind.

"He'll be here in about half an hour, Lovey," she said. "'E works, you know."

I nodded. I was a little disappointed, but I knew about work and so on - how it's a necessary thing that takes people away from the ones they love, and all that.

Flo got Sam to cover for her in the booth and we went back into the staff room and sat down at the table.

"Tell me about him?" I asked.

"Who?" she said, dead-pan.

I stared at her with a kind of playful vexation.

"George," she finally said, "is a very kind and intelligent young man. And understanding. And patient." She paused. "And warm and loving and intelligent."

"You said intelligent twice."

"That's because he's very intelligent."

I smiled at this most generous description - I'd never heard anyone called all those things before. In another time and place and with another person on the other side of the table I might even have been cynical, but with Flo - even after such a short time knowing her - because she showed absolutely no guile, I took what she said as gospel.

"But," she said, "he's spent far too long being very, very sad."

I looked at her, my heart slowing to a crawl:

"Why?"

"Well, I'll explain it to you the way he has explained it to me," she said. She looked up and for just a moment seemed lost in thought, then: "He says '*God made me what I am, but man wants me to be something else*'. It makes him sad because it devalues the very best and most loving part of him.

"He's a university student right now, Lovey, working part-time at a major accounting firm. He's got job offers in hand, for when he completes his studies. He has tremendous potential - his brains are going to take him a very long way in this world." She paused. "I dare say he'll want to see if he can help you with your schooling, but I'll let him bring that up in his own time."

"What's he look like?" I asked.

"Is that important?" she returned.

"Well, no," I answered. "I'm just curious."

She looked at me strangely.

"He's actually quite handsome if you ask me. I imagine if he were interested in such a thing he'd have no trouble at all getting any girl he wanted."

"And you've told him about me?"

"Oh yes, Lovey. I have now. And he can't wait to meet you. But he must finish his work first."

I thought about all this for a few moments, letting it sink in.

"What did he say when you told him about me?"

I practically held my breath, waiting for her answer. For some reason I was worried about it. I didn't want to be a disappointment. I didn't want him to regret putting himself out - for that was surely what he was doing. But, nervous or not, I had to know.

"He said he would be absolutely delighted to meet you and, if you both get along well enough he'll be overjoyed to be your friend."

"Really? He said that?"

Suddenly, Carstairs and his claws faded a little further into the background of my life. Suddenly, ulterior motives like ownership and sex felt like strange concepts from someone else's life, like hazy memories of a past no longer worth the factoring. I'd always known Carstairs as my first lover, but now, for some reason, I started wondering whether it was ever love at all. And yes, I knew all this was patently absurd - because after all, even though I hadn't even met George yet I already had him up on a very high pedestal.

"Yes. Now let me ask you something," she said.

"Okay."

"What do you think you want most from George, or from a man like him?"

I thought about this for a few moments, then:

"I want him to like me," I said. "But I want him to like me as a person, not just because I'm a boy."

She smiled.

"Good," she said. "I'm quite sure you're going to be very pleased with our George."

Bumpity-bumpity-bump.

The train is stopped now. I'm alone - though of course I've known that for some time. In my mind I picture the scene around me. I know, for example, that a little lamp over my head emits some small amount of light - insufficiently bright for reading, but sufficiently bright to be harsh on a longer journey. If I were eyes-open on this junket I would probably stand up, look for a switch, or use the hanky in my pocket to unscrew the bulb.

The light from the corridor, in my mind, would be quite sufficient.

There's nothing going on outside. Oh, there are lives being lived - people, families - doing what they do. But there's nothing for the idly curious to worry about, and that's fine by me. I learned long ago that what others are doing is generally unimportant. This isn't because I'm cold, or egotistical, or self-obsessed. It's because in general my energies are spent trying to find a way through my own morass.

Actually, George taught me that. There was a wisdom about him that I appreciated as soon as he arrived at the theatre. The first time he took my hand in his I could feel the strength behind him. Strong, yet sensitive. I knew the very first time I looked in his eyes that he was a good man.

How could I know that? Four years of seeing the other side. Four years of sizing up the ludicrously selfish and lost, the miserable and mistaken. Four years of trying to navigate the physical hungers of men who needed boys - not just lust, but an actual, spiritual need in men who had somehow come to the belief that if they looked in my trousers, they'd find *themselves*. I'd learned to recognize the particular tension of those men whose motives were less than pure, and those who had psychological needs based on the resolutions of their own journeys. But their particular arguments break down when you remember that the need is never met - the resolution never achieved - with just one indulgent event. I've never yet met a John who did the deed, then stood up and announced, "alright, that's it, I'm complete now. I can get on with my life." Maybe it happens, but I remember how they always wanted more - as if there was a short-circuit in their wiring.

George, as I said, was a good man. After the handshake he hugged me, and my initial, habitual thought was '*here we go*'. But that wasn't it at all. There was no ulterior motive in him - there was only a smile on his face. A real smile, not the back-

door Cheshire Cat grin of the other men who believed they were home at last. No, I felt a real kind of delight at the notion that I might finally have found my knight.

My feelings for Carstairs weren't really changed - what he'd given me was at least *something* at a time when I needed a lot. But what he gave me had strings attached - a fact that hadn't occurred to me until he betrayed me. What George gave me, on the other hand, was everything I should have been given all along, for he gave me what any decent father would (should) have.

The hug seemed to last forever. I didn't want to let go. I hadn't even really looked at him before we shook hands - I was so very nervous - but I already knew that I loved him. I loved his face, for it seemed to me to be the kindest, most loving face I had ever seen. I loved his heart, with its strong, steady rhythm, bent to kindness. And I loved knowing that, for whatever reason - courage, luck, whatever - something different was happening to me now.

Finally I disengaged and stepped back. My eyes were watering a bit, and he saw this. He pulled out a hanky and wiped the tears away.

"Thanks," I sniffled. "I'm not usually like this - it's just that I - "

"Don't you worry about that, mate," he said. "I feel a bit squidgy inside myself just now."

Squidgy. What a funny word! Funny, but it did the job. It made me smile, even as I hung my head. He reached out with his hand and gently picked my face up so he could look into my eyes.

"You are a handsome young fellow, aren't you?" he asked.

Of course, I had no notion of the rhetorical, so I said:

"Am I?" Then, "I'm just me."

He laughed. I laughed at the silliness of what I'd said, and suddenly I felt like everything was coming right in my world.

We sat at the table in the staff room for a good hour, just talking and holding hands. Flo had gone back to work in the booth, but once in a while she'd duck back into the staff room to check on us. Then on one of those occasions she looked a good deal more somber than before.

"Hey boys," she said, her voice low and discreet. "I've just seen that bloke again and he looks like he's making his way here, so you two just stay put in here, okay? I'm going to close the door and block it off from the concession."

George didn't even think about it. He brought his chair around to my side of the table and we both moved as one to press our backs up against the farthest wall, the one facing the entry. He took my hand and held it, even as I held my breath so long I thought I might pass out. After a minute or so he went one step further and put his arm around my shoulder. And you know what? I let him. I didn't recoil as I'd done so many times before. I mean, sometimes even with Carstairs the act had taken me by surprise.

We sat in silence. In the theatre we could hear the general hubbub of people preparing to see a show - buying their snacks, their drinks, and figuring out which theatre they were supposed to be in. Then, I held my breath again, and the hand which connected me to George suddenly and severely clamped down tight.

Mixed thoroughly into the hubbub I heard Kenneth's voice. It was unmistakable. He was using the most officious part of his temperament to try to ingratiate himself with Sam, who was working behind the counter.

"I'm looking for a woman," he said. "She was here last night, working in the booth."

"Really?" said Sam. "You must mean Flo. She's on. Stick around I'm sure she'll be out in a few minutes."

Seconds later, I heard Flo's voice, and soon they faded away, and their conversation with them. She was talking kindly and sweetly so as to remain aloof, but I thought I detected in her

voice a measure of stress. Generally, I had seen that she was very good at dealing with people, but just at that moment I could almost feel the anger in her voice. She treated this little weasel of a man with as much customer-focused disdain as she could possibly muster.

"Oh Lovey," she said, "I've seen lots of kids in 'ere in the last hour. How'm I supposed to know if one of 'em is yours?" A pause. "No, really. I can't let you into the theatre to go looking for kids now, can I? Now, I don't like that kind of talk, sir, and so I'm gonna suggest that you 'op it. Call the bobby if you're so convinced that 'e's 'ere. Anyway, if it were my kid I'd already have the coppers 'elping me look, so I wonder what's your 'oldup." Another pause. I heard Kenneth raising his voice a bit. Then Flo.. "You don't want to be taking that tone with me, Sir, or I'll call the police myself and 'ave you escorted out! Then I'm quite sure they'll want to know why the boy ran away in the first place!"

George held my hand tighter yet. Even in the desperate tension of that moment it was the most reassuring thing, and I turned and looked up at him. His jaw was set, his eyes focused. He was staring at the door to the lobby. We were both confident that Kenneth couldn't come through, even if he knew I was here, but George looked like he was figuring out his strategies in case he did.

"And the same to you, I'm sure," stressed Flo. "That's right - off you go. And don't come back, neither. You're barred, mate."

It felt so good to hear those words - less because I felt they carried any weight (they certainly wouldn't with Bruno) than because it felt good to know that someone had the power to tell Kenneth to fuck off. That was a dynamic I had not previously witnessed, and so it was in that moment - the moment that Flo stood up for me at what I knew but she didn't was great personal peril - that I decided to stop holding back. I decided to give my new friends everything.

Bumpity-bump.

It all spilled out a little while later. Flo was on a break. Well, more accurately, she'd arranged with Sam to cover the front so that she could go out of her way to take a break.

"He's not a very nice man," she said, taking a sip of her tea.

I shook my head.

"And he's very nervous about losing you."

"He's got a lot to be nervous about," I replied.

"Michael," said George, "I really think it's time for you to come clean with us, okay? You need to tell us what's going on."

"Oh, yes please," agreed Flo. "Generally when I'm telling people to sod off, I like to know why. There's more here than you told me yesterday, isn't there Lovey?"

"Yes," I said. "You're right. You deserve to know." I turned to George. "I'm sorry that you're both mixed up in this, I really am."

"Sod that, Michael. We want to help, but please - tell us what we're helping with!"

So I told them. Everything. Carstairs. Sex. Kenneth. The pornography. K&B International Distributing. Everything. Yes, even Bruno, and even Stewart. It took about fifteen minutes to adequately (I felt) recount the last four years of my life so that they'd have a chance to understand it all. It wasn't just cocks and balls, it was feelings too, and I thought they deserved to hear it properly.

The effect of my words was obvious. With questions, fifteen minutes turned into half an hour, and then Sam was knocking on the door to find out where Flo had gone. She opened the door and peeked out.

"Hold the fort for us, Sam, there's a chap. We've got something rather serious going on in here."

"Take as much time as you need, Love," he said. "But it is after school and before dinner and it is slightly busy out here." He looked at me, sitting at the table, and I hung my head. "Don't worry, mate. You need 'elp - these are the two what'll give it ya. Fill yer boots!" He clenched his fist and punched the air with it.

As I was speaking - telling my tale - I'd seen a sort of mist descend over the pair of them. I wasn't immediately sure what it meant, but then as I talked it started to dawn on me. It was worry. Not just for me, but for themselves, because now they were learning exactly what kind of men these were that we were dealing with.

Seeing their worry, I started to worry, too. I worried that my new friends, just now beginning to fathom the depths of my debauched little life, would start to wonder how they might escape the commitments they had already made to help me. I could only imagine how quickly they must want to get rid of me and my problems and my heart sank at the realization. I felt tears welling up inside me as I realized that the simple act of clearing the air, of filling them in, of sharing my life with them might actually be enough to scare them off for good. I mean, there's no way they'd signed up for anything like this! I already regretted telling them, and even as my lips were still sharing the story, my mind was screaming *'thanks for everything, it's been great, but please, for your own sakes, just forget I was ever fucking here!'*

That was when George said:

"Have you proof?"

I looked at him like he had two heads. After everything I'd said, did he still not believe me? Why should I lie? Why would I ever make shit like this up?

Reading my face, George said: "Look, I - " he gestured to himself and Flo - "we - believe you, Michael. But others may not, and we have to tread carefully."

"What others?!" I roared - as well as any twelve year old boy can. "You're not telling anyone! The government will take me away! They'll put me in a home - a borstal! I recruited so many! They'll blame me! They'll tell me I was responsible!" Kenneth, I remembered, had often gone out of his way to stress me with these notions. "They'll blame my mum! It's not my mum's fault! I don't want her knowing anything about any of this!"

George reached over and gently touched my shoulder.

"Michael, calm down please. What happened to you is very bad, and it should never happen to any boy or girl. There's no love in it - not even in what that first bloke did."

"Carstairs."

"Right, him."

George paused.

"But, Michael, what happened to Stewart - that was..."

The words wouldn't come.

"Murder," whispered Flo. "It was cold-blooded murder."

"I tried to help him!" I shouted. "I tried to teach him how to give them what they wanted!"

"Of course, Lovey, it's not your fault. But you see, don't you? It was still murder."

"The police have to know," pronounced George.

"No! I - "

I could hardly breathe. I'd never wanted this. I'd never wanted my mum to know, or other members of my family. Or my - Oh God! - my schoolmates. I'd crafted all that recruiting stuff so carefully. Feeling trapped, and now guilty again, I started to cry.

"But everyone will know!" I moaned. "And I don't want everyone to know. I don't want *anyone* to know. I didn't want you to know, except you've been so good to me and you're right that you deserve to know what it's all about."

The room fell silent. They were both looking at me, but I couldn't look back. I sobbed quietly toward my lap, and through my tight-shut eyes even that was a tear-smearred mess.

After a while, George said:

"Did you like Stewart?"

"Yeah, he was alright. He was nice. He was just sad. He didn't want to be there! He didn't want to do those things!"

I sobbed now uncontrollably. Suddenly, my course was clear. George held tight to my shoulder with his hand as I cried and cried, but he came no closer than that.

"Well, at least we know now why you were running away," said Flo. She leaned in. "Quite right, by the way."

Changing the subject, George said, "but if only it weren't your word against theirs."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking at him.

"Well, *if* we go to the police now, and they even decide to listen, it's going to be your word against theirs, isn't it?"

"Well, me and every other boy involved," I countered.

"You know them all, do you? I mean, how to get hold of them?"

"Well, most of them. A lot of them go to my school." I tried to wipe my eyes dry with my wrists, but it didn't work very well.

"Will they back you up?"

"Well, they..." I stopped short.

Would they? One of Kenneth and Bruno's most effective weapons was fear. They forced themselves on the boys they used with thoughts of terror. They preserved their secrets - even the simpler secrets, like fucking - with the threat of exposure, of harm - of harm to loved ones. So many times Michael had heard

Bruno from the next room say: "Come on, ya little shit - you want me to pay a visit to your mum?" He'd even used that one on me a few times.

No, they might not back me up. Fear is a powerful force, especially in the mind of a child. Fear of pain, fear of loss, or even of causing disappointment - of letting people down. And what child didn't have night sweats around the notion that he wasn't measuring up, or that he was a source of irritation for his parents. What boy, or girl, *didn't* keep quiet about things which would cast him, or her, in a bad light?

"No," I said. "They won't."

"Why?"

"Bruno."

It was all I needed to say. Bruno would have them too scared. Especially since I'd run off. My blood ran cold. It wasn't even completely impossible that he'd already gotten rid of some of them. The contingency plan.

"Then, what's left to do?" asked Flo.

We all three fell silent for a moment. Then:

"I can't prove what Bruno did to Stewart," I said (I didn't want to use the word 'murder'), "but I can prove what it was all for."

"What do you mean?" said George, sitting forward now.

"In the toilets." I pointed. "Across the way."

"What?"

"I hid something. It might help."

"What? What did you hide?"

"One of their tapes."

"*What?!*" shouted Flo. George calmed her, holding out a hand, palm-down.

"What do you mean, Michael?" he asked.

"When I escaped. I destroyed all their tapes but one." They were still silent, incredulous. "I didn't want them to hurt any more kids," I continued. "And I don't know why really but I just thought they'd leave me alone if they knew I had their faces."

"Oh, you genius boy!" cried George, and he reached out and hugged me so tight. It was wonderful.

I thought I could see tears of relief in Flo's eyes.

"Well, let's get that tape then," she said, "and let's get it to the coppers so they can bring them pricks in."

"Wait a mo, though," said George.

"What?"

George turned to me.

"Are you in the tape, Michael?"

I explained to them how I'd deliberately grabbed one from the box which I knew I was not in.

"Brilliant. Just brilliant! Absolutely brilliant! Such clarity in one so young! Oh my!" said George with something akin to pride. "But they..." he gestured back toward the lobby - "...they are?"

"Oh yes." I nodded.

"Well then, don't you see?"

"No, what?" I asked. Flo shook her head.

"We may be able to end their little game anonymously! We may not have to actually *talk* to the police at all!"

My jaw dropped a mile.

"All we need to do is find a way to send the tape - so, *their* faces are definitely in the film?"

"Yes. I wasn't in it, but they made me watch them filming it."

"Why on God's green earth - " begged Flo.

"They did that. They called it research," I explained.

"Jesus!" Flo exhaled.

"Well, all we need to do," continued George, "is figure out a way to get the tape to the police along with a note about Stewart - about what happened and where he is."

"Can we do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know!"

George was excited, and for the first time I had a sense of how his brain worked - by grabbing hold of a problem and not letting go until it was solved. He stood up suddenly, and in the motion threw his chair violently away behind him.

"I've got it!"

Bumpity-bump

Ladies and gentlemen, next stop, Liskeard.

Liskeard

It's very quiet in Liskeard this evening. The parent whose child was upset is now either long gone or has fallen asleep, so now there's nothing happening on the platform, or anywhere, but the low, resting growl of our one diesel engine.

I wonder at the schedule of these trains. It's a pressure all its own - the pressure to perform. The pressure to be here, or there, at this particular time, to do this or that, flawlessly, to somehow live up to all expectations. It's a mechanical pressure, governed as much by the laws of personal dynamics as by the laws of physics.

We've been here at the platform for quite a while now. This suggests that something, somewhere, has gone wrong. The engine, up front, waits patiently, though not interminably, for the blockage to clear. And I, in my mind, contemplate how life for different people really is ultimately the same thing in a different bag.

Even in good conditions life can go wrong. There are no promises. Well, that's not strictly true: we humans promise things all the time. But we shouldn't, because we can't control the deviations. Even something as simple as being somewhere - *"let's have our meeting at 8am"* - can be fouled up by the most inane of circumstances. Someone, somewhere - someone totally unaffiliated with my day - can have a starring though inadvertent role in totally messing it up. Someone, somewhere, might be in a mood, have a problem, or make a rudimentary decision which permanently affects me and my plans. We are all connected.

Tension comes from those connections. A friend of mine once likened us to atoms - floating about aimlessly in the ether, bumping into each other. He imagined that when the heat gets turned up in our lives we float faster and bump harder. Accidents, when they happen, can range, metaphorically speaking, from fender benders to head-on collisions with fatal effects.

I think this is why people spend their lives trying to keep their own motions under control: they don't want the hard, head-on collisions. They don't want to *bump into* their neighbour all the time, or surrender themselves to others who are more accustomed to the contact.

With Carstairs, tension came from the fact that while I was in control of our impacts, he managed the background. With Kenneth and Bruno it came because they controlled everything. The schedule, the location, the intensity of our collisions were all according to their whims - and any collateral damage was within their purview. Yes, they controlled everything. They had all the worries (and I can imagine they were substantial), until they just didn't worry anymore, which happened when I said *no more*, and took that control away from them. For them, that really turned up the heat.

I increased the risk of a high intensity collision between us, or at least between them and others they had not yet met. They wanted nothing but to get me back under their control - locked down tight - unable to collide with anyone, ever again - and whether that meant back to work or dead only they could truly know. I wanted only to control my own destiny, to float away into the distance, away from them for good. But of course even that would come with a cost.

I feel the same tension now as I did on the day I told George and Flo what had been going on - the paralyzing, conflicting tension and release of sharing what I'd been going through, along with the fear of two horrible men, and the fear of the unknown. There's anger within me still, though it no longer has any purpose. Apply whatever lessons you like to it - massage whichever of its key components you need to - anger will only sit and stare at you and remind you with its very silence of what you would just as soon forget. Even the 'teak' veneer in this little cabin - quiet, innocuous, ugly, cheap - would, if I could see it, remind me of the panels on Kenneth's 'studio'

walls. That horrid, shit-brown panelling was one of his production's signatures - if you've ever watched any of his crap then you'll know what I mean.

There's no real release for the tension that goes with this kind of regurgitation. The same tension (a tight little knot in my stomach) that I felt when as a child I watched Bruno or Kenneth prepare for a session is forming again now as I revisit the memories. The same pains and anxieties are also building in other parts of my body - like a really bad muscle cramp.

I don't want those pains anymore.

In my mind I look out the window as the train starts moving again. It feels like I'm being jostled more now, in my seat. I know that lights are passing by - first the town, the high street, the bank, the café, then scattered little farmhouses, then single light bulbs at odd, irregular little country intersections. This B-road, that A-road. Quiet little corners of life where people go to stop moving, or from where they want to move on.

I'm hungry. It's been hours since I ate, but I won't be eating now. I'm not feeling optimistic enough. We eat to gain calories labouring in the belief that we're going to need them - but I honestly have no idea whether I'll need them again or not.

A thought very much like that had passed through my mind the day before I'd run away. That was the last time that Bruno 'had his way with me', and it had hurt. He was getting more and more mean in the sessions. He was being hurtful and even violent with the boys, and he was particularly unkind on that day. I've since heard of the diminishing returns thing - where he's got to keep upping the ante to get the same high. Ever more debauched. Ever more cruel. Ever more evil.

Of course, I didn't dare say anything, but I seem to remember glowering at him. After. His patience was waning, if he ever had any to begin with, and that was bad news for the boys -

especially the little ones or the new ones who didn't yet know what was going on. I was tiring of it too. My heart hadn't been in it for some time now. I'd done what I had to, but this was so different from what I'd known with Carstairs. Everything was changed. I was changing, too, and Bruno's increased impatience and anxiety were making me change faster. Maybe he saw the end coming. Maybe he felt the tension of his own culpability. Either way - what a horrible, angry, monster of a man he was! How rotten do you have to be, inside, to take pleasure from giving pain?

George was the complete opposite. Patient, kind, understanding. He was alert, and aware. He was considerate. If you were upset, he knew it before you said so. If you were anxious, he knew to pay attention *in case* you wanted to talk about something. Of course, he was hyper-alert as time went on because of my admissions, but that was only part of the story. He felt it, you see. When he looked at me, he could just *tell*. And the goodness in him made him work toward helping me resolve the pain I carried inside. He cared. That's the bottom line. He cared about me, and sometimes even that very fact made me cry.

His kindness shone through in all aspects of our friendship. They say that you are the same person between the sheets as you are outside of them - and it must be true. Bruno was violent, and horrible. George was kind and loving. George was Carstairs, but without artifice. He was Carstairs without the ulterior motive. He was Carstairs, but loyal. He was the first such man I ever met who listened to me and paid attention to how I was feeling. I didn't even have to say anything - if I was uncomfortable with something he knew, he could tell, and he reined himself in without being asked. He was as passionate as any of the other men I'd known, but his greatest worry, and his driving force, was not whether *he* was enjoying it, but whether *I* was. And I'm sure I don't need to say that because he cared so much, I enjoyed it more than I ever had.

After my tell-all, we went together and fished the tape out from behind the WC. George wrapped it up in brown paper, sealing it up tight. "I don't want to see it," he said. "I mean, I do, but I don't. It's a horror. It's for others to see - professionals. The law."

I understood completely.

He put a disguise on me - something like a big hat, pulled down low, and a big, brown rain coat. He practically stuffed me into the left seat of his little car then drove me to the flat where the studio was - I was reluctant to do this - it gave me a feeling I didn't like. But, he had to know the address, so I gave in.

I hated being there. It felt cold and harsh - an unloved place. Even the foliage, the leaves, the bushes, felt darker and colder and more wiry than even a few days before. When I'd jumped from the window I'd landed in bushes which felt encouraging, but these - these were angry, even from a distance, as though my coming back here was belittling the help they'd given me. For George's sake, even as the bushes pointed accusingly at me, I pointed at the window I'd climbed through, the bush I'd landed in, the path I'd used to run away.

We composed a note together for the police, explaining - as I described it - what had been happening, where, and who had been involved. I named names. I thought it was the least I could do to save the very boys I had myself ensnared into that life. Flo sat in the back of the car, tutting and tsking and tching at everything I described - at least until George gave her a 'look' in the rear view mirror. I named Kenneth and Bruno - though of course I only knew their first names. I didn't name Carstairs, though I had a feeling that the police would learn about him soon enough - as the saying goes, there's no honour amongst thieves; once the jig is up, they tend to do for themselves.

Nor did I name any of the punters. Somehow I felt sorry for them; they were desperate men, beset by a society of humans

which neither understood nor cared about them or their needs, and I didn't think that their sadness or desperation should be punished further. Maybe I was wrong, I don't know, but some of them were almost even nice to me when we had reason to interact. Of course, as with Carstairs, I was pretty sure they'd all be named soon enough, by each other, or by the other boys. There was too much self interest involved for it to go any other way.

With the note written, the package wrapped, we went to a post box in a quiet residential area. I wanted no witnesses. We had a small ceremony - a formal goodbye of sorts. Flo offered a very short prayer. George held me by the shoulders as I tucked the offering inside the post box, then folded his arm around me and guided me back to the car.

"Now we can start to let it go," he said as we walked. "Once they catch them, it'll be over." He actually kissed the top of my head.

"What do you think they'll do?" I asked, looking back up at him.

"I think they'll investigate. They'll watch the film, they'll go to local schools with stills. They'll identify enough of the participants that the majority will be named. They'll check the flat, talk to the neighbours. They'll arrest the men, and they'll locate the boys and rescue them."

"I hope they don't find me," I said.

"They might. You need to be prepared for that."

"I know. It's just - I just..."

"I know."

I'd been lying to my mum for so fucking long. How could I even think of admitting it all now?

George put his arms around me again, squeezed me.

"It's okay. Of course, some day you're going to have to deal with it... but if you're not ready yet, then you're not ready."

George always got it. Just at that moment I had so much love for him.

"Thanks."

He squeezed me again as we walked to the car. He let me in the passenger side, like a date, then walked around. Inside, he took my hand and held it, and looked lovingly at my face. I felt so good just then. Strong, brave, and loved.

And what more could a growing boy possibly need?

You might as well say that I started living with George. Oh, I still called my mother's place home, but there were so many 'sleepovers with friends' around that time that I hardly ever saw her. She expressed happy surprise whenever I told her I was going to stay with a friend for a couple of nights. She smiled, chucked my chin, kidded me about whether it might be a girl that I was seeing, but I never answered her when she went fishing like that, and she never really pursued it. I let her have her hope. I mean, why not?

Bruno and Kenneth made ink. In fact, a few days later they were front page news - photos and all. I can't remember the actual headline, but it wasn't flattering. And then a few months after that I came across Carstairs' family at his house.

Bumpity-bump.

All of that was so very long ago. The anxiety I feel when I think about it now is almost palpable, but I think about it anyway. How can I not? It's a mix of pain and pleasure - rather like the sex was. Different elements of it met different needs then, and they still act that way now. The anxiety, though, is horrible. And it's still real.

And then there's what happened earlier today.

Believe it or not, I still remember Carstairs mostly fondly. I still believe he did the best he could with the way he was built. Yes, selling me to Kenneth was a betrayal, and it turned out to be a very unkind thing, but my charitable side chooses to believe that he meant no ill for me - that he too was taken in. I choose to believe that rather than selling me for profit or for convenience, or future favours, or freebies, or whatever, he was actually trying to help me make the best of a bad thing, and helping himself in the bargain. It was simple enough: my aging (*Christ, I was only eleven!*) had caught him off guard, and when he met Kenneth, he was taken in enthusiastically by the notion that I'd be loved again, as he had once loved me. He was more conscious than many lovers of boys that the cut off age in his kind of appreciation was a potentially damaging thing, and he wanted to help me along with a little continuity.

George never agreed with me on that. "Desire isn't love," he told me. "Sex and desire are one thing - love is another. Sex can be used to express love, but they are not the same thing at all." I knew what he was saying, but I still couldn't believe that Carstairs had meant to hurt me.

Perhaps he was right to denigrate Carstairs, I don't know. Perhaps I was being naïve. But I had to keep *some* charity within me, or else just give in to all the rage in the world. And I just couldn't bring myself to do that.

George and I stayed together exclusively for three years. He didn't leave - I did. I just felt like it was time. He had done everything right by me but I knew two things about our friendship. First, I was, somehow, perhaps miraculously, becoming more and more interested in girls, and he, like Carstairs and all the other men I'd ever known, was starting to acknowledge his own age-focus. He would never kick me out, and I knew it, but I knew he was starting to hunger for what he particularly needed, and, knowing that it was not mine to give,

I knew I wouldn't stay past the point of welcome. God knows I didn't need George throwing a telephone at me.

That fact will never depreciate what he gave me. He gave me the courage to do what I had to do to end a nightmare. He gave me true friendship when I needed it. He gave me his total support. He gave me stability. He gave me acceptance - my past didn't bother him in the least. He gave me loyalty and love, and understanding, where so many others might only have given me questions and uncertainty. He gave me certitude, too - the knowledge that if I needed to talk he would be there. He also gave me control again. With George, I knew that no meant no. Not that I ever tested him.

I can't over-stress the importance of that. His presence allowed me to resume my development as a man, despite what I'd been through. It allowed me to use my experiences to become understanding and caring and aware, where without him I might have been only angry, bitter and vengeful. A boy needs that balance. He needs someone to throw his pain at. He needs a baffle, a blind, someone to talk to so that his miseries don't fester, and George was perfect, at that time, for letting me work all the crap of Kenneth and Bruno and Stewart and all those miserable, sad, horny men out of my mind.

Even after the physicality dwindled, and even after we drifted apart, he still helped see me through school, and even into university. He gave me the strength I needed to handle the pressure of exams, and then helped me to secure employment. He most paternally gave me the wherewithal to grow and heal and learn and understand all the things that had happened to me. He loved me then, and he loves me still.

Kathy was the true innocent in all of this. Not me. Not George. I told Kathy about my past the very first night we met - at that convention. To this day I'm not really sure why I did that, except that it might have been an attempt to be supremely honest with her. Perhaps I was tired by then - I was 23, remember.

Perhaps I was tired of holding it in. Perhaps I was too tired to maintain any kind of long pretence about who I was and where I'd been. Perhaps I wanted to know right away whether she would have the patience to deal with me. Or, perhaps I believed she would appreciate the honour which is paid by absolute forthrightness.

Anyway, we made our way outside later on in the evening. There was a large balcony in the hotel where the convention was being held - the top floor, basically, of one of the wings - and we went out there, with our drinks, to talk. Well, I talked. She listened.

Kathy met George once, about three months after the convention. I introduced him as 'a very good friend', but I'm sure she knew he was more than that. He and I didn't hold hands any more, but that didn't matter. I remember when I introduced them. It was at a pub - I'd arranged the meeting to be inadvertent. She actually said "Nice to meet you," and then, as I went away to get drinks, I saw them talking. When I got back I heard her say, "anyway, thank you," and change the subject. I didn't ask either one of them about it. We just raised our glasses, toasted each other, and smiled. In a short lifetime of explosions and surprises, that was the most wonderful and natural moment I had ever known.

I dared to hope. I dared to look on my body of work - my studies, my job - as proof of my worth. I dared to believe that I could put the desperados behind me, figuratively speaking. I could never forget them - how does one forget stuff like that? But I started to believe that it was somehow possible to put them in order within me.

When everything is going well a person can begin to believe in himself. It's the illusion of control. It's the ludicrous notion that we aren't, somehow, after all, the sum of *all* our parts - just the ones we like. It's the idea that we have some kind of say in what we feel and believe - when we know in our hearts that we don't.

I did well in my daring. For a time I did put the whole thing behind me - or at least out of my mind. I was so focused on what

I wanted to achieve that I could easily justify forgetting all those other things. And on those occasions when I forgot to forget, I could usually find an ale or two to help numb the pain. Of course, this was not a long-term solution, but it seemed to resolve the tension in those moments, so I was okay with it.

I never got so out of control that Kathy or George worried about me, but there were times when I worried about myself. There were times when I sat alone, stupefied, supremely focussed on the pain I was trying to ignore, that I started to wonder whether I was overdoing it. Like now, here, in this train. But even in those moments - these moments - I have often reasoned that if you have the wherewithal to wonder, then you know you haven't gone too far. You don't go mad just because you want to.

Kathy and I grew closer and closer. She became more and more wonderful, and I trusted her with more and more of the facts of my youth. She never once argued with my way of handling it - as if she felt I had hit on the best way possible. She listened, she loved, she tried to understand, though of course there was no way she could. No one could understand such things without first living through them. Knowledge is not understanding. Hearsay is not knowledge. Sympathy is not, and never can be, the same as empathy.

I probably should have secured psychiatric help - it probably would have helped me to process some things. But then, why should I, when I had deliberately chosen to not accept it as a problem? I had my focus and my ambition to override the pain which occasionally bubbled to the surface. I had school, then university, then courses and work, then when Kathy and I married I had the building of a life with my wonderful, loving woman, and eventually with my perfect, innocent little children.

Of course, I did what everyone does. I rebelled against what had happened by resolving to do everything differently. I had had no father, so I resolved to be the *best* father. I had had a

hard-working though absent mother - so Kathy and I maximized the amount of time we spent with our children. I had needed a Carstairs to be the man in my life - so I resolved never to let my boy need such a proxy. I would be there for him in whatever way he needed - I would mentor him as only a truly contrite man can. I would be with him throughout his boyhood so that he'd never have to go to another man to find out whether he was loved or not.

And yet here I am.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next station, Bodmin Parkway.

Bodmin Parkway

Here we are at Bodmin Parkway. The train smooths and stops with a kind of hiss - not of steam, but of effort - as somehow the cars release their stress. I listen to look, but there's nothing. The car doesn't so much as jiggle as it might if people were getting on or off. Why would anyone join this train at this time of night anyway? Apparently the good people of Bodmin have better things to do.

Carstairs must have seen it coming. The inevitable. Given how intent he was on secrecy from all his boys I don't imagine the idea of arrest, detention, and conviction was very appealing to him. I never did see his name in the papers, but I'm sure it showed up there at some point. I suppose even as I was writing the letter and stuffing the tape into the envelope he was contemplating what to do, and I don't imagine it took him too long to figure it out. More than one of the punters over those years told me that he had a plan ready in case of discovery. I heard it all, even as they did their work, but basically their plans amounted to either suicide or escape. It was a strange thing to talk about with a boy. Maybe they felt I was reliable - that I'd keep quiet. Maybe I was a good listener and they felt like I, of all people, allowed them to speak their minds in ways they just couldn't with anybody else. Or maybe they just started talking out of stress. A lot of them talked constantly, nervously, while they were doing the deed. I don't even think they knew they were talking.

I've often wondered what Carstairs' last thoughts were as he pulled the trigger or downed the pills, or swallowed the poisoned Tizer. Did he know it was me who'd undone it all? Did he think of me, I wonder, as the bullet shocked through his scalp?

He killed himself about a week before I ran into his family. I didn't know it at the time, of course, but just as I was getting to know George properly Carstairs was removing himself from the

bosom of society. It was perfect really. He was admitting his guilt without ever having to admit his guilt. It makes sense, if your aim is to avoid shame and humiliation, but I've often wondered, if he didn't want to be known as *that*, why didn't he destroy his big box of pictures before he did it?

For some reason, a cold rush of blood surged through me when I thought of that, just as it had when I'd met his family. By now, of course, I can probably afford to put the big box out of my mind. While I'd been able to destroy Kenneth's work, that box was a definite loose end, but if anyone had ever bothered to chase any of those kids down they would already have knocked on my door. This could only leave me with one conclusion to draw: Carstairs' kids burned it. To save the family name, they burned it all.

The headlines proclaimed charges against Bruno for murder. Kenneth was charged as an accessory to murder, though the article said that additional charges were contemplated. My written account had clearly placed Kenneth in the crosshairs for giving the order, so I suppose that was what they were still considering. Is an anonymous written account considered evidence enough for a conviction? Probably not. They'd have to use it somehow to find evidence or extract confessions.

They found Stewart's body about a hundred yards downriver from where I'd seen him weighed down - carried there by the current until he hooked on an underwater branch. I saw it on the telly - all the horrified onlookers watching the police divers work. The river and the rocks had done some of the work Bruno had asked of it - but my letter meant he was discovered before he was rendered completely unrecognizable. Pictures of his clothes were published in the paper in hopes of someone coming forward to claim him. This the parents quickly did. They had reported him missing in the Hendon area, and now they were horrified of course. At some point I suppose they were told about my letter. I wonder how they felt about that. It was awful. Stewart's mum,

crying and wailing at the loss of her boy was the second worst thing I had ever heard.

At least Stewart wasn't one of my recruits.

It was a mixed up time - a miserable time. I was lucky: I had George to rely on, to spend time with, and that was good. Because of him there was a certain joy in that time despite everything. I had escaped from the two mad men in my life - from more lunacy than any child should ever be around - but there was sadness, too. I'd had a lesson in how quickly and completely things could get out of control, even when we think we're in charge. Until little Peter had shown up, I had believed that Carstairs was all in for me - that I was lifetime - a soulmate. But I quickly realized how dispensable I was.

I still believed that I had things under control. I was still making the decisions that guided my life. You can keep yourself as busy as you like, subsume your mind to the world around you, and hold your schedule before you like some kind of religious beacon, but when the misery needs to flow, it will flow.

A little like today.

Bumpity-bump.

We're moving again. In my mind I'm looking out the window through the corridor at the passing countryside - a rolling black blanket, now, dotted sporadically with clusters of soft, silver diamonds. The ocean is there, I can smell it. Night-black, omnipresent, omnipotent - a fiendish, deceptive lady who lures us to calm with her soft, siren song, then tears us to shreds for our trouble. She is the big, black guardian of our understanding. She is the most natural limit on our abilities. She knows who we are, and what we're really all about.

Ladies and gentlemen, next station, Par.

Par

What a strange name for a town!

I feel the train slow and stop. There's a lurch to the left as the cars cut onto an adjacent line, and in a moment or so the train is stopped and doors are opening and closing. There's the same slight shimmy as people get off the train - assuring me that I'm still not alone. Lost as I am in my little cabin island, I'm still not alone on the train.

Outside, off to the left, I hear a car start. Something small. The driver shifts it impatiently into gear and tears rapidly away from his day in rather the same way that I am. I'm well past time as I sit here, thinking about the things that were. I'm far, far beyond my abilities in doing it too. I can't help but think there will be a price to pay.

I was free. By acts of strength, courage, luck, resistance, collaboration - I don't know what - the bad men in my life were gone, and that was hard to get used to. It had been a matter of years for me, exposed to those men. From Carstairs' first ascent of Mount Michael to Kenneth and Bruno's horrible hunt on the High Street was just under four years. For almost four years I'd been tied to those hungry, hateful men. The tension of that time still lives within me.

It was better with George - a kind man, a caring man. A man who took no for an answer - a man for whom good grace was not a catchphrase but a way of life. He was a good man. He loved me, unequivocally. He still does, even though I am well past his physical interest.

I asked him about that once - why men only like boys of a certain age? Why did Carstairs like me when I was small, but not when I got older? He did his best to explain it, but I know it was hard for him - like an engine trying to explain petrol. He said something about wiring, experience, and threw in a few

trifles about genetics and predisposition. I tried to grasp it, but I quickly lost the thread.

Freedom comes with a cost, of course. Nothing in life is free, and no matter how kind to me George was, there was a natural, concomitant cost to it. No, not what you're thinking - I was happy to do that. The cost to me was in the effort he demanded from me in my studies. In everything, because of my experiences, he cut me slack - but not in that. In my studies he was a harsh taskmaster.

I learned this quite quickly after the sting. I'd gone to his place after school (mum was working that night) and was settling down to watch some telly. Remember, that was the seventies: you had to get off your arse to change the channel. I had just sat down to rest a bit when George walked in to the room.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I wasn't sure what answer he was looking for, so I decided to shoot straight.

"I'm watching some telly before dinner."

"What about your homework?"

"I thought I'd do it in the morning before school. It's only..."

"Uh, no," said George, interrupting me. "I don't think so." He grabbed my school bag and fished a text book out of it, holding it up in the air. "This one?"

I thought he must be asking me which subject I had homework in, but just at that moment even though I didn't really know, I wasn't completely comfortable answering. There was a look on his face that made me wary. I shook my head.

"No, the other one. Geography." I fluttered my hand - half pointing, half dismissing.

He peered into the bag, fished around, and brought out a thinner text about European cities.

"Yes, that's it."

"Come on then. Let's get it done."

I still felt a little uncomfortable, but then he said: "Then we can watch some telly together, yes?"

That made me smile. And truly that's all it took. And it's still all it takes. He sat with me that evening, and many more besides, and we did my homework together. I'd been nervous because he had pressure - tension - in his voice, but he had a way of applying that pressure whilst also making me feel special.

We especially enjoyed studying biology - yes, there's a joke in there. You have to remember, his interest in me was pure, but he was also who he was. He had needs, but he left me totally, completely, and utterly in control of that. I had started this little adventure of mine thinking that Carstairs was a kind man because of how hard he worked to make me feel good, but now I have a more complete understanding of what he was, and the role I played in his life. The truth is, he used me - my body, my existence - to try to fill a void in his own life.

Anyway, the main lesson here is how much George helped me. He gave freely of his time, and of his knowledge; he helped me with my lessons. And at the same time he helped me gain a different understanding of what a relationship between a man and a boy can be. I still remember all the lessons we learned together.

It was a bit of a challenge, sometimes, explaining all the sleepovers for Mum, especially because I never brought my friend home to meet her, but she was all caught up with her work so I suppose she fell back on her old understanding: *If he's not in any kind of trouble, he must be doing okay.*

Bumpity-bump.

This carried on for as long as I wanted it to. That was always the understanding, anyway.

"Michael," he said, one day when we were making dinner together. "I want you to understand something."

He sounded very solemn, so I listened closely as he continued.

"You know I love you, right?"

"Of course, Georgie - of course." Once I became supremely comfortable and trusting I called him Georgie - mostly because I knew he wouldn't mind. He looked at me.

"Well, I'm always going to love you - no matter what - but some day you're going to decide that you need to look elsewhere - to other people - to continue developing into the full, good and proper man I know you're going to be. I will always be here for you - always - but you need to know that when it does, it's perfectly okay. It's right, Michael. In fact, it's more than right - it's essential."

I looked at him like he had three heads, and grinned.

"I'm never going to leave you," I said. "You're everything to me. You've done everything for me. You saved my life. I know I can trust you - completely - so why would I leave you?"

"Alright, angel."

He gave me a knowing look, like a father or something. He put an arm around me and pulled me to him. I felt him sniff my hair.

We'd been together (you know, weekends, evenings and so on) at this stage, for almost a year. I felt supremely sure that he was one hundred percent wrong about this, and I said so.

"Okay, love," he rejoined. "I'll be happy for you either way. Whatever you decide is fine with me."

That's how he was. If I had, in fact, decided to stay with him - if I had decided as an adult to become gay, to be his wife, to live with him, adopt kids - *whatever* - he would have been okay with it, because that's who he was. But of course, I knew about his age-focus, too.

Still, I was happy to have him when the nightmares started.

After that year and a bit, I decided - yes, I decided - that it was time my mum met my friend. It was an awkward year, after all: secrets every which way, explanations to make, lies to tell. I knew I must move mountains to keep her from my past, lest she completely lose her mind, but I wanted her - somehow - to feel more involved and included in my present.

I thought about it for a very long time. I knew the awkwardness involved. I knew that the first thing she would ask about George would be the age gap - George was a full eleven years older than I, after all. I knew, too, that if I didn't do this just right George might well be legitimately suspected of all sorts of nefarious deeds of which he was plainly and wonderfully guilty, but for which I loved him and would never see him harmed. Those particular visits must remain secret for his sake, and for my mum's, and even for my own, so there were some pretty stiff constraints right there. I knew, too, that opening the door to my connection with George would open the door for future questions from my mum. She would start to put two and two together, as it were, and she'd want some clarifications. I also knew - and this was big - that George (we had talked about it before) wasn't all that sold on the idea of including mummy, not because of any kind of guilt he felt but because he said it would introduce a new dynamic to our friendship which might be difficult to manage. He worried about this for my sake. He didn't want things spiralling out of control for me now that I'd finally managed to get some perspective on things.

"You've got everything organized, Michael. Why would you want to jeopardize that?" He was right, of course, but so was I. For a boy now thirteen years old I had buried a great deal of shit in my time, and I felt now like it was time to ease the pressure. What's the old saying? *The truth shall set you free.* Well, to a certain extent that's true, but of course, the truth can also really fuck you up.

So yes, I thought about it for a long time before figuring out how to do it. It would still come with risk, but I thought I had a half decent chance of cracking the door - even just a little

bit - without an ocean of pain coming down on me. George agreed to play along, though he still wasn't convinced it was the best thing to do. I know now what he was worried about - that it would put him in a very awkward position. I had a sense of it at the time, but in my naïveté I thought I could overcome it with yet more lies. Now I know better.

At the time, I hadn't yet put together a few of the realities that surround the matter of interpersonal relationships - especially *intergenerational* relationships. Frankly, I thought from my limited perspective that if one kind of relationship - *vis*, the connection I had with Carstairs, Kenneth, and Bruno - was abusive and hurtful, and another - that being George - was not, then I was far better off with the non-abusive George. It was black and white for me. There was no question about it. There was no doubt. No debate was reasonable. It was a simple fact that the person who loved me, who saved my life, was a good man, no matter what. I didn't yet think in terms of grey areas. I knew of course that the whole man-boy thing was frowned on - I learned that from all the measures Kenneth took to protect his network from discovery. But I equated the evil with the filming of the act, not with the doing of it - except when there was force involved. I thought - and I thought that everyone else *also* thought - that if a boy like me were to find comfort in the arms of a loving adult, that should be okay. I mean, how could there ever be harm in such a thing? Who on earth would object to the happiness that love brings between two human beings?

I know now, of course, that the answer to that is, 'pretty much everybody who isn't so inclined'. Grey areas meant nothing to me - well, why should they? How often had it been drilled into me, on set, that I was making my own decisions and that's okay? How many times had I been warned that *society doesn't see things the way we do*?

It's a valid question, but of course I didn't equate my mum with 'Society'. I thought that she would at the very least take my word for it when I told her that I'd met George at the cinema and that he was helping me with my homework.

I hadn't factored in the maternal instinct.

Bumpity-bump.

There haven't been any tunnels for quite a while now, have there? It's warm out. Or is it? Perhaps I'm the warm one. I feel the train moving slowly, like a cat, crouching, preparing to pounce. It's slowing for a signal. The driver is thinking if he slows just right he might be able to out-wait the signal without actually bringing the train to a complete halt. But he's wrong, and with a lurch and a grunt we stop at last. And we sit. And we wait.

I wonder how many people there are on the train now? All the way from Paddington we've come. When we left London there must have been hundreds of passengers on board. But what about now? What was the last stop? Par? The strange-named place. I wonder about the history of the area, then discard the thought with a mental wave of the hand. Every place has a history. Every person has a story. Not a life is lived but that it has highs and lows, joy and pain, love and hate, triumph, loss, and sadness. But, however many people there still are on the train with me today, I doubt that any of them are feeling as I am right now. It's not *impossible*, I suppose, but I doubt it.

Further up the car I hear someone cough. I hear the engine rumble as we wait. I hear a baby cry - most likely not a commuter, I think to myself. I wonder for a moment what their story is.

As time passed, the memories of the back of Kenneth's hand and the infernal burn of Bruno's lust began to fade. With those two horrors gone, life could once again take over. School, homework, and all the machinations to get my two love objects together. Such things occupied my consciousness even as sex had done before. And growing; growing up. I suppose you could say that the little things gradually became important again.

The darkness of my childhood went underground. It receded into the little-known, greatly under-explored parts of the psyche, surfacing only when needs absolutely must. It surfaced, mostly, in my dreams - in recurring nightmares which reminded me in a most terrifying way of where I had been. I can't count the number of times I snapped awake, sweating, afraid of every shadow, even of the darkness itself. I can't express the fear and loathing I felt at the mere suggestion of some of the senses that had been so heavily used when I was young. You probably don't want to know which muscles still hurt to this day, though I do nothing to vex them.

One nightmare in particular I remember very well. Me, in a dark room, under lights - floodlights - bright, like a football pitch - prone, anxious, full of dread, with a large number of men pointing at me from the dark and laughing. Delusions of adequacy. Shattered, and now no more.

I did not enjoy those dreams. The feelings they brought back I had long since toiled to forget. And yet there they were, enhanced, even, by their growing distance from the empirical. They got stronger with time.

My hatred for those men also got stronger with time. I say hatred, and I mean it. I know it's contrary: to work so hard to forget, while at the same time nursing and cultivating such a firm, intense loathing. I had always hated the pimp and the murderer, but as time passed and I lived my life of control and learning, and positivity, and abject, unbridled happiness with George, I learned to dislike most of the punters too. For the longest time I had felt that they were victims of Kenneth and Bruno. After all, if those monsters hadn't made the product available, they wouldn't have been able to consume it. If I weren't there, a commodity - sought after, bought, paid for - they would never have been in a position to want me in the first place.

I know that as photos circulated of me and the other boys many of those men found a way to contact Kenneth, and he made a lot

of money as a result. From us. From me. It made me more and more angry as time went by. My innocent view of myself as being agreeably desirable changed as I started to understand the true nature of love - especially as that contrasted with what most of those men did. And with that understanding, I started to feel dirty. Used. Even guilty. The things which I had at one time enjoyed about the contact were slowly subsumed by other feelings. There was no love in what was done. Truth be known, I might as well have been a teddy bear or a blow-up doll.

My memory of most of the men faded over time, too, even as the hatred grew. Perhaps I hated that I was forgetting them. Or perhaps I was trying hard to forget them so I could lose the hate. I don't know. What I do know is that every moment devoted to hate is a moment taken away from love, and the damage it does cannot easily be repaired. It's not good to hold on to hate.

In my mind's eye I saw myself a boy, waiting for whoever was next. I saw them, as I occasionally passed that room - the one where they got themselves ready - as naked and vulnerable as nature could arrange, and yet ready to thrust themselves on me in ways I didn't deserve and they hadn't earned. I saw them advancing on us, on me: scrawny, transfixed devils, long-fingered imps, black-hearted fiends for whom pleasure was all, conscience nothing. They blended in together. They were all one, and one was the other. For those three years, they were a blur I cannot forget.

But some stood out for me. The horrible ones, of course. They stood out because for years after the ring was broken I felt a knot in my stomach when I even so much as *thought* about them. They were the hurtful ones, the angry men. I surmised even at a young age that they needed to wield control. Control got them off. They took pleasure from their power, from enforcing what they wanted, and they took exceptional pleasure from exerting their power on the young. Of course, now I know this as a proof of weakness. Today I would tell them all to fuck off - because that's what they deserve. But at that time the back of a sinewy hand was all they needed to get their way.

Some others also stood out, but in another way. They clearly had a need they neither understood nor controlled. Often they cried like children themselves, even as they were doing it. They had a conscience, but they were powerless to obey it. I looked on them as quasi-victims, and on myself as the tool they used to manage their pain. I believed that those men did it to keep themselves in check - against what, I don't know. Something worse? Is there something worse than what they did? They suffered urges that pulled them hard in a direction they didn't want to go, and they used me to free the innocent or unapproachable boys in their own lives from worry, as if those boys were somehow worth more - or I, less. Those men understood only the brightness of the light that called them there. They heard the siren song and somehow re-connected with memories of feelings long-ago dried up, yet still, for all that, powerful and demanding. More than one confided in me, even as he tried to breed me, that I reminded him of a boy he once knew - as if somehow, I was the miraculous embodiment of a memory that would make him whole again. I was eleven. I was twelve. I was thirteen years of age. There is no way I could have understood what the hell they were talking about, but I gritted my teeth, said thank you, and made sure I moaned just right if that's what they were after.

They came from all walks of life. It's true what they say - they're everywhere. God's great plan. Doctors, solicitors, bobbies (that's police constables if you're American), rubbish men, teachers. Even judges - those pious observers and influencers who had the power to put everyone else in prison, but who lacked the decency to honestly judge themselves. *Hypocrites!* I even knew one who was a priest, and it doesn't get much more hypocritical than that. I wondered what God thought of him. I wonder what He thinks of him yet. He was one of the kinder ones, it's true; but he must have a rather singular relationship with his maker to somehow rationalize the things that he did.

Bumpity-bump.

All those memories. All the pain, anguish, fear - all the emotions which had been so thoroughly repressed absolutely had to go somewhere. Kenneth being locked up didn't mean I was completely free. Just because Bruno was not going to be kicking my door in didn't mean I started leaving it unlocked. The punters still knew who I was. Perhaps they lived in my area, perhaps they didn't - I don't know - but if they saw me on the street they'd know my secrets and they might try to hold them against me. Some of them might even be brazen and try to kidnap me and force me into it all once again, or worse, to dispatch me and so protect themselves from discovery. I expressed this particular fear to George more than once. There's that knot again - in the pit of my stomach.

I was a slave to them. The bad men were gone, but their deeds lived on in every breath I took. And to top it all off, I heard in the news at one point that there was a rash of suicides taking place amongst school boys in my area. I couldn't help but wonder about that.

If it weren't for George...

Bumpity-bump.

Only the thoughts make noise for me now. The train is stopped. It stopped without asking me - certainly without telling me. One moment we were moving, the next we were stopped. I heard nothing. No one. We're close to St. Austell now - surely only minutes away. It makes me think of another church - St. Jude's. A Catholic Church. It was supposed to represent peace and calm in my life, in any life, but that's not how it worked out.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next station, St. Austell.

St. Austell

Well this is a quiet place, isn't it? Two lines, one each way. There's an overhead path of some kind - I can hear people using it to cross the tracks. I can still smell the ocean - it rolls in through the windows in waves on the wings of a wild and wicked wind.

The ocean breeze is the one where the wind blows inland off the water, right? In that case, since it's getting dark now it should soon be swinging around and heading out the other way. It follows: warm air rises. When warm air rises off the land in the day time, colder ocean air rushes in to replace it. That makes wind off the ocean. Then at night the cycle is reversed: the land cools so the ocean is warmer and the air rushes out to find it. There's an awful lot of wind, it seems to me, blowing around in my mind just now.

Carstairs explained it to me once on one of our touchy-feely-let's-be-naughty-in-public trips to the seaside. He could care less about the ocean, the sand, the rocks, the starfish. What he wanted was to chew on rock candy, and molest me unobtrusively while we sat together on the quay, whilst at the same time ogling other little fellows like me. He really was a most monstrous pervert. To accomplish his end he would talk about anything I wanted, as long as it unlocked my doors.

"Michael," he said one time, "learn well. If someone farts at you be sure to duck, because warm air rises and you don't want it in the face!"

I'd laughed at the time. What a strange little adult he was! But now, not so much. The way that all of them - all of Kenneth and Bruno and the other punters - referred to my - our - bodily functions... it wasn't nice. Even back then it felt odd, though I couldn't really put a finger on it. If I were to guess now why it felt that way, I'd have to say their carefree jocularly about us made them feel as if they owned us. We were toys:

theirs to do with as they pleased. If they wanted to talk about our bodies and minds, they seemed to believe they had that right. And we had nothing to say about it.

With George, things changed. A lot. I felt loved at last. There was an easy goodness about it - and about *him* - that left me feeling more than ever before like I had rights. Beside teaming up with Flo and all to save my life, he just showed me a whole different truth of what it meant to be a man. The first time I slept over is just one example. He prepared a room for me in his flat. When I got there he showed it to me. I looked at it like I didn't understand what was going on - mostly because I didn't.

"Your room, young sir," he said, gesturing inside.

"My room?"

"Yes, your room." He paused. "Don't you like it, Michael?"

He walked in.

"No, it's great," I said. "But I'm confused."

"What about?"

"Well..."

I must have looked tongue-tied.

"Oh, I see," said George. He marshalled his thoughts. "You thought that you'd be sleeping in my bed with me."

I nodded.

"Like all those other men."

I nodded again.

"Well, Michael... I'm not like all those other men."

"I know, but..."

"I think you should know that by now."

"I do! It's just that..."

I trailed off. Boys are not often short for words, but this was one of those occasions.

"What?"

"Well, you're not the same as those other men, no. But at the same time, you are."

"Sweetie, just having the same physical urges doesn't make me like them. A man is created in nature, but that doesn't mean he's defined by it. What he does is far more important in determining who he is than mere longing. Believe me, the sexual urge is a very difficult thing to manage. It's a significant part of any man's equation, and it's a huge part of the shaping of his life. Even so, a lot of men give it far more power than they should.

"By giving you your own room to use whenever you stay over I'm trying to demonstrate this. I don't want there to be any doubt about it. I'd like nothing better than to spend close time with you, but I don't want you to think there's any obligation for you to do that just to have my love and affection. If you ever - ever - thought that, I'd deem our entire relationship a failure!"

Those words absolutely terrified me. I remember I dropped my backpack on the floor and stepped forward to hug him. It was just one hug, but it has lasted a lifetime because truly it was far, far more than that.

Bumpity-bump.

By the time I turned fifteen I was already on my second girlfriend. Just friends, you know. We hung out in the playground.

The first was Laura. She was pretty - curly locks like Shirley Temple, but of course, older. She was a little bit academic for me, perhaps, but she seemed to like me fine until one day she just didn't anymore. I was okay with it: I'd had my fill of testosterone growing up, so I didn't take it, as some do, as an assault on my manhood.

The second was Peggy. Peggy was smart, and kind, but a little bit possessive, and I just wasn't ready for that. I'd been possessed by so many for so long that I needed to make sure I kept control in my hands. I was a very stubborn and temperamental little car, and the system really only worked if I approved of the person who was driving.

The two girlfriends thing suggested to me that I wasn't gay. My experiences, I reasoned, might well have made me gay - there is an argument out there which states it as an absolute guarantee - but to that point at least it didn't seem to be the case. I hadn't caught the gay virus from any of the men who'd done me, so that was cause for hope. Not that there's anything wrong with being gay (*ooh no, there certainly isn't, ducks*) but because it seemed to me to mean that playing had not done anything to deflect me from what what was natural *for me*. It reassured me that I was still me - whatever that meant. I was untainted by the hands of others, unburdened by the hang-ups of the men who had known me intimately. Oh, *they* were as gay as all get out - no question about it. But all I really wanted was to be sure that I was not totally fucked up by all those experiences, so feeling naturally inclined to look at girls and hang out with them felt to me like a positive thing.

George knew I was dating girls. He was a boy lover himself, but he didn't do or say anything to discourage me. We fooled around a bit to begin with, but after a few times I didn't feel the need anymore, so I suppose in that respect he'd been right. I had construed an obligation shortly after the rescue, but he was true to his word and soon enough when I was around him I felt just like a normal boy.

The nightmares eased a little over time. As I remember them now they had a central theme of inadequacy. In the dreams I was always ugly - what the punters called "useful". Or I was too small to fight, too weak to resist, or too slow and stupid to even understand what was happening.

That was something I had heard all the time, after Carstairs. Believe it or not, some men get off on telling a boy how stupid he is, others on pointing out flaws of which the boy is very much aware. I can't count the number of times I heard someone say, about one boy or another, "he's quite good-looking, too bad about his face." It wasn't true, and I knew it at the time, but it still hurt to hear it. Kids believe what they're told. They don't know they can resist an idea. They don't know when ideas are being planted - and they certainly don't know that those ideas might well last them a lifetime. Strange really: the idea of positive reinforcement is not really up for debate any more, but so few people have figured out a way to turn self interest into selflessness.

So, inadequacy was a central theme of those nightmares, but it wasn't everything. There was also fear and anger, resentment and sorrow. Fear for the chance of being somehow dragged back into that world, anger for any of it having been necessary in the first place, resentment of all the men who took what they needed from me, body and soul, but who gave back nothing, and sorrow for the part I played in luring other boys to Kenneth's evil scheme. Even though I know that I was only doing what I was told - and under threat, besides - I still feel that sorrow.

Bumpity-bump.

Now there's rain on the roof. A red signal. We're stopped again. I can't hear anyone moving on the train. All I hear now, eyes locked shut, is rain drops on the roof. It's as if every conversation, every interaction on the train has suspended at once - like some great force reached down to all the people on board - however many that might be - and said, "alright, now, shut the fuck up!"

There's an electrical smell. Not quite smoke, but more than a cigarette at thirty paces. Like burning, but not. I feel no panic - there's no great conflagration in the works - but I'm

suddenly alert. Then it's gone - snatched up in the ocean wind like a fly yanked away.

God, but my arse hurts! How fucking long have I been sitting here anyway?! It's dark out. It wasn't dark when we left London. It wasn't dark when I left the office. It wasn't dark when I followed that...

No. Mustn't go there. Must not. Clench the eyes, hold the breath. DO NOT GO THERE! Of course, that's exactly where I'll go, because that's exactly where the story goes. The only question is... Is that the story's end?

Never saw it coming.

Bumpity-bump.

Diesel now. Diesel fumes. Thick, heavy, dense diesel fumes flooding the cabin as the train starts moving again. Conversations begin anew - few and far between, distant, but they are there. I'm guessing three doors down, maybe four, and a few more a little further away. They fade from hearing as the train accelerates, as the whole of this little crew come closer and closer to the end of the line.

I often wondered, as a boy, how it worked with the punters; what combination of factors - emotional, mental, physical - it took for them to finally cross the line. How did they work themselves around to a place where doing the illegal thing, the immoral thing, the really incredibly selfish thing was actually preferable to the abstinence? What combination of feelings did it take for them to seek fulfilment of their need above all other factors? In the same vein as wondering what made Carstairs tick - how he managed to rationalize getting into my pants all the time - how did those men - how did *all* those afflicted men manage to justify crossing the line and taking what didn't belong to them?

I never have found an answer. In the end I suppose it's different for each of them. I suppose that their natural bent melded with their experiences growing up, with their upbringing - the installation of their moral centre - to draw that line. For each man it exists, but for each man its placement is different. What's the old saying? *One man's garbage...?* Well, it's true there, too. One man's no is another man's yes. One man's *hell no* is another man's *hell yes*. There are as many variations of the balance of this morality thing as there are men on the planet. There are as many different versions of need as there are men (and women) to define it.

Once in a while I'd ask them. The punters. You know - bored while they did it to me I'd act just like a boy (as they expected me to) and ask them silly questions like, *what do you like about me, are you married, and what would your kids think of you doing this to me?* I was careful never to come off as critical or judgmental - only as curious about how their minds were working. I was curious, of course. Even as I got ploughed, again and again, both on screen and off, I wondered what the hell brought this man to this place, to need to interact with me in this particular way at this particular time. I had no real concept of sexual urges, though I could see that they did. I had never actually felt an urge myself, though I'd been sexually complicit for years, so I didn't really understand what they were feeling when they got excited about doing it to me. All I knew is that it had to be, and it had to be me.

Unfortunately, I was good at what I did, and that made me popular - *on the circuit*. I say 'unfortunately', but maybe in truth it's fortunate, since it made me 'useful'. I had value because I was proficient. I have no idea what the punters paid Kenneth for the pleasure of my company, but I'd be willing to bet it was a chunk of change.

Most of them, I think, could afford it easily enough, but for some it was a definite sacrifice. Those were the ones I only saw once or twice. Others, who became regulars, must have been

loaded. Of course, all that money didn't do Kenneth any good in the end, did it?

I remember Kevin. He was a forty-ish man, tall and rather handsome. He was married, and he said he was happy, though that was debatable. He told me he had kids of his own - slightly younger than me - one girl and two boys. I asked him, quite matter-of-factly, "Wouldn't it be cheaper to have sex with your own kids?" He said, "Oh, I couldn't possibly do that. That would ruin them forever." Even as I lay there, letting him use me in that way, I wondered what made them more important than me.

Then there was Neville. He was in his late twenties. He lived on his own - no family at all - and no friends either, as near as I could tell. I almost took pity on him, once, and offered to hang out with him, but that thought disappeared the day he slapped me, hard, in the face for grinning when he couldn't get 'in the mood'. We had a stare-down. I knew I was indentured or something, but there was no call for violence. He was particularly harsh that day. Later visits were a bit more civilized. In the end I decided to be charitable and to allow that he'd just had a bad day.

Andrew was tall - very tall. He was a giant of a man, with an enormous (to me) head and big, deranged eyes. But for all that he was kind to me. His big hands he used gently - he seemed to know just how to stroke me with the backs of his fingers so that I'd enjoy our visits. I was happier when I knew that he was coming - because it meant that I could close my eyes and lose my fear. I often thought that if he and I had lived together, he would look after me forever - he seemed to have that kind of love in his heart. He even told me, several times, that if anyone ever hurt me I was to tell him about it. But then one day he just stopped coming. So much for that, then.

Cyril was also tall. He was older, probably mid-fifties. He had a receding hairline - a rather large bald spot, in fact - but that didn't affect his performance, if you know what I mean. He was aggressive, but not rough. Passionate. It was like he was

always fighting with something, trying to let it out without losing control of it. At the time I had no idea what that might be, but now I think I know. There was an underlying anger about him, and about the way he ploughed me rotten every time he bought me. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I knew when I saw him walking up the path to the flats that my arse was going to be sore later on. Jesus, sometimes I just don't know how I did it all!

Then there was Paul. Short, fat, horrible. It was like he was using me to get rid of all of his shit. He was an angry, angry man - and unfortunately he seemed to be quite well monied. He smelled, as I recall. He was one of those who made absolutely no effort to clean up. I think he figured I would do it for him. Add to that, he was big on humiliation. I was his 'little bitch'. I was 'a miserable little shit'. I was 'his tired little slut'. I hated him. I certainly made sure I mentioned him in the letter, though of course I had no way of knowing if Paul was his real name, so I don't know if he was ever arrested.

William was also tall. He had a cross around his neck on a chain so long that it would slap me in the face when he was looking down at me. He was nice enough, but he'd cry, every single time, after he was done. He was clearly very conflicted about what he was doing. The crying was almost embarrassing for me. It made me wonder if I was doing a good job or not! Oh, he spoke well of me, but I couldn't help but look down on him and his masculinity. I mean, Jesus, if you're going to be a pervert, be a fucking pervert... But first, *be a man!*

Of course, I didn't know why he cried all the time. Never before, just after. When he arrived at the flat he was all business. This was something he had to do. This was the only way, it seemed to me, for him to quell his demons - to sit them down, to put them in order, to shut them the hell up. So I did my job, and when we were done he cried. Every single time.

So many. So very many sad, sad men. Each on a path of their own. How they got there I didn't know. Hell, how *I* got there I

didn't know. One day it was me and Carstairs, reaffirming my budding masculinity, the next it was Kenneth telling me who, and where, and threatening 'a good hiding' if I didn't do it right. I felt sorry for most of the men who used me like that. I got the sense that none of them *wanted* it to be that way. Who would actually choose to be that way - especially in light of how the world feels about them? If they could be any other way, don't you think they'd try?

There were more. So many more that it shames me. Many of them got arrested after my letter to the police. I'd intended for Kenneth and Bruno to be arrested and I didn't name them specifically, but I suppose the police found Kenneth's 'little black book'.

Bumpity-bump.

That time echoes on in me even to this very day - this now rain-soaked evening on the cold, hard steel to Penzance. I'll never forget it, though I try and try and try. But isn't that just the thing - it's impossible to deliberately forget something. Just the act of trying to forget simply imprints it all the more. No, all you can do is distract yourself, and hope it goes away.

But it never does.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next stop, Truro

Truro

I sense trees and traffic as we slump into Truro. This place is bigger than anywhere else we've been - there's a faster pace. I hear someone blowing their horn, and somewhere there's shouting. It feels like warehouses, houses, shops, and still there's the irrepressible aroma of the sea. Somewhere here, there's a bloody big cathedral. I haven't been there - I just read about it somewhere.

We stop and there's that inevitable wobble of the cars. No one's getting on anymore. I don't think I've felt that for at least two or three stops now. It makes me think of Ducky and the queens. Home already, likely throat-deep on this or that. Perhaps Ants is showing everyone his enormous truncheon.

Instant guilt! I'm judging again. That I, who have shouted at many different truncheons, should somehow feel superior! Why? Because I found a woman? Because I found an escape from all that? Was I somehow born again by my lucky escape? Did it make me a better person? *Ludicrous!* Carstairs had a woman - somewhere - at one time or another - and look what happened to him. He turned, *big time!* Or... was she perhaps the biggest lie in his life?

No, I'm no better. If anything, I'm worse, because I did what they did and then ratted them all out. I broke the code of the schoolyard - I told on them all, and got them all killed! Metaphorically, at any rate. What those men did was the untraveled road, the turn not to be taken, the fork not to be chosen. But they took that turn and they traveled that road, and they enjoyed the scenery with all their smug smiles and self-satisfaction for as long as I would let them. How pleased they must have been, to find their little gold mine of boys and guilt! For a short while at least, they were the cat that got the cream. But ultimately, the cream was laced with surprises.

When we're little our decisions seem so inconsequential - nobody ever takes them seriously. But in the end they mean everything. A pilot, flying an aeroplane, deviates from his

course by one single degree and after one hour he's miles and miles away from where he's supposed to be. Same thing: a child, saying no - or yes - to almost any question is affecting his life in ways he cannot possibly know. Does he watch television, yawn, eat, go to sleep, or go and play with the nice man down the road? A child, feeling the brute angst of sexual expression, the dagger of passion against his tiny person, tasting the sweaty high life, seeing things he's probably not ready for, flies instantly away from his expected course and into the vast and terrifying realms of the unknown.

But with no perspective on life, how does a child know when - or even if - the decision he's making is consequential? It all makes sense when you do it - when you make that decision and take that turn - but it's not until much later that you realize how badly you fucked it all up. You didn't mean to fuck it up. You didn't know what you were doing. You thought you were doing the right thing, but you weren't. And the worst part is the part you let others play in your dismantling.

The fear I saw in the eyes of some of the first-timers: I had to guide *them*. I had to show *them* what to do. They were there, curious. But they were giving themselves over to something they didn't fully understand, and some of them were horrified at the prospect. Some laughed, defensively. Some cried.

So many men.

Bumpity-bump.

At one point, I don't quite remember when it was, I felt it was time for my two lives to merge. I was about fifteen. I was tired of playing roles to get by - I wanted to be whole again - to not have to pretend to be something I wasn't. So I decided it was time, for good or ill, for mum to find out about George. I decided she needed to meet him at last.

I had no delusions that they would fall in love and get married and become my forever parents, but I still thought they should

meet. There was pressure, sometimes, at home, when she wondered where I was going all the time, and I was getting tired of having to hide my favourite person from my mum.

George argued against it. He tried, gently and calmly, to convince me that he should *not* meet my mother - that she should not meet him. They were different people. It was different worlds. She might not understand. Or, worse, she might understand completely, figure absolutely everything out, and call the police to report him. I took this into account when making up my mind. I truly didn't think she would do that. My mum was not a complicated woman. Frankly, even if she figured out my true connection to George (which I doubted) I did not think she would cross me and my interests to exact some kind of revenge that only suits the needs of officialdom. I think she also understood how badly I needed a man in my life, and I suppose I hoped that she would see that I had found one, and just leave it at that.

I had it all organized in my mind. Where, when, how. It would need to be a public place - that, too, I thought, would limit any kind of negative response if she did figure it out. I chose a café near my school. It was close to our flat, and it would be easy for George to get to. After school was best, I thought. It would allow for George to leave if he had to - as in, "goodness, gracious me, is that the time?" On a weekend he wouldn't have the same built-in excuses. I wanted it to seem completely fortuitous - George had to show up while mum and I were having our coffee and Ribena.

I planned to introduce George as a man I'd met in the library who was helping me with my maths homework. I hoped she would appreciate such an altruistic bent. The truth, of course, is that as an accountant he was good at maths, and yes, he had been helping me to get better so while the location was a lie, the essence of my bullshit was not.

I'd concocted quite a complicated tale of how we'd met, and how nice he was - I had planned, truly, to lay it on pretty thick

for her - to really go all out to impress her with how wonderful George was. But when I told George my plan, he overruled it, explaining that any attempt to make him look too good would only arouse her suspicions and make her look at him even harder.

I hated having to hide the truth of our friendship. I wanted to tell her everything - Carstairs, Kenneth, Bruno - all of it, because truly only perspective and understanding bring freedom. I wanted to welcome her wholly and without reservation into my life - after all, she was my mum and I loved her. But of course that just was not possible. She could not know. Knowing the truth of my sordid little existence would destroy her, no matter how positive it had become since those early days. She would automatically include George with the evil elements - the usurious ones - and he would become just one more devil in a long line of devils to run roughshod over my little life.

Perhaps George was right. Perhaps I should've kept my mouth shut. But it was one of those moments in a life where a man - even one as young as I - has to do what he has to do. It was a turning point - an important moment in my development - a reckoning.

The café was called Em's Place. It was at the end of the road near the school so it got a lot of kid business at the end of every school day. I had it organized for a Tuesday - one of the rare Tuesdays when Mum had some time off work. For some reason, too, Tuesdays at Em's Place are quieter, so I wasn't worried about running into schoolmates and such. I planned it so mum and I would be there, and George would just *happen* upon us and stop by for a chat.

Bumpity-bump.

In planning this little surprise meeting I had given no thought whatsoever to how she would react to it all. In fact, it wasn't until I was sat there at the table with my Ribena in my hand that it occurred to me that she might actually be horrified at the idea of me meeting with some strange man for any purpose, no

matter how innocent. She had no notion of the truth, of course, but she had a parent's curiosity, and it wasn't until that moment that I realized she *might* actually ask questions.

I turned positively cold at the prospect. Of necessity I had been lying to her for a long time now - almost half my life - and it was only at that moment that I realized that her questions, if not carefully managed, might expose me for the liar I was! God knows I didn't want that! I started hoping against hope that George would be delayed, that he'd get stuck at work, that he'd forget the address. Mum spoke to me continually as I had these thoughts - encouraging things, loving things, proud things - little knowing what a fucking little liar she had borne. But I could hardly hear her. The blood thundered through my ears with a force and a fear I hadn't known since the night I ran away from it all. I was absolutely terrified that my carefully constructed wall was about to come crashing down around me, that all my lies would be exposed at last, and it would all be my own damn fault!

Yes, I hoped that George would be delayed, but of course, he wasn't. I should have known that because it was me, and because it was something I had asked him to do for me, he would be absolutely certain to be on time.

He played his part to perfection.

Bumpity-bump.

We're stopped again. Why? There's no announcement, just a breathless waiting as I feel something approaching. There's a fly in the cabin - probably a bluebottle. It's buzzing repeatedly somewhere up in the corner of the window, near the ceiling, or at the top of the window. I imagine it caught up in a spider's web - you know how clean these trains are. It buzzes, then stops. Buzzes, stops. Buzzes. Stops. Like Stewart.

There's no talking. There's no announcement at all. Why are we there, stopped, waiting? Are we being boarded? Has my wife

reported me missing? Are the police finally coming to look for me? Nobody's moving. No one is walking up and down the corridor. Usually there's someone or other going to the drinks car or such. No one is jumping around like the boy did earlier. What time is it, anyway? What time could it possibly be? I know the evening schedule to Tiverton quite well, because that's where I live, but I don't know the schedule this far down the line. I've never been here! I don't know the layovers, the delays, the switches, the freight holds, the crossings. I know none of that, so now I really am blind.

Why on earth would they run a train all the way down to Penzance at this time of day, anyway? It sounds empty. It *feels* empty. There's a soullessness about the whole sorry mess that's making me quite sad. Sad. Sad. And still, what? Four? Five stops from the end of the line?

"What's the matter, Michael?" my mum asked as I slurped the last of my Ribena up through the straw. "You've gone through that drink in a big, bloody hurry!" Her face was pinched - half surprise, half disappointment. "We've only been here about three minutes and it's all gone already!"

"Sorry, mum," I replied.

"Well, alright. I'll get you another one, but that's it. I don't want you to start peeing purple!"

Drinking so fast had been totally unconscious. A stress thing, I suppose. I imagined it was the sort of thing that happened every time a person attempts to cover up a big lie with an even bigger one. I felt that disappointment again, like a twist of the knife in my gut - *what a fucking liar I was!*

I smiled at her joke.

"I was thinking, is all."

"What about?" she queried.

I hesitated. Already her questions were bogging me down. I had to think too long. My mum told me years ago, when I was little - before Kenneth, Carstairs and everything - that she could always tell when I was lying. She said my eyes changed colour. It made a sort of horrifying sense to me at the time that my mother - my stay, my owner and keeper - should have such a window on the foul pestilence that was my little soul. It occurred to me later, of course, that if she ever actually did have that kind of insight then she would have rescued me way back at the beginning. But of course as a young sprog that just didn't cross my mind.

"Oh, just stuff," I said. I was pleased with the clever ambiguity of my response. It could be taken any way you want, and I couldn't be nailed down by it.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Stuff, mum. Just stuff. School, homework, friends." I paused, and said again, for emphasis: "Stuff."

"Alright then. Stuff." I don't think she believed me. She sipped at her coffee as she turned her head up the street. I knew she wasn't looking for anything in particular, but I followed her gaze anyway. And that's when I saw George. Yes, right on time.

Instant terror. The terror of knowing that these might be my final moments, or that everything might be about to change forever. But also pride. George looked really nice to me just then. As he walked towards us I could see that he had dressed up a bit. He looked at me, feigned surprised recognition (damn, but how often we had practiced that moment!) and raised his hand and waved.

"Michael!"

I waved back, smiling - smiling as both a part of the act and from genuine joy at seeing my lover. I think I realized, just at that moment, that even if mum *did* ask me some very difficult questions, I didn't need to worry because George was there with

me. I could rely on him. I pictured him holding my hand under the table and already I felt better. He gave me his most capable, calm, encouraging and confident look as he walked up towards us, and I was very grateful indeed. At the same time, there was a questioning in the way he looked at me.

Mum and I were seated in front of Em's Place, at one of the two small wrought iron tables laid out for the purpose. If I didn't know better I would have thought we were somewhere in France, waiting for *baguettes et vin rouge* - you know, except for the insolent clinking of tea cups.

My heart surged. This was it. I looked at my mum and pointed at George.

"Mum, this is George. He's a friend of mine. He's been helping me with my maths."

It's still amazing to this day how easily these words flowed out of me.

"Oh, really," she replied. Her forehead furrowed. She looked quizzical, suspicious.

George smiled his broadest, brightest smile and stuck his hand confidently out to my mum. They shook. He took a chair from the other table and, after first getting my mum's permission, pulled up beside us. He sat down as I aimed toward my lines - my rehearsed explanation of George's connection with me and where and how we had met - you know, over there in *Fictionlandia*.

"So how do you two come to know each other?" she asked. There was an air about her I couldn't fully appreciate at the time, but which now echoes through my memory as confused satisfaction.

I opened my mouth to answer, I thought I had come up with something pretty plausible, but George beat me to it, impressing me with his creativity. All those rehearsals, and he bested them all with something off the cuff. It's amazing how natural bullshit can be. And equally so how satisfying it can be when it works.

"It's actually rather interesting, Mrs...?"

"Hartley."

"...Of course, Mrs Hartley. I went to the cinema one day with a friend of mine and as I was procuring a drink I happened to look over and see Michael looking at the bulletin board they have there."

"Oh?"

"He seemed to be looking for something particular, so I entertained myself as I waited, wondering what that might be. Then, when I was in the line to get my ticket torn and go into the theatre I saw him behind me and I asked him what he'd been looking for.

"He told me he was looking to see if someone could help him with his maths as he was so jolly bad at it and he had heard that sometimes people advertise on the bulletin board to be tutors of things like that.

"I didn't think much of it really - it seemed plausible to me. So I thanked him and we went separately into the theatre."

"What were you seeing?" asked mum. Strange question, if you think about it.

"Star Wars!" I interjected. I didn't want George picking something boring that clearly would not have interested me. Mum didn't get to spend a lot of time with me, but she'd know it was bullshit if we tried to sell her on *Casablanca*, or *Kramer vs. Kramer*, or *Papillon*.

George nodded. Mum looked at me strangely. I didn't actually see this, but I felt it, intuitively.

"The friend I was with was quite keen. I wasn't so much so, but after I got into it it was actually not too bad."

"It was *brilliant!*" I gushed, inspired to participate creatively, but to not tread on George's toes.

"And who were you with, Michael?"

"No one, mum. I went by myself."

That was a first. As far as she knew, I'd never gone alone before. All my previous lies included friends. But, it had occurred to me that if meeting George was problematic she might make enquiries by way of verifying the tale, and if she called my friends from school I'd be sussed. But of course, she didn't know any of them either.

"All by yourself."

"That's right."

"Interesting."

"Anyway," picked up George, "after the film was done I saw Michael again and I happened to mention that I might be able to help him with his maths. It's always been a very friendly subject for me."

"That's right, mum, so he's been helping me with my maths. That's why my marks have been ever so much better. You've noticed that, right mum?"

"Oh yes, I've noticed. But tell me, Michael, how did you pay for Mister..." She paused and looked at George.

"Macintosh."

"How did you pay for Mister Macintosh's teaching?"

"Oh, my dear madam, I didn't charge him anything at all!"

"Nothing at all?"

Uh-oh. Now she sounded incredulous.

"No, nothing. You see..."

I wanted to hear this myself.

"When I was young I was told the best way to make the world a better place is to help others. I was taught the benefits of doing things for others - how that spreads goodwill everywhere. A former tutor of mine - Mr Graham - told me the best way to reinforce a kindness and a good feeling in your own mind was to offer it unfettered to another person in need. So, when I saw Michael, and learned of his need, and realized that I could

help, dear old Mr Graham's words came flooding back to me and I made the offer."

LIAR! I thought, but I went along with this new twist. George must know what he was doing.

"I'm sorry, but how old did you say you were?"

"I didn't actually," said George. "But if it matters, I'm 27."

"And you've known my Michael for how long?"

"Um, well, since he was 12, I think. Yes, three years."

She didn't seem very happy.

"Three years. And in all that time it never occurred to you that it would be a good idea to talk to me."

Time for me to speak up.

"George wanted to, Mum, but I said no."

She turned to me.

"And why on earth would you do that?"

I hesitated.

"I knew how busy you were, and I thought you might get angry, and jump to wrong conclusions. And I just wanted to surprise you with good reports."

After a good long while of staring at me, mum slumped a little, as if giving in.

"It appears I was doing exactly that," she said. She smiled, then: "Michael, be a dear and give me a few minutes to talk to George alone, alright?"

I hesitated. This was it. It all hinged on what was said here, now - and I wouldn't even be allowed to hear it. I confess I found this somewhat irksome, but I did my best not to show it as I accepted that, at fifteen and still a child, I had no choice.

I gave mum a look I'd never given her before - if words had been used they would have amounted to, "*Don't you dare fuck this up for me.*" I loved my mum, but when the truth stuck to the

wall, it was George, not she, who had been there for me in my darkest hours.

I left them together at the table. I walked over to the brick wall about fifty yards along the high street and sat down in the sunlight. With all the traffic whizzing by there was no way I could hear what they were saying, but as I turned back and watched them talk together I noted an intense kind of civility about them. They weren't arguing. First she would talk, then he. Back and forth. Back and forth. Then she spoke again - for a long time this time, with George listening intently. This worried me a bit, but it was also reassuring. Nobody shouted. No one got slapped. There were no tears, no hysteria, no rage. They didn't seem to be at each other's throats at all, and I couldn't help but suppose that that was a good thing.

I think I chewed my fingers quite a bit for those ten or so minutes. My whole life hung in the balance. I loved my mum, but George was everything to me. Without him I might not even be able to continue - I knew it, but of course I couldn't tell her that because that would involve sharing the whole story, and at that moment I just wasn't ready for that.

I watched and I watched - it felt like hours. Finally, they stood up. She offered her hand, he took it, and they shook hands. That was something, wasn't it? Wasn't that a good thing?

Mum gestured me to come back. She hugged me to her, then held my head in her hands, and looked at my newly-poxed, teenaged face.

"We had a nice chat, Michael. George and I are in agreement on almost everything. You're lucky to have a friend like him." She paused. "I want you to know, love, that I regret not being able to find a nice man for you when you were little. I know you needed someone to look up to. I know you did - every little boy does." She paused again. "But, it seems you went out and found one for yourself, didn't you? You always were resourceful. I'm so very proud of you."

She looked into my eyes as if searching for something. I didn't say a word, but I remember my eyes were watering. What *could* I say? Even now, I wonder what those words meant. I've always believed that to her dying day she knew nothing - that she was blissful in her ignorance. But now as I look back, I wonder if George hadn't actually just gone ahead and told her the whole bloomin' lot.

She left. She left me with George. She said she had to go to work, and I took her at her word because at the time it seemed efficacious. But now, I wonder. Now, today, alone here on this silly train, I'm thinking there's no way she could have been telling me the truth. That was before cellular phones and the day had started out, at least, as her day off. So now I'm making a mental note to ask George, again, what they talked about.

I say 'again', because I did ask him at the time. But what's he going to tell a fragile, rebuilding fifteen year old who may or may not have been able to cope with the idea of his mum knowing all of his filthy little secrets. What's he going to say to a boy who is terrified of losing his mum, of disgusting her, of disappointing her beyond all possible redemption?

He told me to mind my own bloody business, and every time I tried to winkle it out of him I failed utterly. It was the one and only secret he ever kept from me - as far as I know. But that's just it, isn't it? If he did tell her and he didn't share that fact with me, then it was a secret shared, but not. But if he didn't tell her anything probative, then it was nothing - a hurricane in my mind - a wisp of smoke in a gale, destined to be, and to mean, nothing.

For my fifteen year old self, my sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen year old self, it meant exactly that. If she knew about me, she never brought it up. She never discussed it over dinner. She never questioned me about it. Nor did she ever question the continued presence of George in my life, and if I told her I was going there she never expressed surprise or disdain, or concern. It speaks either of a greater understanding on her part, or of a

silent sort of sadness that she was not and could never be sufficient for all my needs. At the time I just took it as blind contentment, but perhaps I didn't quite give her enough credit.

In George's care, and with the support of both him and my mum, I re-dedicated myself to my studies. I finished school and went to university. I got scholarships - a real point of pride - though because of George's professional success I knew I didn't need them. At university I applied myself and finished up with all the accreditations I needed as an accountant. Why did I choose accountancy? I'm not really sure. Perhaps it was because I was always good at making things add up. Perhaps it was just a desire to emulate and thank the good man in my life.

Being an accountant has allowed me to be comfortable - to look after my family in a reasonable way. What they need I have always been able to provide. It wasn't always easy, and I sometimes wonder whether the money that I was supposed to have earned as a boy might have made things easier. Perhaps. But without it, at least I can claim to have resisted Kenneth's control, and I can point to a life earned through the will and determination of my own mind, not the rampant, mercenary abuse of my body. If he had given me *any* major part of the money he had promised me, all my achievements would in some way have been tied to that, and nothing would be clean.

University took me away from George, but not from his influence. He was always there for me. How right Flo had been to put us together. She must have known how perfect he would be for me. Perhaps she even saw how I would help *him* - after all, she had known him for a long time before I showed up. She was a friend to us both for the next five years, until she had a stroke, right there in the booth at the theatre. She was taken quickly to hospital, but treatments were primitive then, and she died within a couple of weeks.

Ladies and gentlemen, next stop, Redruth.

Redruth

Quiet again. I had no idea there were so many stops in the run to Penzance. So many chances to sit, and wait, and think. I have a sense that Redruth is a small place - almost a forgotten place. It feels still. No one is getting on or off here. This was a commuter train when we left London, but now it feels more like a shuttle. Of course, at this time of night none of the locals are shuttling anywhere. They're all locked up comfortably at home, eyes to the goggle box, minding their own business, numb to the travails of the strange and troubled man in the Penzance train who is endlessly re-hashing the horrors of his life. They're the sensible ones. That's where I should be - *where I would normally be* - where I would be at this very moment if it weren't for...

I redoubled my efforts, after school, to establish a solid career. I told you that when I met Kathy it was like it was *meant to be*, and that still holds. We met at that work do, and the strength of our forged connection from that first night only increased. How could it not? When I told her about my childhood - about *all* of it - she didn't run, screaming for the hills. She stayed with me as George had, showing understanding and compassion and belief in my ability to survive it all. She could have balked right then and there - panicked within - fleeing in fear of a life supporting a wounded soul, but she didn't. She locked arms and stayed with me.

She stuck around for the episodes, the seizures, the nightmares, the tiny, laser-focused moments of *isness* to which I was prone. She supported me through those - sometimes offering the mere touch of her hand on my shoulder as a help to steer me through. She even stayed when I strayed - finding myself, strangely, and ironically, tangled up in an anonymous encounter I don't to this day remember initiating. She could not, she told me, ever hope to understand my pain, but she would always be

there for me. She would always listen, and try, and she always has.

In truth, I think she cried about it more than I did. It affected me, yes, but in some ways it affected her more. She used to get angry *for* me when we talked about it - the assault on my budding manhood, the abuse of the power dynamic, the dishonest manipulation, the extortion. She never said it out loud - conscious perhaps that I might not yet have asked the question (how could I not?) of its inherent *rightness* - but I'm sure she wondered how I even survived it all. It was so very much darkness, betrayal, use, abuse, and horror for a childish mind to absorb. As a matter of strategy she would allow herself to get wound up, from time to time when we talked about it, as if her doing so allowed me to remain more calm and detached and pragmatic whilst being exposed third-hand to the emotions of it all. I think this enabled me to be cognizant, yet unemotional. Sometimes it even led to me defending the punters - after all, they weren't all bad, right? Her anger, deftly expressed, allowed me to remain phlegmatic - to ooze out my mental shit bit-by-bit, thereby keeping it under control. She recognized when I needed that. She recognized when I needed to regulate, to vent.

I mentioned before, I loved her from the first time I met her. She was so pretty, so refined. She was smart - much smarter than I. Oh, I had done the work, put in the time, and had somehow scrambled away from the fracas of my youth with qualifications and prospects, ideals and beliefs, but she had all that naturally. She was so much smarter than I, and infinitely more elegant, and for the life of me I couldn't imagine (I still can't) what she saw in me. I was as grateful as I was amazed, however, when I plucked up my courage and asked her, and when she said yes, and my gratitude was only reinforced that amazing time when she first told me she was pregnant.

My thoughts when she told me... how do I encapsulate them? I was overwrought. Overjoyed. And one hundred percent terminally terrified. The responsibility, the pressure, the demands on both

the physical and the mental acts of living - they terrified me, all. I felt unworthy. I felt suddenly ineffectual, as if all the angst that had filled me to the brim when Kenneth and Bruno were in my life spilled out now in a dream, threatening to drown me in my own fear. "Don't fuck it up, boy," said one. Said the other, "You're in the big time now, boy. You can give it to me later. I'll know what to do with it."

At first I thought I would pass out. I flashed back, horribly, to Carstairs and all his deceit, masquerading as kindness. I flashed back to how he had fooled me, how in his words and actions he had stolen my options away, how he gave me no power over my own outcomes. How he smooth-talked me into most of the things I wound up doing with him. How he stood there in front of me then, tall, skinny, evil-grinned, chicken-necked - Adam's apple bobbing up and down in anticipation - and now as his memory still warbles, "*I hope it's a boy, I hope it's a boy, I hope it's a boy...*"

And that's when it occurred to me, waiting with Kathy at the OB-GYN for first news of health and gender. *What if it is a boy? And what if I have... feelings.*

Bumpity-bump.

Kathy was a rock. She knew before I did if one of my spells was coming. Come to think of it, it's rather odd that she didn't see this little episode coming now. But then, maybe she did. On the other hand, how could she? She's smart, not prescient. She can't part the mists of time and peer into the future. All she can do is guide me by being there for me, by holding my arm as I walk, looking ever backwards, waiting for Kenneth to tap my shoulder and offer me, stretched and bloodied, to one of his mates.

The idea that I might have those particular feelings for a son of mine had long bothered me. I was intimately familiar with the feelings in question, and as I think I've expressed before, they weren't all bad. The feelings themselves were... as nature intended. The context, though, that was all wrong. The context

for the feelings was the fundamental horror of them - the co-option of *my* budding masculinity by men who clearly had issues with their own. At first it was slightly flattering, but then it became a source of night sweats. The nightmares I've endured since the escape - even to this very day - have almost always been about my masculinity, what it was, what it wanted to be, and why it could never ever be that.

I spent many an hour, as I waited those nine months for the birth, contemplating my absent father. My middle names became *Theo* and *Retical* as I spent hours and days wondering what I would do, how I would react, if this or that happened. Basically I questioned my ability to do this thing - the father thing - and then when I went to bed my dreams reminded me unequivocally of how fucked up I was and who the hell was I, anyway, to take on such an important role? Such temerity! To think that I, of all people, could be trusted to raise a child.

The day came, and it was a girl. Well, to say I was relieved is not to do it justice. I got drunk that night - something I hadn't done in many months, even adding up to years. A girl would not, could not, be harmed by me. A girl played no part in my foundational memories. There was nothing to recollect there, so there was nothing to fear. With a girl, there was *no* danger of re-living what I had never done in the first place.

According to popular theory people only do what they are taught, what they are exposed to, so everyone is either a victim or a perpetrator. Some are both. In the public sphere there is no grey area. Of course, in bedrooms and studios around the world there is nothing *but* grey areas. Every man I ever spoke to when I was a boy, you know, whilst he was doing his *work*, had good reasons for what they were doing to me, always finishing with some variation or other of, "you know, this really isn't who I am. This is just a one-off thing - I just want you to know that." Why did they think it helped me to explain it like that? Were they saying that for my sake, or theirs? Did they think it gave me comfort? The idea that because for them it was just a one-off thing (most of the repeat customers said that every

time) it was somehow less objectionable or more easily understood by me?

In a strange way, though, I took comfort in their chatter. At least if they were talking like that it meant they had a conscience. They cared enough to cradle my feelings, to try to enable my defences, to de-normalize what they were doing, even though they had to *know* it was done to me so often. There's no way they could ever imagine that they were my first, or my last, or my only.

I could assure Kathy of one thing: she *was* my first, and my only female. She had no competition. And she understood this - even on that day just before we married when I sat her down in the living room of our little flat and told her absolutely everything. Perhaps especially that day. She was in a league of her own - she never had to worry about women from my past showing up unannounced with little swaddled bundles, weeping mightily how I'd done them wrong.

It was always a difficult topic and even though I hadn't really talked about it at length since George and Flo and I had sat down to write that letter I still found myself a razor's edge away from tears. I told her everything. I had forewarned her, so she took it well, but I could see and feel how often and how long she held her breath as I spoke. I knew she was holding it in - she suppressed her true shock so as to not make it worse for me. I knew this, and I let her, because I knew that if she cried, I would cry too, and I was too far past the events to want to go back in that thick, emotional way. Her strength allowed me to get through the telling without suffering a total collapse.

Afterwards, I told her she could ask me anything she wanted. I told her I really didn't want to spend my life thinking about it all, so if she had any questions she should try to put them out there now so that I could return to that time and place in my mind as seldom as possible. She started with the obvious.

"Did you like this Carstairs chap?"

"In my way, I loved him. At that time I thought that what he did with me was just another way to show a boy that you love him. There are different kinds of love, right? I had a basic understanding of that even at eight when I first met him. I also understood that I had needs which my hard-working mother alone could not meet. I was struggling with everything, especially with the lack of my dad, who it seemed wanted nothing to do with me, and then this man showed up - a most unlikely character - and made me feel special. He said nice things. He treated me nicely. He touched me nicely. He fed me well, listened to me prattle on endlessly about things that could only ever be important to a young boy, or to a man who loves him. I even took pleasure from the way he let me have a tiny bit of beer from time to time, and from the fact that he asked my opinion of things. In my mind, he truly did treat me like an adult, and that was an amazing and rewarding thing. Yes, she was at work, and yes, I knew she was working hard for the benefit of us both, but that didn't change the fact that I was almost always left alone. Imagine going from that kind of loneliness to the kind of attention, the golden rays of appreciation, the perpetual sunshine of adoration that Carstairs beamed upon me. Imagine how it feels for a boy to suddenly hear how wonderful he is, compared to before, when he wasn't even convinced he was alive. It is the most amazing thing. All I wanted - all any child really wants - is to be accepted. Appreciated. Heard. These simple things are at the foundation of every human being's existence."

"Do you miss him then?"

"Yes, because your first will always be your first, no matter who it was and what else happens in your life. No, because he did, in fact, ultimately betray me to Kenneth and Bruno. That hurt me, very much. It hurt, knowing that he had not only betrayed me, but that he had betrayed almost every word he had ever said to me.

I'd been with him for three years by the time he did that. To say it was a shock to my core would be an understatement. It was

an earthquake to me - one assuaged only by the temporary excitement of having a new man around me.

"Why wouldn't you tell your mum about it all?"

"How could I? Ever? I knew then as I know now - she measured her duty to me in financial terms. That might not be fair. I know she wanted to support me emotionally too, but that was so much harder to do - me being a boy - and the offspring of her hated ex, to boot. She determined that the best way for her to meet her obligation to me was to make sure the money was there to clothe me, feed me and so on, and she met the other stuff - the emotional stuff - with little more than an occasional tussle of my hair or an embarrassed squeeze around the shoulders.

"And given all that, to tell her anything at all would be to absolutely drop her in it, and that was something I just was not prepared to do."

"You didn't think she could handle it." It was a statement more than a question.

"I didn't know. What I did know is that I didn't want to disappoint her. And even as I was revelling, at first, in the attentions of Carstairs, I knew that if she ever found out about it she would be."

"Did you not know your father?"

Now that was a whole different kettle of fish. All of this, every last moment, had started for me with that person. The man who'd run out on us. Carstairs - you might say - *profited* from his most poisonous act, but it wasn't he who set it in motion. If it weren't for my craven father none of these things would have happened.

"No, I didn't know him at all really. He left when I was very small. He left suddenly, quietly, and without conscience. He left, little knowing or caring how his leaving would affect me. I supposed at the time that he must not have been comfortable with me. What other reason could he possibly have for so egregiously abandoning his duties? In school they slammed duty

into us all the time - duty to Queen and country, to God, to family and society as a whole. Duty was the way to salvation. Well, it was a way, certainly. Duty was a selfless act with redemptive powers - it throttled guilt and bolstered self respect. Duty satisfied was a matter of great pride; duty neglected was a source of unending shame.

"Well, given all that, I couldn't help but imagine the torment my father was living through, knowing how he had let us down. It must, I thought, have been absolutely dreadful! But then when I was out with mum at the market on a Saturday before everything happened, I saw a man who I thought - no, *believed* - was my father. I must have been about six, but I actually recognized him. I knew his face like I knew my own. I knew his soul because I myself, though I had no knowledge of such things at the time, had sprung irreducibly from it. It was like looking in the mirror. It was my father because it had to be.

"My little heart leapt, I remember that much. It *leapt* to see him there, on the other side of the road, and I was just about to start jumping up and down on the spot, yelling, shouting, waving, and to alert mum to what I'd seen, when I saw who that man was with. He was hand-in-hand with another little boy, about four years old. He was guiding him around the market with a pretty, short woman at his side. He was holding that woman's hand too, dragging the pair of them around like trophies from a teddy bear toss. He had a smile on his face as wide as the ocean. They laughed, all of them - even the toddler. It seemed to me that they laughed at everything.

"Competition, betrayal, breach - it was all there. The birth of those emotions, those feelings, right there on that day, at that moment. The rush of blood through my brain seemed to thunder in my ears, and I felt as cold as a winter night as I watched them all. I'm sure my mouth opened, gaping. I know I stared. I stopped, even as my mum tried to pull me along, and stared across the market at my dad. I felt my heart drop. I even felt it stop for a moment as it absorbed the full weight of this most massive of all the betrayals.

"Mum followed my gaze and I felt her stiffen as she realized what I was looking at. In a thrice she positioned herself between me and what I had seen. There wasn't much point to it, but she still tried to protect me from all that pain. She didn't have to do it for long, though. It took only a few moments for the jolly brood to move on around the corner, leaving me to question what had just happened, and to wonder why it hurt so bloody much!

"And that day, that hour, that minute, was the very first time I understood how things went. They were so very happy. It must have been something about *me*. There must have been something wrong with *me*. Nothing else explained it. Nothing else came close to explaining it. Not, at any rate, to a six year old boy.

"I felt hooked, from that moment, to an idea. A vague notion began to consume little me that I must figure out what it was, about me, that was so problematic, and I determined that - if it took me my entire life - I would fix it. I wanted my father to learn about me, and to get to know me and to love me as he ought, so I could somehow come to the conclusion that I was not the problem after all. Even at six years old I had a clearly defined problem to reconcile.

"Of course I wasn't the mistake - I know that now. But I didn't know it then. At that time the problem was me, and that left me bereft as only a fatherless son can be.

"The beating heart of the estranged young male throbs with an earnest desire for acceptance, for understanding. Completion lies there. A boy yearns for the love, the solace, the advice, the company of the man who made him. He needs it, even as a flower needs the sunlight, and when it is denied him, he, like the flower, withers. And when he withers, he obviates the loss. He seeks alternatives, proxies, substitutes - which though not perfect at least go part of the way to assuaging the original lack.

"The problem is that he is only small. He gets confused about what it is that he really wants. He doesn't fully understand the

action/consequence dynamic, and because of that he does things to fill the void which ultimately affect him forever. That's the real tragedy, I think."

By this time, I think I had scared her away from more questions. At any rate, she asked none. She said nothing. We said nothing. Instead, for the longest time, we sat there, together, alone with our thoughts and each other. Finally..

"What's the story with George?"

I told her. Everything. Absolutely everything, on the promise that she would cause him no trouble.

"Why would I cause him trouble?" she said. "He saved you."

"Yes, he did."

And that was that. We sat for several hours together, in that room. It soon turned dark, yet still we sat together. At one point a vicar walked past our window.

"You know," I said, suddenly, "one of them was a vicar."

"One of who?"

"One of the punters."

Again, she fell silent. I looked at her. She was clearly holding her feelings in. I let her continue to do that; it might give her a taste of what I'd been through.

"That's sick," she said.

"No," I replied. "What's sick is how they have to live without expressing themselves."

"Oh surely, you're not going to - "

"What's sick is allowing no outlet at all for an impulse which nature - or God, or whatever you want to call it - made damn near irresistible. What's sick is expecting perfection from men who neither asked to be that way, or knew anything about how to manage it. What's sick is denying a simple, biological imperative in favour of the made-up, often political rules of man. "

She started to raise her voice.

"You're *defending* - "

"No!" I shushed her. "I'm not defending them. All I'm saying is that society is harder on them than is in any way right, and that the extremity of what happened to me is a direct result of that fact."

"Oh, Michael," she moaned. "Don't you see? They've brainwashed you! They've brought you round to their way of thinking! Even after everything you've been through!"

"I'm not brainwashed," I countered. "The difference between us is that you see evil everywhere in that world, while I see it only where it actually exists. Some of the punters were horrid to me, it's true, and they deserve to burn for their trouble." I paused. "But a lot of them were very nice. They were kind and gentle. Some even cried, before or after, or even during. They hated what they were doing. They hated that they felt the need to do it. They hated that the urge even exists in nature!"

"There is and should be only one approach to the pedophile problem," I pronounced. "Love. Compassion. Inclusion. But understanding most of all. The way things are, people are generally ignorant of what it even is, and it just shouldn't be that way."

"So I'm ignorant? I don't understand?"

"Unaware is a better word. Look, to you they're sick. To you they're lecherous, usurious bastards, reaching out to get their jollies from the unsuspecting innocents of the world. Even George, who you concur saved my life. But that's not the way it is, usually. Some are like that, a product of their own lives - but most are not. Most - and let's not forget that they they are all around us, after all - most are suffering from something. Some inner, unscratched itch demands that they try almost anything to resolve their pain, but nothing works except the one thing they're not allowed to have, look at, or even in some places think about. It's an impossible thing! An irreconcilable

catch-22 of a situation to be in even once, let alone for your entire life!

"People say *live your life, be who you are, don't be ashamed*, but that's all bullshit. Those are the same people who show up with sticks and stones and pitchforks when the police release an address or a name. People tell those men to get help, to get counselling, but what do you suppose it is that prevents a young man in the early throes of discovery from doing just that? Hatred and fear. The rage he hears and reads all around him stops him from reaching out even to talk. What if he does open up? What if he tells someone? Can you imagine how much trust that must require? Can you imagine the courage it must take to expose yourself to an uncaring, unloving, angry world?

"And the mandatory reporting laws for therapists? Why would any man, confused, angry, afraid, make any effort at all to get help when his therapist - the one person he needs to trust more than any other - could become bound to some kind of judicial obligation to involve the police? Why would he, in his circumstances - innocent, non-practicing - open up about his feelings when he ultimately has no rights to privacy? Why? No, I don't condone, and I'm not defending it, but Kathy, I've spent a lot of time with an awful lot of those men, and I think I understand them quite well."

"But, Kenneth. Bruno."

"Kenneth's first love was money. How is that any different than a lot of men? He used me, and a lot of other boys, to make money. Frankly, I don't even think he made very much money before they caught him. I think his work was pirated. I can forgive Kenneth for the sex part. What I can't forgive him for is the betrayal. Stealing from me. Lying to me. Then there were the injuries. The fear. And I especially can't forgive him for threatening boys, for coercing them into compliance with threats against their family - or for torturing boys, or worse, just because they couldn't give him what he wanted. Like Stewart. I

can't forgive him for that. For giving Bruno the order. I can't forgive him for any of that.

"And Bruno, well, the less said about him the better. He was just an animal. He went through the motions, but there wasn't a shred of love in him. I don't like to think how many boys he may have thrashed with a rock, but I'll bet that Stewart wasn't the only one. That was part of his thrill. It wasn't just business. For Bruno, the thrill was the control we allowed him. The power over life and limb. In that room, with the boys, he felt masterful, powerful, omnipotent, and that's as addicting as any drug."

I paused. I remember I felt stupid, saying these words. I was arguing - despite what I'd been *put* through - in defense of the men who had lost resolve, who had given up their fight, who had conceded to the devil within them. I was giving them an excuse. I was allowing them rationality and justifying their actions for them. And yet, at the same time, I wasn't: I was giving them voice, but I was also decrying their weaknesses.

"You realize that you're defending them, don't you?" said Kathy. "Is that what you mean to do?"

"They weren't all bad. I feel the need to defend the ones who weren't bad."

If only I hadn't been so needy, I might have known to run like the wind the moment Carstairs said hello. Instead I behaved like a puppy looking for treats: I ran straight to the devil with the box, and rolled over to let him rub my belly.

I choked up. More words would not come. I remember I looked at Kathy, and she at me. We hugged for a very long time. Neither of us said anything more on that day, nor very much subsequently, but that's how she learned about all the rest, and that's how she sized up my response to it. Perhaps that was why she stayed with me. Perhaps her love was actually pity - mercy - sadness, social responsibility. Perhaps she thought I was weak, and that I needed her.

I just don't know.

Ladies and gentlemen, next stop, Camborne.

Camborne

The barest timid little flash of recognition blips through my mind as I sit in my little car, casting about for the whys and the wherefores. It's a station, somewhere. Who cares? It's dark now. No one can see anything. No one can even hear anything as the train sits inert at what I presume to be Platform One (it's always Platform One), awaiting its next instruction. Who knows how many passengers remain. I haven't heard or felt any other movement on board for at least two stops now. Surely that's a sign, if nothing else, that I'm alone. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Whether I'm alone or not, ultimately I travel this track by myself. No one can stand in for me. No one can take my pain. No one can be me, but me.

There have been many days - many times - when I felt alone in my life. Back then, obviously, with a loving mother who couldn't help in any way, I felt alone in the flat at night: she, out working, me sitting with the telly on, my sock-feet up so sinfully on the coffee table, staring at the flickering little screen (that annoying wobble at the top) but hardly seeing a thing. Other than *Hammer House* I couldn't tell you what I used to watch. In my youngest days there were no real choices for what to watch. All I could do was read, and draw, and imagine, and go for walks. Yes, all by myself.

Then there was the flower-scented, child-loving homosexual man whose mere behaviour did more to cure me of my loneliness than words ever could. Then there were two other men - and I use the term loosely - for whom the word 'love' meant absolutely nothing, and who caused me on more than one occasion, by their pressure and their pain, to introvert. They taught me the very meaning of the word alone, for, with them it made no difference how many people were about, I was always on my own. Then there was the man I basically lived with for several years after the hell ended, even though I called my mum's place home.

Many times, too, as I aged, I felt alone in my circumstances. Oh, I knuckled down and got things done - I achieved a lot, managed my pain and all that, but I still felt alone. Through the rest of school I decried friendship. Apart from George, I just couldn't go there anymore. I was naturally charming, and for some reason other kids were drawn to me, but I told more than one of them who I felt was getting too close to fuck off and leave me alone. It isn't that I was being miserable. It's just that - even though Kenneth and Bruno and a lot more besides were in prison by now - I didn't want to get friendly with any more kids. I wanted to avoid the temptation to access that vibe - the one which I used to use to make them comfortable so they'd let their guard down and allow themselves to be trained. I knew I could still do that, but that wasn't my purpose in life anymore.

I suffered a great deal of guilt over that, growing up. I had recruited so many of the participants, and that was something I couldn't forget - no matter how hard I tried. The sunshine on my shoulders as I suggested conkers, the long walk we took as I made him comfortable, then "oh look, here's my flat" - actually Kenneth's studio - and introducing him to *Kind-hearted Kenneth*, the silky-smooth version that came out when some new boy needed wooing.

I felt that guilt, growing up, and I still feel it to this day. The only thing that's allowed me to float above the pain I caused is the fact that as an adult I've never really felt inclined to follow in the footsteps of any of those men. I've never really felt any kind of sexual attraction to boys, though I had been the object of such feelings on so many occasions.

At least, not very often.

That's why I still don't know. I still don't know how I really feel about all this. About the men - even the nice ones. I should feel a world of sadness about it all. I should feel anger, rage, insane and incalculable furies - a thirst for

revenge! But I don't. I feel confused. Empty. And the vacuum leaves me wanting.

I used to think that was a rational lack - who needs to feel angry all the time? But now it feels more like repression - like hiding my true feelings away so I don't have to negotiate with them. Now it feels like running away - all the way down the high street, across, and into the theatre - into the fantasy world, where truly nothing is what it seems.

Perhaps that's how I managed the guilt - by escaping from it. Perhaps that's why I felt as bad as I did, back then, after my own liberation, and now, as I come to terms with all these new things.

Alright, I sense that you want an explanation, and here it is.

I was out from the office the other day, having a pub lunch at the Red Dragon nearby. I was flicking through the pages of a magazine when I happened to look up just in time to see a man walk by. A man in a cassock. A tall, taut-muscled man with curly grey-blond hair.

It wasn't that he walked by which set me off. From that angle he was just another padre, as far as I could tell. No, what triggered me is that I recognized him. He was one of the men. One of the punters. He was one of those who cried and wailed his unholy misery even as he dug himself into me. He was one who felt such angst about what he was doing, even as he shrugged his metaphorical shoulders and obeyed his biological imperative.

As I watched him stride past my table I felt a cold chill pass through me. He even smelled the same. It was him, I knew it was. He was older, certainly. I mean, I'm twenty years on, myself, so you can imagine the changes in him. He was a little bent over - stooping, as if from the weight of something very heavy.

I had a sudden urge to follow him, to see where he went. I knew when I was young that he was a holy man - Kenneth laid it out for me as if being buggered by a holy man was some sort of blessing. He used me three or four times - crying his eyes out,

start to finish - but then I never saw him again. I had occasionally wondered, after I told on Kenneth, if 'the vicar' had been swept up in it all, but now here, large as life, was my answer. He was still *in the order*, as it were, so clearly, *his* God had chosen not to punish him for his weaknesses.

I stood up quickly as he headed down the road. I threw a twenty pound note on the table - far more than needed for my steak and kidney pie - and darted out after him. I looked left, and right, and saw him there, just turning the corner onto The Strand. I strode after him, watching as he turned this way and that, down side streets, up an alley, and along until he pulled up in front of a church on a small connector road off Drury Lane. I was fit and healthy, but I had to walk fast to keep up with him. Even in his cassock, and even hunched over as he was, he moved very quickly indeed.

The church was tall, and clean, but not particularly old. I mean, it wasn't one of the famous cathedrals or oratories. It was a simple, humble C of E spot with a white exterior and a wide open door and a single, small bell way up high in the belfry.

From my perch across the street I watched him walk inside. I stopped to contemplate what I was going to do. It was not an easy matter. I've worked hard to forget that time, but here it was once more, making me feel uncontrolled again. I wondered how I would broach the subject. How would I introduce myself? How would I begin to let him know that I knew who he was, and what he did? First, though, I had to try to take stock of how I felt about him.

I don't know how long I waited there. A minute? An hour? I was practically paralytic as I weighed my options, which ranged all the way from "*go home and never think of it again*", to "*go in there and slit his fucking throat!*"

To my mind, neither of those were good options - far too extreme. But of course, everything in between just felt pointless.

Then doubt settled in. Was it really him? Was he the one? Years had passed, hadn't they? Surely I could be mistaken. If I was totally honest, it might indeed *not* be the man who had used me. But I had to know, didn't I? I had to ask him. And then, if it was him, I'd have to have my say and be on my way. And if it wasn't him, then so much the better. He'd say so, and I'd apologize and leave. Either way, I had to know. And how else could I ever know unless I bloody well asked?

But, really, what if it wasn't him? What then? False accusations, horrendous overreach of suspicions. How could I live with myself? The first sign of madness is paranoia. And if I was wrong how could I ever live with myself, having so smeared the reputation of an upstanding member of society?

Just at that moment he stepped out of the front doors of the church again. He had removed his cassock, and was clipping away at a rose bush in khaki trousers and an orange long-sleeved shirt. And that was all it took. That was what tipped the scale. I remembered in that instant how many of those nights he had shown up on the bed having draped that hideous, long-sleeved, sweat-stained tangerine-coloured shirt across the back of the prop chair in the corner of the room.

Suddenly I felt cold inside.

It triggered a memory.

The decision was made in almost no time at all. *How would I do it* became, suddenly, *it doesn't matter, just do it!* There were things that had to be said, perhaps even done, to right the wrongs of that time of my life. Time was of the essence, because it was affecting me now, too. I was no longer merely the interested observer. The events of this very day show me that well enough.

I stepped out from behind the lamp post I'd used for cover. I looked again at the church. I froze stiff, unable to move. But then I did move. One foot after another, forward, across the

path, onto the road, across the road, straight breathlessly past the man in the orange shirt, up the stairs and into the church.

The peace and tranquility of the space belied the intensity of my feelings. It enveloped me, warmed me like a blanket, yet, equally, it chilled me like a bath of ice. I wondered at the time, what is the source of that kind of warmth? Is that what religion is? Is it God that gives us strength, or is there comfort for believers and non-believers alike in a womb-like physical space such as this? My vision returned. The thudding in my ears eased, absorbed by the calm, cool sanctity of heavenly stone slabs and wood trim. With my vision restored I spotted the pews, and I strode, uncontrolled, in their direction. I took the first one, sitting there in the middle, facing the apse and the altar.

In the still of the church I could hear the vicar outside, snipping away, lopping off dead heads from the rose bushes. There was no wondering, now, whether I would talk to him. The only thing left to figure out was what I would say once I started. I thought I could hear him singing - or was that a kind of guilty moan that somehow escaped his servile throat? No. The vicar was happy - even incongruously so.

It hardly seems possible, but as I sat there, waiting for him to come in from the garden, I could all but see the shadows of trees move across the floor as the planet turned. He took so long at his green-thumbed task that it actually seemed that time was playing out just for me. It felt ironic to me, not least because confronting him might well soon offer a few seismic consequences of its own.

He entered the church, then, and turned and looked at me, smiling as he walked by. He had no reason to suspect anything amiss. For him that time was long gone. Those days were over. I was a boy then, and now I'm a man. There's no way he would recognize me. Perhaps he still suffered from the weakness that made him do those things, perhaps he didn't. Maybe he had a choir boy locked up in the vestry even now, ready to meet his

nasty needs. I didnt know. What I did know is that he was in for a reckoning.

He swished past. Vicar he may be, gay he may not act, but he swished all the same. You can't chart your course rudely inside a small person and not be thought of in dark terms by someone - perhaps even by many someones. I was quite certain that he was alone with his memories of that time. But not for long.

I watched as he tugged a dust rag from his belt and started walking around the church with it. I could picture that as a daily regimen of his. He stood up tall for the higher ledges - even up high on his toes - accenting, for me at least, the shape of his body. I remembered it well enough, but not kindly. He had cried, yes, but that never made up for the why behind his tears. He dusted his way back to the rear of the chapel, and to where I was sitting.

"Hello," he said, politely. He was digging - I knew that. He wanted to know who I was. Point of fact, I hadn't so far given any thought at all to how I would respond if he actually talked to me. Now I had to.

"Hello," I replied.

"Lovely day."

"Wonderful."

He kept on dusting, wending his way back, toward the main doors.

Oh come on, this can't be it! I screamed inside. *You didn't go through all this to talk about the fucking weather!*

I watched him work his way down the right side of the church - under the windows where the sun was streaming in. Finally, his apparently care-free attitude pissed me off enough that I found my voice.

"I know who you are," I said, a little louder than before, to be sure that I projected.

"I beg your pardon?" The vicar looked at me and took about three or four steps in my direction, cupping his left ear with his hand.

"I said, *I know who you are!*" I was very deliberate with the emphasis.

"Have we met?" he asked.

"Oh yes," I laughed, "I think you could say that we've met."

"I'm sorry, you have the advantage. I don't remember."

"Perhaps."

This was it. It was time to catch him up.

"I was quite young when you knew me before. Twelve. Thirteen."

"Were you a choir boy here, or an altar boy?"

"No, I was not an altar boy." I hoped I sounded impatient, because that's how I felt. It wasn't enough that he had fucked me, but now he was going to play stupid? Pretend to forget me? But of course, that was unfair. My reasonable self was quite sure that my being older now gave me the advantage.

But I recognized him, and now it was time to say so.

He was moving closer to me, out of the sunbeam of the church window.

"I was your bedmate on more than one occasion," I announced, searching his face for signs of familiarity. For a moment or two there were none, but then a look of such dread and terror spread across his face that I thought he was going to pass out. It looked like an army of virii spreading over him as his jaw gaped, his eyes widened, twitched and blinked, and the gravity of my words became clear. I saw his throat bob up and down in tremendous consternation. Finally, he put word to thought.

"*Oh, sweet Jesus,*" he gasped, and somehow it satisfied me that I was probably the only person on this entire planet who could make him use such blasphemies. He'd used them before, of course, as I recalled, in a different context.

I saw him clutch automatically at his shirt as the weight of his situation made him stiffen in terror. Was this it? Was this the reckoning he had always feared? Was his life about to be turned upside-down? He slumped down into the pew he'd been standing beside and sat heavily there, staring at me, his mouth gaped wide, his jaw vacillating between open and closed. I saw terror there, and it felt good. He hesitated for a moment, then said:

"Michael."

"Yes," I replied. "Michael."

He looked at me - really studied at me. What was he looking for, I wondered. Features? Verification? Proof? I wondered whether he believed me.

After a while he found his voice again:

"Are you, um - are you alright?"

"Am I *alright*?" I repeated his question, my voice rising a little, causing him to look around his little church in some dismay.

He got up suddenly. I thought he was going to run.

"*Where d'you think you're going?*" I challenged.

"Door," he replied in a pitiful, halting squeak of a voice. "Door."

He stumbled to the big church doors, closed them both, and bolted them shut. In my jacket pocket I held on to my pocket-knife - my little life insurance policy. I was tense; spring-loaded. If he pushed me the wrong way, I knew, I might just go off.

With some hesitation he swished back to where I was seated, then stood there, about ten feet away.

"So from that little display," I said, "I suppose I can assume there's no one else here."

He swallowed hard. "No. No one. No one." He tensed a bit more. "It's just us. What - um - what do you want?"

"So you do remember me," I said.

"Yes. Yes, I do. God, I wish I didn't, but I do."

"You remember what you did?"

"Yes, I remember. I can never forget. I can never undo what I did. I can only hope for the forgi - "

"*You can cut that shit out right now!*" I spat. "I'm not here for that."

My blast of indignation echoed through the church, then there was only silence between us. He looked horrified - at my language in his holy place, and at my mere presence again in his life.

"Well then... what are you here for?"

I answered calmly. The theatrics of rage were no longer needed. I knew I had his attention.

"I wanted to ask you some questions," I said, softening. "There are some things I don't understand."

"Oh my *GOD*," he exclaimed. He seemed relieved, though I had not yet granted him cause. "There's so much that I don't understand, too - even to this day!" He hung his head, then quickly raised it and look at me. "But please, ask. I promise I'll do my best." He looked at me. "To be totally honest right away," he said, "I've often wondered what became of you." He paused. "I worried, you see. I worried about you, and the effect of my actions and I wondered because I worried, and I worried because I wondered, and..."

He saw me looking at him.

"Shut up," I said, and instantly I felt shame for this, and looked away. Even with everything else I'd been through I had never, ever told another human being to shut up, until now.

"Sorry."

When it came right down to it, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to know from this man, but I knew this was a definitive moment for both of us. I held my breath, and reached for something.

"Do you regret it?"

"Oh God, yes!!" he exhaled. "With every fibre of my being. With every moment of every day. Even in my dreams I regret what I did. I regret even feeling the need. The need was so very strong - and I didn't understand it at all - why me, why boys, why you? Where and how on earth and in God's domain did I ever find the temerity to act on those awful, awful feelings? It had been such a battle within me for so long, how could I not in that place find the strength to tell myself no? To deny myself? I have asked myself these questions every single day. I've worried so that I hurt you, that I hurt any or all of the boys who..."

"How many did you... *visit*?"

He swallowed hard.

"Four," he said, and hung his head again. "Four too many."

"Nice to say that now." I stopped and thought about it. "I remember you cried a lot."

"Yes. I really did not want to be there. It felt wrong. It was dreadful - a simply dreadful, disgraceful thing to do - and yet it felt like I had to. It felt inside like the universe had dropped me on this planet for that single purpose. The sexual impulse - it's... it's..."

The church fell silent. Outside, a breeze had come up, and it was whistling now, through a tiny gap somewhere in the old building's structure.

"And now?"

"Well, I'm older, obviously. After it all broke up - oh, God, I was so happy when it got broken up, but scared too, not knowing if... Anyway, I completely re-dedicated myself to God and to my fellow man, and to my work, and to doing as many good things as

I possibly could to try to make up for my weakness and for the horror of what I did with you four sweet, innocent... I'm in my sixties now, but I still feel it. It's a shadow of what it was, but it's still there. I have to work very hard, even yet, to resist thinking about it.

He pointed to the side of the church, to a large bank of candles. "I light a candle for each and every one of you every single day." He paused, thinking... "You, Kevin, Steven, and Stewart. You were all such fine boys, very fine indeed. I truly loved you, in my own dreadful, selfish way." He paused again. "What I teach my parishioners - that God can forgive everything - I believe to be true. But I will never forgive *myself* for what I did to you. If I am to be forgiven it must be by you boys, and by God. I can never - "

"Did you know about Stewart?"

"Not at the time, no. But then they printed his picture in the paper. I didn't know about it at the time, though. Lord, no."

Did I believe him? Yes, I did. The evil of my life resided in Bruno and Kenneth. The vicar was never one of the nasty ones.

"How is it," I asked, "that you managed to get away with it?"

The vicar looked at me, studying. Finally, "I have no idea. I believe in God, of course, and I ascribe all events to Him, but I have never understood why I should be spared for what I did. We're taught to understand that such things are bad - evil - and yet, sometimes it seems there is no choice, and no consequence. I have never understood this. Such an unbalanced, random world. It makes me wonder sometimes if..." He trailed off.

"If what?"

"Well, if God's plan isn't more *about* us than *for* us."

He paused again. "What do you think, then?"

I hadn't expected to be asked anything. I had arrived there angry, determined, yet unsure. I was tense, and I didn't really

know what I expected - of him, or of myself - but I knew I had to talk to him. There was a part of me which could not go on without at least trying to understand his role in what had happened to me, and I knew that if I was to actually live out the rest of my days without anger then I needed to achieve some kind of understanding. There was nothing affirmative about blind rage. I could have shut him down, screamed at him that I was asking the questions, but instead I accessed the depths of maturity which had helped me survive all those assaults, way back when. I thought for a few moments.

"I think it's because there's a purpose for everyone who lands here, in this world. Everyone has something to learn, and learning comes from pain. A life without pain is never promised, and is at best of negligible value, so the only thing to be determined on each person's path is what kind of pain - and how much - they will have to endure."

I stopped, and looked at him. To this day I'm not sure how those words managed to form in my mouth. I don't think I had ever so much as thought them before.

"Was I the cause of your pain?" he asked.

"You specifically? No. Kenneth and Bruno, definitely. I curse the day I fell in with those two gents. Of course, they led me to you..."

He looked at me. "I hated who I was and what I was doing. I hated that I got caught up in it all. My mistakes - that's what they were - were made in the name of love. Love of my youngest self, perhaps. Love of beauty. Love of joy, of intimacy. My motives were pure even if my needs weren't, and they were tied up in the visceral, the innate. But even as it was happening I knew that *they* - Kenneth and Bruno - were the *real* evil. They were not there for love. They were there for something else altogether. I did what I did. I took what I took. But Kenneth and Bruno... they lived for it. They gloried in it. They thrived on the pain and the humiliation and the horror they caused. They wallowed in it, they burgeoned within it, and they made money

from it. They thoroughly enjoyed inflicting pain. They were the real evil."

"Yes," I concurred. "They had power, and they loved that. Control of others. The boys did what they were told, and that got them off. That's who they were. The sex was secondary. They didn't care about us. They got hard for the power. They liked barking an order and having it carried out, and they derived pleasure from reinforcing their power with their hands, their fists... or with large rocks."

The conversation, which had become rather more civilized than I had been prepared for, dwindled, and neither of us said anything for several minutes. The only sounds, again, were the whistle, the cars and lorries motoring past, and the swaying in the wind of the nearest tree branches.

"Did you figure out that I was the one who told on them?"

"The letter that the police received: that was you?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell them?"

"All the bad parts."

"They never came for me."

"Which must mean that you weren't written down in *Kenneth's Little Black Book of Magic Tricks*."

"So you didn't tell them about me?"

"I never even spoke to them. In fact, I'm amazed that they never tracked me down. I thought they'd find me for sure. I mean, surely someone they spoke to could have identified me. Or the photos. Or all the printed mags and movies in circulation."

"I didn't know there were such things. I thought you were just, um, for hire."

I looked at him.

"Well, that's not completely true, is it?"

"What? Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean... didn't I see you once, standing at the back of the room whilst they filmed me and Bruno?"

"What?! Never! No no no... I have no recollection of that at all!"

Now that worried me. I had a crystal clear visual from the worst of times of him standing there, watching, and chewing on his nails, but here he was, saying that it wasn't him. Should I believe him? Do I have any reason to believe him? Do I have any reason to *disbelieve* him? Why wouldn't he stay after, and watch, or come early, to stoke the proverbial fires? On the other hand, he had cried his way through every single time so did it really make sense that he would draw satisfaction from watching? If he was telling me the truth then my mind had tricked me. Perhaps on one of those nasty occasions over the sheets and under the lights I'd looked out into the leering, lecherous audience and subconsciously planted his friendly face on the watching body of one of the perverts I loathed. Perhaps he was something of a safe place for me, even then, because he wasn't mean and nasty and foul.

So did I like this man? I mean, back then? And what about today? There we were, having a conversation about horrors, as if we were meeting in the lunch room at the office discussing a file. Was that comfort? Was I now actually comfortable with this tainted, perverted priest? And why? Because he cried? Because he never called me names? Because he never beat me? Because he evidently cared a great deal, even as he bent reluctantly to the enormous will of his nature?

"May I ask you a question?" he said.

I nodded.

"You don't seem to be here to hurt me at all, so why are you here? Are you looking for help? For money? What?"

"I'm... just trying to answer some questions."

"You're what? Thirty? Thirty-two?"

"Thirty-three now." I paused. "There's only one thing I need to understand," I said, then continued: "You came back a few times. Was there a special reason for that?"

He answered without hesitation.

"I hated that I needed to do it, but I really enjoyed that time with you. Plus, you were available, weren't you? God, that's an awful thing to say, but through all the tricks and turns of your life, you were there. And somehow you showed up just when I needed you the most."

"Well, Kenneth did."

"Yes, it was him. Through someone else I happened to know, and they through a friend. I felt absolutely terrible - especially the first time - but I felt wonderful too. Like I'd finally found the centre of my life. Think of that! That you, at twelve, should somehow be the centre of *my* life!"

"How much did I cost?"

"You mean they never told you? He told me that what I paid him was 80% yours, that he was holding it in trust for you." He paused. "So he lied to me, too."

"The devil lies. You can't trust a word he says."

"I'm so sorry!" he vexed. "If I'd known, I would have paid you directly."

"I don't care about that. In fact, money would have made it worse so it's okay that I never saw any. I know what it was - I worked with an understanding of what I was doing, and why. But perhaps not ultimately being paid for it allowed me to consider myself a victim rather than a participant."

Not that either one is any more healthy than the other.

Bumpity-bump.

Ladies and gentlemen, next station, St. Erth.

St. Erth

Now there's rain driving hard against the windows - hard enough that I feel tiny flecks of water on my hands and face from the open vent above. In my mind I see dark, low clouds scudding by to my left, across the channel and along the coast. Trees wave back and forth in the winds as if trying to get my attention. But I can't fall for that. I can't even *begin* to think about that. It's not time yet to rejoin the world.

The train is stopped. There's no movement of any kind but the wind and the rain. Even with my eyes closed I know that it's dark outside. As I expected, the world has moved on without me. In that respect I am alone now. Completely, utterly alone. It's just me, in this train, in this world, living with my thoughts and my memories. My little extensions of self.

"What I wish," I told him, "is that you - *all* you men - had been able to control yourselves. I wish that you had somehow found the self-possession to recognize temptation and stare it down. I wish you'd been able to find another way to manage yourself rather than taking your frustrations out on me - on us. I wish that you'd done something else with all your little anxieties than breeding them into us. I wish that you'd been a little bit less animalistic in the way you acted - in dominating me and bending my little self to your will. I wish..."

I paused. Suddenly, my mind was full and overflowing with energies I didn't really understand.

"I wish it hadn't been me."

He said nothing. There was nothing he could say that would not fall short. Finally, he managed, "I'm sorry," and I turned to look at him.

It wasn't much but it would have to do.

The silence strung out like a web between us. Time to think. To be. To remember. Man and boy. Priest and parishioner. Pederast

and... *pin cushion*. I started to cry. Something I hadn't done for a very long time.

He hung his head, evidently ashamed as I vented my feelings. "I can only speak for me," he said, "but you have no idea how often I've railed at God - at my very *Maker* - over why I had those feelings - over why this bloody need even exists!"

"Shouldn't your faith be enough to overcome such things?" I blubbed.

"My faith is everything to me, and does everything for me, but it can't by itself overcome the intensity of the innate. For whatever reason - my life lesson, my challenge, my temptation - *God...*" he looked right at me, "...or nature, the cosmos, genetics, DNA - gave me this cursēd attraction." He paused, as a motor, gearing down. "When other men follow their compass - when other men *be who they are, or live their lives*, their journey might take them to places that are not condoned. But nor are they forbidden. When other men feel the need, the urge, the cataclysmic desire to unite with their own specie, they simply find a willing woman and bleed the valve. But I - we - can't do that without living in violation of every societal decree, without breaking every law. We cannot do what we must to exist without falling afoul of the world order, and I, too, of the church order. And we can't so much as *feel* these feelings or acknowledge them without also knowing the hatred that society reserves for us. Yes, hatred. Hatred. For being what we are - for being what God or the cosmos made us. We can't even inhale without knowing the putrid loathing that the world heaps upon us. We can't be ourselves. We can't express who we are. We can't feel the joy of fulfilment - emotional, or physical. We can't do any of that without risking all we have built in our life. We can't obey the laws of our nature without falling afoul of the laws of man. We can't do it, we can't draw it, we can't write it, we can't look at it - we can barely even *think* about it without someone looking for a way to somehow punish us simply for existing.

"So, what are we to do? God tells me, this is your challenge. This is your pain. Deal with it. Negotiate it. Try and fit it in with the world. Try to belong in a world which hates you. Try to live your time with this challenge as a yoke around your neck, an anchor on your belt. Try to love yourself as I have commanded, and so to love Me, to understand, to appreciate your good fortune over others who also struggle, even as everyone around you loathes your very existence. Believe in yourself, and believe in Me, even as those around you use My words in justification of the unkind and the ungodly, and the actions they take even against the challenge I have given you. Use your time to understand yourself, to learn, to be tolerant and so get closer to Me."

He paused.

"I get angry too. God knows I have anger within me. Anger at being this way. Anger at those who can't see that their rage is misdirected. Love is love, in whatever guise it appears. Love is love, and hate is hate. Abuse and love are never the same thing. Abuse is evil, but love is kind. We all experience things - the things that make us who we are. We use them as excuses for our own behaviour. My father was a God-fearing man. He beat me. Perhaps he is why I needed to show *love* to you - to boys. Perhaps *I* had an inner need to correct *his* mistakes, but I over-compensated, psychologically. I don't know. What I do know is that the need is innate within *me*, and it demands expression even as it demands control. And so the war rages.

"When you're young everything is simple, very black-and-white. You think you can be happy, and maybe you are for a while. But it doesn't last. It doesn't matter who you are or what your challenges are - you can't be truly happy for long. If you are, you're doing something wrong. You're not learning. All you can be is less or more *unhappy*. Sometimes you think your actions will make you happy, but they don't. Sometimes you think your thoughts will make you happy, but they don't. Sometimes you act on your thoughts and you're still not happy. Everything you do

just makes you curious about the next question, the next answer, the next puzzle, the next challenge.

"And then we get old and we look back on a lifetime of pursuits and we consider that whatever happiness we might actually have achieved has come more from the things we didn't do - the things we resisted - than from the things we did, because ultimately if we didn't do anything we can't have done anything bad. In a man with a conscience, happiness comes from clarity. Unhappiness comes from the confusion we feel when we try reconcile our needs and our wants, and how the way they *actually* make us feel doesn't equal the way we *thought* they would make us feel.

"We spend our whole lives trying to fill voids, trying to think and say and do things which will explain what we somehow missed out on as children. We spend a lot of energy trying to correct the feelings which we don't think we should have. The orphan, the abandoned, the beaten, the used and abused - the all-encompassing pursuit of things that were never there, but which we believe should have been. The sadness that comes from understanding, even intuitively, that our chases are pointless and derivative. Does that mean that life itself is pointless? Meaningless? Perhaps. And yet here we are. The purpose of life is something upon which only each individual can conclude, because the answer is different for each of us. Ultimately, if we can resolve our angst without hurting those around us then we might be on to something. Perhaps the understanding we achieve can be useful to others, and maybe that can define us at our final hour.

"If we go through our lives without reconciling, or at least understanding, our pain, then I believe we have failed in our mission. Perhaps God has put us here as part of a massive organic computer in order to ascertain solutions. Whatever you think of Him He's a very positive force when left to be who He is. But when bent to the will of the power-hungry, He becomes something else. He is used negatively by those who have no sense of self, who are weak and who must be led, who cannot lead, or be strong.

"Your questions cannot be answered by me. My questions cannot be answered by you. You must do your own work, as I have tried to do mine. I have failed, on occasion, to do my work without involving others - you, for example. I imagine that your work involves reconciling what I and others did to you. I hope you approach it with forgiveness, but I cannot expect this and I certainly can't demand it. Ultimately, only you can decide what it all means to be you, and what part your past will play in your future."

He stopped then, as if wondering whether he should say more. I said nothing.

"May I ask..." he continued, "what do you intend to do now that you've found me? Are you going to turn me in?"

In that moment I felt every feeling I had ever felt in the midst of the abuses. Pain. Anger, angst, confusion. There was memory in my muscles - in certain parts of me, long-forgotten agonies raged. White hot passions lived in those feelings, in those places, but in my heart I also knew that I had to find a way to let the anger go. Some of the men I'd known deserved to be punished, but not this one.

"When I got here," I said, "I felt a wonderful kind of satisfaction at finding you. Here you are. Mine now. Roles reversed. I can do what I like with you. I have the power. I have the control. Even before you knew who I was, I was the one with the power. It was liberating. Invigorating. I almost understood for a moment what the draw was for Kenneth and Bruno: knowing that you've got someone totally under your boot can be quite a rush.

"But I'm not them, and you weren't either. Back then. You weren't a problem for me, you were a relief. Compared to some of the others, you were a walk in the park. Should I have had to do those things with you? Probably not. If it had been my choice - if I'd initiated - maybe it would have been better for me, but that's not the way it went. Anyway, comparatively speaking, you were a kindness. Your crying concerned me sometimes - I didn't

know how to handle that - but I know now that your emotion was a sign of your humanity. That you struggled with it was evidence of your inner beauty, and of your pain. Of course, I didn't think in those terms back then - all I knew was that you wouldn't beat me, you wouldn't use tools, and you'd always cuddle after. I also remember how you always made a point of saying something nice about me. That stuck with me, you know.

"No, I'm not them, and you weren't either. And that's why I won't be doing anything to get in your way. I got the ones that mattered when I wrote that letter to the police. I freed the other boys, and I got the bad guys, and some of the uncaring ones. That's quite a success for a 13 year old. I had lots of help - probably more than I deserved - but even with that help it had to be me.

"So don't worry. I just wanted to talk. Things have been happening lately that have been bothering me, and when I saw you in the street I really felt the need to talk." I paused. "I'm sorry if I came on a bit strong at the beginning."

"Of course not! You're a man now: completely in control of yourself - far more than I was. You're so much better as a man than I ever was."

"But you're working now to make up for it," I said, "so don't sell yourself short. Forgiveness comes with contrition. Yes, we have to seek the forgiveness of those we wrong, but sometimes, too, we have to figure out a way to forgive ourselves."

In the silence, somewhere, a small bird flew into one of the church's windows.

"So... can you forgive me?"

Is it the wind or the snap-lurch of the train as it jolts its way out of town that has caused me to alert? The tracks are rough here. Was I actually asleep? Almost, though it might have been the simple, soporific effect of casting my mind back so much that caused me to blank. Such reminiscences are hard work, of that there is no doubt. What I said earlier, about energies:

it takes so very much energy to work on this, to try to resolve it. You can't score any goals, etc etc.

I'm hungry now. I'm trying to remember what time it is. There's a clock on the wall. Hell, there's a watch on my wrist, but I'm still not ready. There's more. There's still more to unfurl.

Did I give the priest a fair shake? I like to think so. I could've done him a great deal of harm and nobody would've blamed me - not even him, so it would seem. He had asked me a simple enough question, and I interpreted it most likely as I should have. He wanted at least a chance to get out of his guilt. The shame he felt had clearly been eating at him for all of these years, and he was asking without asking if he could please, somehow, begin to heal.

"I have to go," I said, standing up from my pew. I wasn't quite ready to answer him. I grabbed my hat and strode over to the big double doors at the entrance. There, I turned around. I saw him hunched over in his seat, holding his head, staring at the floor. I took pity on him.

"Look," I said, "I'm not ready yet, okay? Forgiveness is a big step, and I'm just not ready to go there yet. But I'll make you two promises."

Still he stared at the floor.

"I won't tell anyone. You were nice to me. I actually liked most of your visits. I will keep your secret."

He turned around then in the pew and looked at me. His lip was quivering.

"But I'm not ready for forgiveness just yet, alright?"

"Okay."

"When I am," I continued, "I promise I'll come back and tell you myself." I hesitated. "I'm going to expect to find you here when that day comes, ok? So, for now, just keep doing good things. Good things will help to right the wrongs in your heart." I paused. "That's the best I can do. I hope it's enough."

I looked at him one last moment, as I stood there in the doorway. He was swallowing hard - that much I could see. Then, "I have to go," I said.

I unlocked the door and stepped briskly through it into the bright sunshine. The wind was still blowing. The rain shower had breezed away while we'd been talking and off to my left now two solid rainbows arched boldly across huge, darkened skies. I sailed quietly down the street - alone, completely, with my thoughts.

Bumpity-bump.

I wonder what little Michael would think of me now. No, I'm pretty sure I know. He'd be disappointed with me. For all the stupid, horrible things he did, the stupid decisions he made, it at least *felt* as if he had things under control. But now, today, with me a man, that just isn't the case anymore. Not after all this.

Where are we? We're near the end, that's where we are. Soon we shall run out of track. Soon, this little journey will be done. And what happens then? Nothing. The world carries on - neither wiser nor happier. It just carries on - deaf, dumb, and blind. Stupid. Nobody will learn from me. Nobody will learn from my experiences, my thoughts, my feelings, my mistakes. After all, how can they?

It's raining again. In the movies it always rains near the end. Kathy's at home, wondering. The kids, innocent, beautiful, hopeful, in bed, asleep. Me, here, lost and alone, forever trapped in my solitude.

What a strange day! That one word: "boy". It has defined my life. As a boy myself I lacked so much, and I surrounded myself with people for whom it was also an important word. I grew and grew, and still that word was there. Somewhere I lost the boy within, but now with all my heart and mind I want him back. I need him now - my younger self - even as I needed my father when I was little. My very oneness demands it. There are no

substitutes, as I now know. There is only the real thing. All others are frauds. Sweet, soft, beautiful, guileless frauds. They are on other journeys - other paths, which we cannot possibly walk. We can drag others along beside us, but only we can walk our own line.

He was another. That which cannot be faced. He threatened to be the next. How many boys did I 'recruit' into the game? How many innocents did I smile at, as a boy, then grab and clutch and steal into a world of exciting use and abuse? It's easy. "Hello, I'm Michael." Take an interest. They're all starved for attention. You can tell just by looking which ones want some excitement - which are adventuresome, easily led. You can tell in conversation how far they'll go, whether they can be overcome. And if you tease out of them facts of previous naughty deeds? So much the better. So much easier to twist them 'round if the guilt is already there.

How many? Too many. Little Michael is ashamed of himself. He is completely ashamed that even though he knew it was wrong he could not say no. He is ashamed. And I am ashamed of myself today for what I did then.

Bumpity-bump.

What's the fucking time? Who knows. We've been sat here for ages - the train hasn't moved. I hear nothing. No evidence of anyone but me, and the rain still pummelling the roof. That dampness in the air - the same dampness as the night I scaled the side of Kenneth's flats and hurled myself to freedom. Cold. Clutching. Miserable. This must be seen through to the end, whatever that end might be. It is already written. In the here and now, there is nothing - no one. It is as if the whole world is waiting for me to resolve this, to figure this out. It's as if the planet has held its breath while I work to remember it all, even up to today.

He wasn't meant to be there. He'd never been there before. Why was he even there? Why on earth would he be? But he was. And so was I. And now... Now everything feels different.

It was at the office tower where I work. I was getting ready to go home. One last trip to the water closet and I'd be on my way to Paddington, to Kathy and the kids. I hadn't a care in the world, outside of the obvious. It had been another successful day, another good, solid work day - another in a long line of testaments to the power of the love which George had given me, and my personal triumph over the forces of evil.

Then *he* showed up.

I was at the urinal when he came in. He pulled up beside me and I sensed rather than saw as he lifted up so he could reach in without splashing. No, I didn't look. I didn't have to. But something triggered.

He was about the same age as I was when Carstairs found me. He looked... self-assured, confident, and that drew me to him right away. Even without seeing him I knew he looked good to me. I saw little Michael in there - in his physique, his face, his size. I saw his curiosity, his determination. I saw, or sensed, his fear, too, as I looked at him, and as, in my mind, I talked to him - and talked and talked and talked. My lips still, I talked about the weather, sports, and school. He heard nothing, of course, but in my mind he understood it all. It didn't occur to me that he'd been taught to avoid strangers - in my day that wasn't really a thing. Perhaps it's only a thing now because of what happened in my day. No, that's not right. Even my mum, busy-busy, had the awareness to warn me about strange men. *Why is it always men they warn about*, I wonder.

Oh, how I talked! On and on and on, about nothing, about everything. Certainly about nothing he could possibly hope to understand - because, very clearly, he didn't have the experience I had had at his age. Someone was looking after this lad. Someone cared about him. Somewhere - perhaps in this very building or even right outside the door in the lobby - there was a father - big and strong, and protective, looking after all his

needs. Perhaps that, too, drew me to him. The idea of a boy with a father appealed to me. An ideal state. A perfect - an immaculate - union of beings. A love founded on adoration, not worship. A love founded on need, not desperation. Unlike anything I ever knew.

He was small. He had short hair, and sharp, clear eyes. Everything about him reminded me of little Michael. Little me. Everything except the luck.

After I finished and he still attended to his task - I backed away slowly and turned to the sinks to wash my hands. Then, as I reached to grab a towel to dry them I saw him in the mirror. Somehow, the sight... inspired me. A flood of memories surged in, supplanting all the good work I had ever done. The shape of him, the action, the pose - I had seen it all before. And suddenly I was as interested in it - even to the point of arousal - as I had, for years, been disgusted by it. Suddenly, it seemed that he was there for the taking. Suddenly, the poison of all those usurious men flooded through my veins. The visions I had long suppressed, the emotions I had tried so hard to work through all immediately melded together and grabbed hold.

I moved to the door and stood there, watching. He was only small, so it didn't take him long. After he was done he put himself away and turned to wash his hands. That's when he noticed me. He tried to smile. Or did he? Perhaps I saw what wasn't there. Rather, I had the sense that he was trying to decide if he should. Perhaps he could feel my need, radiating across the room. After a moment he appeared to suffer an understanding - and I observed a change in his life force - it lowered slowly across his face like a veil. I recognized it instantly. Vulnerability. He was suddenly struck with an understanding of how prone he was, and it was making him very uncomfortable. He was small, and I wasn't. And that, too, brought back memories.

My mouth opened a little - I should actually say something, I thought, to calm him, to reassure him that I mean no harm. But words would not come. I was blocking the door - not deliberately, but I was - and he already knew that once his

hands were clean and dry he'd have to try to get by me that way. There was that vulnerability again. He was at my mercy. I had power over him. I had control. He knew it, and I knew it. But still my words would not come. *Don't worry*, I wanted to say. *You look like a lovely little chap - I've got one of my own!*

(Ownership) But nothing came. Nothing. Nothing, but the look of the terminally flummoxed, the despicable, animal confusion which was clearly concerning him very much. I imagined, even as all this was happening, that the effect wouldn't have been much worse if I had held a torch up from below and contorted my face grotesquely. If I wanted to terrorize the poor child I couldn't do it any more effectively than with my stymied, dull, impotent silence.

I didn't want to terrorize him, of course, but I'm certain that's what happened. Me standing in front of the door was an accident - a happenstance - but it was a critical factor when he was finished at last with his sweet, small hands and couldn't get away.

He backed away from the sinks and looked at me. I saw him swallow. I saw him blink. His soft hazel eyes seemed to dart here and there and back again as he sized up the room, the space, and me, his enemy. The thinnest sheen of sweat appeared on his little brow as his concerns grew and grew.

Like me, he couldn't talk. I know - I knew - that he wanted to ask me to move, but he couldn't. Something in his eyes said there was something in my eyes. Animal. His fear was practically palpable. Tangible. He backed up, one, tiny, shuffling step at a time. I doubt in the whole time we were locked there together that he shuffled so much as even one foot away, but I knew that to him it felt like a distance too small and to me it felt immense. Too little, and yet too much.

I saw his mouth moving, his little jaw flexing, his little throat bobbing up and down as he struggled to comprehend what was going on - what I was, unintentionally, putting him through.

I doubt the whole exchange - after he finished with his hands - took more than thirty seconds, but it was the longest thirty seconds of my life. In my mind I went all the way back to the

events I had worked so hard to forget. But it was different now. I was the aggressor, the angry man, the scared man. I was the power - he the innocent. I felt the rage. The strong, sexual angst welled up from deep within, and with every passing moment I grew more and more startled and confused. Though I didn't so much as lay a finger on him, I know that every second trapped there with me was making him feel like a victim.

That's what broke the spell. That word. What I had been. I had been a victim myself all those years ago, and the sudden dynamic - the exchange between us - of the powerless and the empowered, finally made me move.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Please, do excuse me."

"Fanks," was all he said. He knew, but he played along. Why did he do that? Why not rather shout at me, "*Oi! Get the fuck out of my way!*" Why not get angry and take control? Why not charge at me and knock me off my feet? Why? Because all the energy in his little body wouldn't be enough to budge me if I didn't want to be budged, and he knew it. He instinctively understood his size, and respected mine. And I think that he also, somehow, respected my need to resolve this impasse on my own.

Thirty seconds. Maybe thirty-five. Not the end of the world. Easy to dismiss. Easy to explain away as a misunderstanding. But with everything that had happened, with the priest, the shut-downs, the latent, residual rage, the understanding, the unresolved confusions, I knew what had actually gone on.

The door snicked shut behind him. I saw his bum as he rounded the corner and sprinted for the lobby. Surely, after everything I'd been through, that wasn't what this was all about!

Bumpity-bump

The train. It's moving again. When did that happen? I don't know. What I do know is that I've had just about enough of this. It's not pretending when there's nobody else to pretend for. When you're all by yourself, it's just madness. Solitude. Guilt. Yes, I'm about done here.

My heart leaps as I think again of Kathy and the kids. My kids. My beautiful children. I need to shake this madness off, and soon, or risk losing them all forever.

I don't know where I am. I don't know what the time is. I don't know anything anymore. Can meeting that boy really have affected me as much as all this? Perhaps it really was a trigger. Perhaps I am one of them now. One of *those* men. Perhaps meeting him, restricting him, scaring him - even for such a short time - shows me, once and for all, that nothing happens without consequence. Perhaps the filthy depravity of their world has finally found me again, sprouted and grown to full, physical...

No. No. That's not possible. They were - they are - a part of my life, but that doesn't make me what they were. The sins of the fathers... *Bullshit*. What if there is no father! The sins of every man on the planet who finds you attractive? I'm me. I'm not them. I'm not what they tried to make me. I'm just not. I'm different. I'm me.

I'm angry now. That I could succumb to this kind of madness. That I, of all people, should suddenly think that *I* number among *them*! With all the things that they did - all the things that were done to me - that I should suddenly, inexplicably feel akin. Ludicrous!

Bum. That little place. Unbidden, it heaves into view. Even now, eyes-closed, I see it, and my body, my mind, screams for that journey, that adventure, that time. It's a longing. A longing that I can appreciate, even as I cannot understand. Where's the antipathy? Where's the loathing? How can all those memories (hands, lips) have resolved themselves into this? Into desire? Into lust? Into curiosity? What need is this that I should be so consumed, even with everything I've been through?

My heart is racing. My loins, roiling. Sadness fills me. Fear. It's not possible. It's just not possible.

Bumpity-bump

Ladies and Gentlemen, next station, Penzance.

Penzance

I am full to the brim with my world. I'm logical, but emotional. I had thought that, with George's help, I was done with all of this. I had actually believed it. It was what I wanted: triumph over my adversaries, banishment of my evil. When I took care of Bruno, and Kenneth, I had all but literally washed my hands of them, of their evils. George had taken me away, loved me. He had raised me. He had taken up the mantle of responsibility and helped coax me into manhood. I owed him everything.

The train is still, at last. Penzance is the last stop. The end of the line. I feel nothing. It must be close to midnight by now - there's no movement. I'm the only one here. I have to get off. Sooner or later someone will come to clear the train. I don't want them to wake me. I don't want another person to rouse me from this stupor. I need to bring myself out of this - to rejoin the world on my own power. After all this, I don't want another face to break the bonds of isness.

I hold my breath, clench my eyes tight-shut. I grit my teeth.

I knew all along what the wall opposite looked like. I knew the whole time what I would see there when I did open my eyes: a plain, dark panelling with simple mouldings, a small sconce for light. A dark, ornate, time-worn printed pattern of vinyl and cloth on the seats over there. I knew all along how ordinary it was. How tremendously boring. I hold my breath even so, readying myself once again for engagement with the world. I'm scared. It's scary to have to move on again. The comfort of this place, this solitude, it's kind to me even as it reminds me of troubling things. No, *reminds me* isn't the right phrase. I didn't remember it - I relived it. In that washroom with that boy, I relived it all too, in moments, but differently. As a boy I knew what to do - when to resist, when to submit. I knew how and when to assert myself, and when to close my eyes and let it be.

This is not one of those times.

I open my eyes.

Panelling, light. All as I knew it would be. Quiet. Warm. Reassuring. Good.

My heart slows as I turn my head left and look outside. Train cars, resting in the dark. Street lamps. A bridge for pedestrians over the tracks. No rain. Wind. Lots of wind.

I need to move my legs. I need to move my mind. I've been sitting here for so long - it feels like years. Well, it would, wouldn't it? Small movements will bring the circulation back. That's the way. I look down at my knees - at my black trousers. I think of the queers, then - did they look at them as I rested there? Did they stare? I felt their eyes on me - I know that feeling, believe me. Did they stare at my gay little legs? Did they think naughty thoughts as I sat there, locked in a struggle with my angst?

It's time to go. Kathy. The kids. They'll be worried. No, the kids will be asleep. They won't know. But Kathy will, and she will be worried. I owe it to her to end this, to resolve all of this and return to the land of the living.

The boy will be fine. It was an eternity to me, and a thunderclap of unexpected anxiety, but to him it was a momentary detention. Nervous he may have been, but frightened he was not. No, I should worry more about myself - about what brought that moment about. Perhaps, after all these years, I actually do need to think about getting help.

I move my foot, then I look down at it. It's just a foot. I look at the other one. In a moment, or in a few moments, both of those feet will do what they are designed for. They will carry me to the door, to the platform, to the bridges and out through the exit to the street. In another moment they will begin to carry me through the town, along the main road all the way to the end, through the ancient cemetery, up the path to the cliff edge. I want to see the ocean. Even in the dark it must be a magnificent sight to behold!

I hear doors behind me, opening and closing. No words. But I know what is happening. The guard is checking every compartment. He's looking for sleepers. He needs to clear the train so it can shunt ahead and rest in its siding.

It's time.

I grip the seat, slide myself forward to its leading edge. I hoist myself up. Turn. Walk to the door. As foretold, from there to the platform. Open the door and step out. The air is cold, unwelcoming. The wind slaps me, hard, in the face, drags me by my little summer jacket. A rain drop tickles my cheek, but only one. Perhaps two. I turn left, clutching my briefcase under my arm, leaning forward into the Force Six. The wind takes my breath away. It seems angry with me. Controlling. It feels like hands on my body - pushing me, pulling me, touching me in ways I don't want. Nasty hands. I seek the shelter of the overpass, look back at the train - back toward the car I sat in, as though my life were in there. I feel muddled, confused, and yet, hopeful as I trudge my way toward those cold, cement stairs.

The howl of the wind is all but unearthly, its ghastly moan unnerves me as it heaves through the gaps in the overpass. But, even as I struggle against it, I know that what they say is true: whatever doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. This has not killed me. This journey has not killed me. This revisiting of past anxieties has not killed me. As unsettling as it has been, I'm still here. I'm still here, and the wind is now slapping a game plan back into me - waking me again to the realities and the potentials of my existence.

Wake up! it shrieks. *Wake up!* I'm almost forty. I have a lot of experience. I have a lot to be grateful for. I have worries, like any man. I have responsibilities. I have understandings. I have needs, and I do my best to meet them. What happened today was surprising, but no one was hurt. No one was hurt, but the power of it... I - I understand better now how some of those men of my youth must have felt. I also understand that I - even I -

live on a knife-edge of control. What drives us will control us if we let it. What we feel is a big part of who we are.

But it's not everything.

I brave the wind again, aiming for the phone booth. Kathy. Kathy deserves to know. It'll be cold to the touch - almost as if its angry plastic should punish me for my recalcitrance. I'm a naughty boy. I always have been. And the universe sees all.

Kathy deserves to know. She's been there forever. She knows about me. She's a part of the story. She knows *all* about me. But she doesn't know this. This is a first. She's good, and kind, and understanding. She will still be there for me. But this is new, and unwelcome.

I can stare it down. She will stand beside me as I stare it down - we will stare it down together.

Another call. To the office. I'll need a sick day. I could get back on a train right now (there are none scheduled) but I still wouldn't be back to work on time. Of course, I won't tell the boss that I 'fell asleep' on the train. He'd probably have me sectioned.

I should find a place to spend the night, but what would I do there - watch the telly? After all that sitting, all that thinking, I need a walk. I don't care about the wind now. In fact, it's welcome. It's not handsy anymore - now it feels more like support, like a gentle buffeting - a definition of, a reminder of my empirical limits.

I wander as I knew I would - up the high street and into a cemetery. There's a church there - ancient and daunting. The path curves down and to the left, then forks into two with this venerable structure in the middle. Even in the dark I can see moss growing on its sides. It looks very worn indeed as it towers there in the darkness. It's nothing like the chapel I saw the priest in. That was clean and white - old, but kempt. This is dank. Dark. Dingy. Truly, if God lives here, He's not a very good housekeeper.

I think again about the priest. I gave him hope. Hope that he can resume his life without being forever tormented for his acts. I won't tell. I can't speak for the other boys, of course, but I know I won't, and if I were to meet them I would try to convince them also to protect him. I know goodness. I know kindness, and I know evil. I've met them both, and I know which one I want in my life.

These headstones. So much history here. An old, old country, with so many people. So much history. Here, 1455. There, 1136. Astonishing to think of people living their lives back then. What sorts of things did they have to contend with? What horrors did they endure? What were their temptations? It's all about perspective. Those people - those lives - give us perspective on our own. My life problems, though big to me, are small compared with their death. My little existence is nothing compared to their finality.

I emerge from the trees, small and inconsequential, and there it is: the ocean. It's enough to make me cry. Is this what I came here for? To look at the ocean? Did I have some kind of ambition to... jump in? What would that prove? Who would that serve? Not me. Not Kathy or the kids, that's for sure. It wouldn't even serve little me - the boy who lived through all those things all those years ago.

In a flash I'm thinking of Carstairs and his family, and that telephone - the one that carved a chunk out of the door frame - and the box, and the theatre, and George - Glorious George - and Flo and the priest. They walk like a parade across the stage of my mind even as the wind beats me back from the edge.

I climb up onto the sea wall. This is it. This is where my Maker decides if He wants me. This is where the universe rises up. I'm standing high above the path, but below the tree line. Deliberately, I lean out, but that's where I stop. The wind, the handsy, angry wind, grabs my body and holds it there. My eyes are closed again. I suppose if I looked down I'd see the cliff and the sea wall and the waves crashing onto the shore, but I

don't, because my eyes are closed again and I'm back in that world. On my bike. In his bed. And probably, to this very day, in a little box, somewhere on a shelf, high up in a closet.

I lean forward some more. I'm ashamed of myself. This is not the way. It's a coward's game to expect the rocks to do your work for you. And why, anyway? Why should I feel the need? I did nothing wrong. I got trapped by my needs. Is that so dreadful? I made decisions which made decisions for me. Is that my fault? In my childish mind I felt I had found a solution to a problem, whereas in reality I had only made my problems worse. Is it so wrong that I tried? They say we must take the rough with the smooth. Isn't that what I did? Didn't I do the best I could with the knowledge and the experience that I had?

Suddenly, I can smell Carstairs. The stink of his perfume - that French shit - emanating from every pore. He practically drowned himself in the stuff to help me. Yes, to help me overcome my natural reluctance. And now it's *his* hands again, grabbing at my body, caressing me, holding me, touching me everywhere. I lean forward even more - surely now... Surely, even now... But he lifts me up, laughing, laughing his laugh, his insincere laugh - hastily erecting the facade that keeps me onside, his terrible cackling laugh ringing in my ears, echoing in the air, echoing all around me until...

Until suddenly, I'm on the ground again. The wind - well, something - has pushed me back from the brink, from the edge, from the wall, and placed me back amongst the dead. I'm looking over at where I was - at the wall I was standing on, but I'm not there anymore. I'm not there anymore, and the wind has stopped. The trees are as still, now as these faithful, old stones, and I'm there on the path, looking back at what almost was.

The truth is ringing in my ears now. The simple truth. What happened was nothing. I see the boy in his bedroom, now, in his bed, pyjama-clad, reading a book - or, better yet, having a story read to him by his loving father, unaware that he was at any time a part of someone else's drama. Unaware, because it

really was nothing. Nothing. Nothing, but a thirty-second maelstrom of the mind. Nothing, but a single moment of madness in a lifetime of rationality. I should worry, I know. But should I worry? I lived through it, and it weighs on me still, but I cannot conceive of a time or a place or a manner in which my experiences could play out at my hand for another.

No. It's time. It's time to go home - to put an end to this silliness. It's time to acknowledge it as a blip, a wrinkle. Feel it, by all means, but know what it is. Put it in its place. What George always told me: *"No matter how you feel about it, it all belongs. Everything you feel and know and believe is a part of you. What truly matters is what you do with the knowledge you have."*

He's right. What happens to you simply does not matter. What matters is how you handle it.

That is the measure of the man.

I should phone Kathy. She'll be worried sick.

It takes everything I have to move my foot - my right foot - but after I do, the left one follows on its own. Soon, I'm walking, almost lunging down the hillside, along the path, past the headstones, through the trees to the fork and back toward the town.

Looking for a phone booth. It's time for all this silliness to end.

"Hello?"

"Kathy, I - "

"Oh, thank God! I've been so worried! Are you alright?"

"Yes, I - "

"Where on earth are you? What's going on? Tell me! Tell me!"

"Well, darling, I will if you'll let me."

"I'm sorry, I've been so worried. I'm so happy to hear from you. Ok, I'll shut up now. What's going on? Are you alright?"

Epilogue

I'm standing at the ticket office as dawn begins to break. The gate to the platform is locked. The storm has passed - I can see it there, over the Channel, on its way to France. Such a wild sky! I'm the only person here. I need to get a ticket back to Tiverton, to Kathy and my kids, but the booth isn't open yet. The trains aren't yet running. Just as soon as the station opens and a train comes, I'll go home.

I've been up all night, in the storm. I'm exhausted. I want to go home now. I want to get moving - to head back to my reality and to leave this misery behind. But I won't be closing my eyes this time. Part of me never wants to close my eyes again - there are just too many memories in my tortured mind - whispered shouts of a stranger time. I don't think I'll be inviting them back any time soon.

In fact, I think it's time to blank the mind. To focus only on that which serves. The past cannot be ignored - it *will* not be ignored - but that doesn't mean it must be worshipped either. The past is a part of the foundation of each of us, but it is not the substance of who we are. The past exists because that's what we were, but it's what we are that's important. If we want to be healthy we use the past to serve the present. The present is where life is, and those who fail to relegate their experiences are doomed to a lifetime of misery.

That's the bottom line. You will have all sorts of experiences in your life, but if you can't put them behind you, if you let them rule you, if you try to correct them by reliving them, you will be unhappy until the end of your days. You cannot go back. There are no do-overs. That's just the way it is.

I've got to get home. It's time to re-engage. I need to hug my children. I need to adore my wife. I need to listen to music, smell a stew, taste a small snifter of something delicious. I have to re-connect with George - *today*. When it comes to this stuff he always seems to know what to say.

I think again of the priest and of all those men. I can't speak to their lives, but I can affirm that they have them. I know that so many of them acted solely in defiance of a world which denies their right to even exist. I wonder for a moment if they would have done what they did if the world would only have let them be. Would the monsters have destroyed for enjoyment if they had known the love and freedom we are all taught to demand? Those men, even the worst of them, even the ones I hated, were living examples of enforced denial. Allowed nothing, they took everything. Perhaps, if they had been granted some kind of peace, allowed some kind of middle ground - anything at all - they wouldn't have been so inclined to pay their anger forward. Perhaps, if the world had given them love, they would have paid that forward instead.

But the world offers only hatred to those men. The world fails them. It fails to recognize or even consider why they are the way they are - genetics, or environment. It thinks that simply saying no is enough, and it rules from fear, imposing punishments even upon their fantasies. It denies them expression, even as it denies them the peace of proper confidence.

The world is wrong. The world should do better. In these more inclusive times, the world should practice what it preaches. Understanding, forgiveness, caring. It tells everybody - be who you are. But for those men it doesn't really mean it.

It's time to go home. Just as soon as I buy my ticket, I'll go home and carry on. Maybe I'll get some help now.

Clearly, there's still work to be done.

