

The Price Of Freedom

by
Rigby Taylor

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Also by Rigby Taylor

Jarek
Dome of Death
Sebastian
Time to Think
Dancing Bare

Chapter One

Robert crested the rise, hurled himself onto the grass beneath the monument and lay gasping up at the encircling palms. After a minute he stood, stretched, dragged off his T-shirt and scrambled onto the narrow base of the sandstone column.

To the left, trunks of old eucalypts cut jagged lines across house and tree-sprinkled hills. Ahead, Brisbane's tower blocks shimmered under their dome of reddish air. As he shuffled around the column, fragments of river wound into the sun's glare, reflecting myriads of tiny diamonds – a lesson in subtlety for the mirror-glass office tower thrusting its bulk between a muddle of buildings. A silvery train slid through the suburban jumble, and behind apartment blocks, houses and trees, reared the steeply tiled roofs of his new school.

People were out there somewhere, tens of thousands of them, but none were aware of his existence. No one knew anything about him. The thought triggered a subtle, almost guilty flush of pleasure.

Arranged over a towel on the grass, a woman tried to read while her child ran amok. The young man sprinting up the hill had not escaped her attention and she watched him sidle into view. Longish black hair, determined jaw, large hooked nose and lips that suggested a smile. Sunlight accented the sweaty muscles of chest and abdomen. Runner's legs burst from pale-green shorts. She casually unbuttoned her blouse as her kid scurried up clutching a leaf. 'Mummy, look what I've found!'

Adonis glanced down.

The mother threw a friendly wave and sagged back on to her elbows – an enormous trout-fly cast upon the stream. Her reward was a tersely nodded frown.

The fat bitch is flashing her tits... Jeeze! What a turn off! Robert shuffled back round the column, jumped down, spread himself onto his shirt and let the warm winter sun set his mind adrift.

'You're crazy to change schools!' he'd been told by almost everyone. 'It's too big a risk to take in your final year. Think of your O P Score. You're mad!' Mad, he wasn't. There were so many no-hopers at his old school that his marks would almost certainly have been downgraded, whereas the new school had several Very High Achievers, so final scores were unlikely to be adjusted. He had always shrugged resignedly and sighed, 'I have to do what my old man says.' This would have intrigued his parents who believed humans learn best when free to make mistakes.

Memories of what he had escaped provoked a satisfied smile. There had been no spot as peaceful and beautiful as this near their last house, and at school he had suffered over-crowded classes and the all-mates-together crap of the rugby team. They'd come third in the secondary schools' competition, but never again would he become entangled in such a world. He loved sport, but team-spirit conformity made him nervous.

He tried to figure out why he felt so relieved - as though he had escaped something evil. Like when he was a kid running back to the house from the gate at night, fear clawing at the base of his spine. If he could just get back inside and slam the kitchen door before "it" grabbed him, he'd be safe. He had always managed, but it was by no means a certainty. Even his present relief was tempered by a flickering premonition, a menace fluttering at the edge of consciousness.

There was nothing he could put his finger on and say 'that's what I'm running away from,' and no single problem had been either over burdensome or even insoluble. If pushed to explain his sense of suffocation he would have been lost for words. What he felt there were no words for. How do you define anxiety? How do you explain the fear that your very existence depends on an impossible-to-learn trick? Trapped between dread of disapproval and an inability to willingly conform, he had been developing into a person he neither liked nor admired.

Jocelyn had been a major source of embarrassment with tears and protestations of eternal fidelity; offering her virginity like a sacrifice on the altar of love. Friendship was all he'd ever wanted - she was easy and intelligent to talk with.

A hot blush welled at the memory. Her bedroom, curtains drawn, fumbling with buttons and zips, undressing, and an odd smell. Her excitement - his choking urge to escape only prevented by a reluctance to hurt. Her confusion and anxiety - his excuses... Ignominy! She begged for his new address - he falsely promised to send it. A miserable mess, like the sufferings of the poor bastard in a Sci-fi novel he was reading. The bloke's mind had accidentally been transferred to someone else's body. There was no way he wanted to end up like that, choking on alien feelings, thoughts and desires. Unlike the book's victim, Robert hoped that with the change of schools he could take control of his life. The reset button had been pressed and this time he would be the real Robert - whoever that might be!

Something poked at his thigh. He opened his eyes. The noisy kid peered down, eyes squinting under a frown of curiosity.

'Are you dead?' the child inquired as though death were a mild cold.

'No, my skin's making vitamin D.'

This was considered for a moment. 'Is it good for you?'

'In small doses. Keeps you healthy.'

'I'll do it too,' the young intruder declared with the solemnity of a banker deciding to invest a million dollars. He lay down, casually resting his head on the young man's outstretched arm.

A fiercely swung shoulder bag torpedoed Robert from his daydreams. Instantly defensive he leaped to his feet, urged on by a demon howl.

'Filthy child-molester! Paedophile!' The woman yelled, grabbing at her son.

At first Robert thought the silly cow had lost her marbles, then realisation dawned. 'Hang on, I'm not a...'

'Pervert!' she spat. 'And in broad daylight! In a public park!' Fury became hysteria. 'How dare you? How dare you?' Clutching the child roughly by his upper arm, she stumbled back and thrust her belongings into the holdall. In a desperate effort to explain, Robert grabbed his shirt and followed her. 'I wasn't doing anything like that... you're making a mistake... your kid...'

'People like you should be locked away for life!' Her revulsion was a physical force repelling him. Grabbing shoes and bag in one hand and dragging the frantic child with the other, she faced Robert squarely, lip curled in loathing. Spittle spattered lips and bare breasts, paradoxically rendered her more impressive than ridiculous. The child's eyes were wide with confusion and fear. His mother had saved him from something evil! He had been in great danger! The fury and hatred of the mother permeated the son and he let loose with a scream of terror.

'The police will hear about this, you queer, black bastard!' Turning on her heel she stalked away, head high, hips swinging with the timeless grandeur of protective mothers everywhere.

Only just able to control an urge to vomit, joy and warmth gone, love of life replaced by an icy dread gnawing at his guts, Robert fled.

Monique perched at the breakfast-bar, savouring the joy of a dream realised. Winter sunlight flooding through French windows open to patio and garden, imbued even the old furniture with mellow life. A slow smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. 'Contentment.' She whispered the word softly, relishing both sound and idea. The wait had given life purpose. For nineteen years, since her marriage to Sanjay and immigration to Australia, Monique had worked hard. First in a factory, all she could hope for with indifferent English, then in more demanding jobs until their son arrived and she had taken over the bookkeeping of their small importing company.

Compared to most of her acquaintances she had a happy life. Two trips back to France over the years had reinforced the rightness of her choice. After a week of provincial Catholicism and traditional village ways, the claustrophobia that had driven her away in the first place was

rekindled, and she longed for home. Glancing at her watch, she put on the coffee and set out two cups. Robert was due back from his run.

Robert. The mere thought of him set her aglow. She was glad they had only one child. Over-population, global warming and all the other portents of imminent doom sometimes gave both parents twinges of guilt at having bred at all. Were they to marry now she would not consider bearing a child. She smiled, well aware that most of her acquaintances laughed at such premonitions of disaster. The slamming front door was her signal to pour the coffee. She wished he wouldn't do that, one day the glass would break.

Having imagined accusing stares and scowls of condemnation on the faces of everyone he passed, Robert greeted his mother with unaccustomed warmth. As she wiped again the already spotless sink-top and equally clean work area, he debated whether to off load his recent experience. He was still deciding when she stood behind him.

A stranger would have no difficulty divining the relationship; their noses had been cut from the same pattern - large and slightly hooked - accentuating Robert's masculinity and saving her from prettiness as a girl. Monique was now what is usually described as handsome. Her voice had the deep, sexy quality of many of her countrywomen, a characteristic sadly lacking in the locals according to her husband, and her mouth had the same friendly turn-up at the corners as her son; suggesting a smile even when none was intended. Monique, however, was slight and small-boned; Robert was solidly put together and honey-dark like his father. The mother ruffled her son's hair affectionately and pulled his head back against her breast. 'I am detecting a certain anxiety, mon petit?'

Robert shook himself free. Why she couldn't stop treating him like a five-year-old was beyond him. As usual he hadn't managed to conceal his feelings. That would have to change too. He was sick of being an open book. The urge to smash everything and stomp off to his bedroom was strong. It wouldn't be the first time, but he'd promised himself he'd never do it in this new house. He'd imagined he'd be leaving behind all the bits of his character he disliked, so it had been an unpleasant shock to realise he carried his old self along with him wherever he went. He ground his teeth, counted to ten and accepted that he'd like to offload the horror of the morning into a sympathetic ear.

The reaction was gratifying. Monique listened attentively, nodding and shaking her head at all the appropriate spots in support and agreement. 'Mais, c'est affreux,' she whispered at the completion of his tale of misunderstanding and abuse. 'The woman must be mad to think such a thing about such an honest and clean-living young man. No one in their right mind could think you were anything but good. And even if they did,' she continued with motherly inconsistency, 'not to give you a chance to explain; that is unforgivable! It is the fault of scare-mongering journalists; exaggerating, embroidering – suggesting child molestation is endemic in the entire male population; not satisfied until they have ruined someone's life!' She stopped, gave a self-conscious smile, refilled her son's cup and offered more sticky chocolate cake - her specialty, his partiality.

Robert hadn't thought it necessary to recount the sick feeling in his belly, the almost irresistible urge to vomit, or the unpleasant tingling at the base of his spine. Nor had he mentioned the naked breasts. He'd never felt so vulnerable. He'd done wrong in the past - many times. He'd been caught out, even wrongly accused of things, but there had always been an opportunity to explain. Never before had he faced hysterical, irrational fear mixed with loathing.

Despite his mother's support he continued to feel sick, impotent and unsettled. If someone could behave like that without evidence, without thinking things through, without getting the facts straight - as though she was working not with her brain but by reflex - then perhaps there were others who were the same! What if there had been a policeman nearby? He could have reacted the same way! Maybe she had already called the cops and given them his description! He'd never dare go up the hill again. He tried to convince himself he was being ridiculous, but gnawing apprehension remained.

The time he'd been caught in the rip off Caloundra had been the greatest fear he'd ever known. But a chat with a lifeguard that morning had planted the solution in his brain. 'Don't fight the rip! If you fight it, you'll drown. Let yourself go, even a long way out if that's where the water's going, then swim along parallel to the beach until the waves are breaking closer to shore, that's where there's no under-tow. Remember, the sea always tosses rubbish up on to the beach eventually.' The bloke had even drawn a diagram in the sand showing how under-currents were created. It was logical and comprehensible. Rational! The woman's behaviour wasn't, and Robert found he couldn't cope. Far earlier than was good for him, he had discovered the only thing humans have real cause to fear - other humans.

Monique empathised with her son's distress. She too had experienced irrational fear and loathing from strangers. During the first years of marriage she had suffered from her mother-in-law's jealousy, and rejection from those who considered her strongly accented speech and foreign ways to be fair game for their frustrations. Speech lessons and a determined effort to conceal her differences finally made life enjoyable, but that only lasted until the Mururoa bomb-tests. Even now, though all that unpleasantness was in the past, there remained an ever present, nagging fear that such irrational and violent prejudice could erupt again at any time.

Sometimes she longed for the relaxation of being with her compatriots, even for a few hours. But of course they would have changed and she would feel as foreign in France now as she still felt in Australia. Poor Robert, she thought, he is learning that the world is not always a pleasant place. 'I know it seems impossible at the moment, chérie, but try to put it out of your mind. The woman has probably had time to reflect and realises she over-reacted. The world is full of people loaded down with problems, who desire nothing more than to spread their burden.' She knew from experience that one didn't forget these things, but the wounds heal. Robert granted her a disbelieving smile and went to shower off the experience along with his sweat.

His father's response to the tale of woe during lunch was not quite as sympathetic. No grunts of empathy, no understanding nods and shakes of the head, merely a furrowing of brow and smile of incredulity - not at the actions of the woman, but at the reaction of his son. Sanjay finished his mouthful, placed his knife and fork on the plate, wiped his mouth carefully with a serviette and regarded his son with a perplexed frown. 'I have obviously missed something,' he said calmly, 'because I can't understand your problem. As I see it, you were foolish and a woman told you off. Hysterically, irrationally perhaps, loudly and publicly even, but surely that's the end of the matter? You have often enough been given a piece of someone's mind; I can recall ripping shit out of you myself on the odd occasion. What's really bothering you?'

'But, Dad! Can't you see? I did nothing wrong, but she wouldn't listen! I tried to tell her I wasn't any of the things she said I was, that it was all a misunderstanding, but she went on like crazy, shouting, dragging the kid like a puppet. Demented!'

'I wonder,' said Sanjay quietly, 'what conclusions you would jump to if you arrived home to find your mother and a strange man lying on the back lawn in the sun, her head resting on his arm.'

Robert's jaw gaped foolishly. 'Jeeze I feel stupid. I didn't think of that.'

Monique looked from husband to son, aware of the inaccuracy of the analogy. Robert had not gone to the boy's home; the boy had gone to Robert. Still, it served to lift his air of martyrdom. He could usually be relied on to see other points of view. It wasn't always a virtue of course and could lead to indecision, but better than dogmatic assertiveness. No doubt he would soon see the flaw in the argument, but for now she was content to follow her husband.

Sanjay Karim was a self-proclaimed freethinker. He wanted his son to know about, and be able to use, all the tools available to survive alone against the world - should that ever be necessary. Disturbed by increasingly frequent calls for homogeneity, censorship and persecution of minorities, he found it disturbingly easy to envisage an Australian future where survival was no longer considered a right, but a privilege.

‘I wish I had a dollar for every time I hadn't thought clearly and felt stupid afterwards, I'd be a hell of a lot richer than I am now,’ he laughed, taking the sting out of Robert's embarrassment. ‘What intrigues me, though, is why you let the boy lie beside you in the first place? It's hardly typical of young men your age. What do you think someone from your football team would have done if a child had pushed their toe into them and asked if they were dead?’

‘They'd have given the kid a shove and said, “Piss off, fuckwit”, and then if the mother had looked anything better than a slag they'd have gone over to try and chat her up.’ He looked forlorn. ‘I'm not much good at being like everyone else.’

‘Thank goodness for that!’ soothed Monique. ‘We love you exactly as you are. I'd hate it if you were like those monstrosities on your football team. I could hardly bear to go and watch your games. And as for their parents!’ She permitted herself a melodramatic shudder, then smiled at her husband. ‘I can't tell you how relieved and happy I am to be out of that dreadful place. So far, today's events excepted, this suburb and this house are my idea of perfection.’

Sanjay grinned, blew her a kiss, and returned to the matter in hand. ‘Like your mother, the last thing I want is for you to feel obliged to be the same as other people. I sometimes suspect, though, that if they felt free of censure, most of the conformists we enjoy rubbishing would be just as different from each other as we are from them. A genetic compulsion to fit in with the pack forces them to sacrifice individuality for acceptance. I imagine this is reinforced at home. You, poor boy, have a pair of misfits for parents.’ His smile was smug. ‘Because of our backgrounds and way of looking at things, we want you to be what you want. But, and it's a very big but, you have to use camouflage if you expect to survive unscathed.’

‘I've been doing that, Dad, but I didn't like what it got me into. I ended up being what everyone else thought I should be. I'm glad I'm not going back to the old school. I want to start afresh.’ He blushed and looked away.

‘Don't feel embarrassed about wanting to change yourself. Most people would like to. Few have the opportunity, and even fewer are able to. There's a play by J.M.Barrie, Dear Brutus, in which the characters get a second chance at their lives. Of course they all stuff it up and make the same mistakes again. It's both funny and sad. But that's life, I suppose; funny and sad.’

They sat, wrapped in a comfortable silence.

‘I understand what you are saying,’ Robert said finally, ‘but it's hard to strike the balance.’

‘The secret is to figure out what you value, and on those things never compromise. In all other respects be as much like other people as you're able. Everyone can accept some differences in others, in fact most people like a bit of eccentricity. It's when these differences dominate; when they are shoved at them like accusations that they become frightened and abusive. You may be sick of playing team sports, but keep it to yourself. The worst thing you could do is rave about how they destroy individuality. If you practice selective disguise and a live and let live attitude, you'll probably make more friends than if you become a clone of the mob.’ The telephone interrupted this deeply felt but potentially endless monologue. Sanjay answered.

‘Hello?...Who?...Yes, I'm sure he will. No...Yes, six-thirty exactly. Fine, Jeff. Cheers.’ Unlike his face-to-face conversations, Sanjay's telephone manner was telegraphic. ‘That was Jeff, reminding us to be there at six-thirty, and asking a favour from you, Robert. He has a nephew staying overnight and doesn't want him to feel left out, so hoped you'd entertain him for the evening.’

Robert's first impulse was to refuse. The last thing he wanted was to have to be polite. He felt he deserved a long and miserable brood on the injustices of the world.

‘Their food's always good. Celebrate the last day of the holidays?’

Robert capitulated. ‘I'll bet he's a drip.’

‘Excellent!’ Sanjay checked his watch. ‘I'm going to check some papers then spend the afternoon in the garden. Be certain you are both out of the bathroom and my way by six o'clock.’

And, Robert, make sure you have everything you could possibly need for school tomorrow: first impressions are the lasting ones.'

Robert went to his room and Monique tidied away before setting out what seemed to be the entire contents of her wardrobe to prepare for the evening ahead.

In his study, the unused third bedroom, Sanjay sorted through notes. A part-time University lectureship in Political Studies, apart from providing a respectable job description in his passport and a bit of extra cash, also guaranteed a captive audience. He loved it when students laughed at his jokes, argued a point, became angry at his demolition of theories, or themselves proffered alternatives to popular thought. Most ended up apprehensive at the inefficiency and self-serving inadequacy of politicians; their own country's multitude of governments squabbling over fewer than twenty million people's money; and all the other examples of irrational waste. 'Politics is the physical expression of a philosophy!' he would intone. 'Bad philosophy - bad politics!' His demand that they think about the underlying values demonstrated by political decisions, led even those with the least aptitude to understand that every action, no matter how slight, can be considered political. They soon realised that democracy and informed, rational debate are incompatible with majority government and the confrontation of party politics. All were left wondering why consensus is a dirty word.

Sanjay sat back and contemplated his reflection. Melbourne born and bred, he felt only pleasure at having left the place. His mother was Scottish but his father's Indian genes had proved dominant. Unable to consider himself as anything other than Australian, he liked to think he combined Scots good sense with the acuteness of Indian merchants.

Why his parents had married remained a mystery to him. He imagined two self-willed young people at odds with their families, cultures and religions, emigrating, and then marrying to spite their parents. As a family they had been isolated. The few visitors to their dull suburban house soon felt ill at ease, and seldom returned. A ban on all things Indian or Scottish, the single-minded pursuit of the Australian dream, and relentless urging to "do well", were his dominant childhood memories.

After his father's early death, maternal visits to her only child became less tolerable as Monique's self assurance grew. They now paid fares and all expenses for a visit once a year, as long as his mother only stayed a week. That way everyone kept their sanity. She had only just gone home, so they were free for another year.

Chapter Two

Monique, sheathed in midnight blue, the only adornment a dozen fine gold chains at her throat, was glad Robert wasn't to be left alone. His mood-swings had become a worry. Both parents hoped it was simply adolescence; something he would grow out of.

After rejecting everything in his wardrobe as frivolous, Robert's black mood prompted black trousers, white shirt, black leather bomber jacket and black shoes. He looked strikingly handsome, although one would have had a hard time convincing him of it. Twelve years of schooling had not only taught him that he and his family were not quite normal, but had forged a core of insecurity. He inhabited a world subtly outside the one that restrained his peers, and knew with the certainty of youth that because of his ethnicity, most people would not consider him good looking. This fortunate misapprehension had fostered an air of engaging modesty. With the precocious maturity of a well-loved only child, he considered honesty, reliability, affection and rationality to be the most valuable attributes in a person. All his life, it seemed, he had been seeking a friend like that.

Sanjay, dapper in blue-grey suit, white shirt, conservative tie and black shoes, beamed at his two charges with love and pride. They drove first to the top of Mount Coot-tha to admire the city lights.

Excessive punctiliousness, in Sanjay's opinion, was the hallmark of small minds. Hosts are happiest if they have something for which to forgive their guests, so it would be inconsiderate to arrive less than ten minutes late. The detour was rewarding. City towers floating against a darkly purple sky.

By the time they pulled up at the Skeldrakes', the other guests had arrived. Clients were occasionally invited to dinner to encourage the finalising of a deal. Jeff Skeldrake, Sanjay's partner, had returned from India a few weeks previously and half a container-load of silk and ornaments was due to arrive within the next few days. Tonight, samples would be viewed, prices agreed and supply and other details ironed out.

'Sanjay, Monique, Robert, welcome!' Jeff, sporting a tan and an enviable head of wavy silver hair, was probably in his sixties. Despite expensive tailoring and built-up shoes, he remained a short and rather bulky figure. An expansive gesture towards the drinks-table enabled a large stone set in gold filigree on his left middle finger, to flash resplendently. As they fiddled with bottles and glasses the Karims were joined by Susie, loyal to the importing business in silk trousers and tunic. The shimmering green garment did a much better job of concealing her luxuriant figure, strikingly similar to her husband's, than did his suit. Jeff took Sanjay and Monique's elbows and introduced them to the guests while Susie introduced Robert to her nephew.

Tony was fifteen, tall for his age, overweight and sallow. Slightly protuberant eyes stared accusingly at his guest. 'I know why you were invited; they think I'm an imbecile and wouldn't be able to cope with adults.'

'I understand. Dad twisted my arm. I can go home if you like?' Robert's tone was mild.

'Oh, sorry, no. No, I didn't mean to sound like that. Of course I'm glad you're here, it's just that Jeff makes me feel so bloody inadequate and Susie's no better.'

That's because you are inadequate, thought Robert morosely.

The house was a duplex on the site of one of the large mansions that used to dot the western hills. The decor was designer-tasteful. Delicate prints, paintings on silk and a few expensively framed water-colours decorated the walls, while brass table-lamps bestowed a flattering glow on humans and carved wooden sculptures alike. Expensive rugs littered polished floors, and the furniture was unobtrusively comfortable. The only discordant notes were the curtains. It was difficult to conceive of an environment in which the boldly mauve, pink and orange fabrics would be at ease.

Everyone was ushered into the dining room where the mock antique dining table was set for ten, with white cloth, heavy silver cutlery, candles and flowers. The guests helped themselves from dishes on the sideboard.

'Susie, this is perfect! Surely you haven't done it all by yourself?'

Susie laughed. 'I did have a little help from the caterers, Monique. But I set the table.'

Conversation centred on the weather and the economy. It wasn't necessary to think. Sanjay relaxed, leaving Monique to entertain. He still broke out in nervous sweats occasionally at the miraculous chance that had allowed their paths to cross. Every day he thanked fate for providing him with such a perfect mate.

After his parents had nagged him into a degree in Political Science and Modern Languages he had seemed set for a career in Foreign Affairs. However, he soon came to the conclusion that not only does democracy degenerate to demagoguery as soon as the first politician opens his mouth, but the old joke - How can you tell when a politician is lying? His mouth is open - is disturbingly true. He took leave, and fled to Europe. Uncomfortable with Scottish relatives and depressed by dirt and lack of work in London, he had crossed to Europe. Travelling home overland, he surprised himself by spending a week on a nudist island in the Adriatic near Rovinj. It was an intensely liberating experience, made all the more precious when, on his last afternoon he met Monique who was looking for a travelling companion to India.

All the usual adventures of such a trip befell them, but it wasn't until they were about to separate that he realised he didn't want to. The feeling was mutual, so they did the sensible thing and

married at the Consulate. After the ceremony he realised he had followed almost exactly in his father's footsteps; two disaffected people in a foreign land, marrying.

The shock made him determined not to imitate anything else about his parents' lives. His marriage would be a love match until death. They had stayed with his grandmother in Cochin, and the extended family welcomed him generously. Far more generously than he felt he deserved. It was there Sanjay hatched his plan to become an importer of objects-d'art, and never return to government bureaucracy. Drifting back to the present, he helped himself to yoghurt, marvelling at the heaps of sugar and cream Jeff and Susie managed to devour. His mental flight had passed unnoticed.

Sanjay, Jeff and the clients retired with coffees, liqueurs, briefcases and samples to the lounge, the two young men went upstairs, and Susie and Monique attended to the clearing away.

Tony's sole interest was "The Web". His latest model laptop gave him access to the world. Robert was fairly certain the world consisted of more than electrons bouncing off screens, but kept his opinion to himself.

'Do you want to look at magazines?' Tony offered with a leer. Magazines had to be better than Tony's conversation. Robert had giggled over photographs of naked women with his mates as a more youthful youth, but since Jocelyn, interest had evaporated. He recalled and suffered again his embarrassment and inadequacy, remembered the woman in the park, and began to sweat.

As Tony leafed through the pages he kept pointing out the girls he fancied while regaling Robert with graphic descriptions of what he'd be doing if they were in the room. How Tony could imagine they would ever want him was beyond Robert's comprehension, so he kept his mouth shut.

'Fuck, look at this one, Christ, she makes me horny!'

To Robert's flagging gaze she appeared identical to the preceding airbrushed, silicone-implanted clones, but he mumbled something vaguely appropriate.

'I'm going to jerk off. You too?'

'They're only photographs. Does nothing for me.'

Tony was already pulling at his penis. 'It's OK for you,' he grunted 'You're older than me. I'll bet you've had the real thing.'

Robert nodded in despair.

'Well, I haven't. Dad says I'm too young and I'm hardly going to get some bitch as good looking as this.' Veins had begun to swell in his neck and forehead when the jerking suddenly stopped and Tony demanded sharply, 'Are you a queer?'

Robert contented himself with a mimed threat to smack the repellent idiot in the face.

'Got me worried there... Faggots will root anything, my Dad says. Especially young guys.' Reassured, he panted on.

Robert wasn't offended; he'd joined group wanks in dressing rooms. At his last school some of the year eleven idiots had jerked themselves off in the back row of the chemistry lab to impress their girlfriends. He slipped out, and went downstairs.

Closed lounge doors indicated negotiations were still in train, so he went to the kitchen. Monique was nursing a cup of mint tea, Susie sipped at a balloon of brandy, and the dishwasher spluttered dying gurgles.

'Tony has exhausted his conversational repertoire I gather,' Susie sighed. 'This has been a long four days. Pull up a seat.'

Robert filled a glass with water, having found the meal a little too spicy, dragged up a chair and scowled into the glass.

Susie drew a quick breath. 'Are you all right?'

'Perfectly.' He glanced warily at his mother's best friend. She was seldom solicitous about anyone except herself. But she certainly was nosy. Her obesity was accentuated in the hard light. Small eyes glittered in their pouches, one could hardly call them sockets, and her chins developed vertical lines when she turned her head. He couldn't understand anyone allowing themselves to get

so fat. It didn't bear thinking about the sweat, washing under and between all the folds, the effort of carrying the extra kilos. He tried to imagine lugging fifty tubs of margarine about wherever he went.

Susie was staring at him; smile carnivorous, voice concerned. 'I have just had the most extraordinary sensation. As you turned, colours streamed from your head - purples, oranges and dark blues. Has something bad happened?'

Robert shot his mother an irritated glance. She shook her head.

'Something important has crossed, or is going to cross you! - Shall I lay the cards?' Susie missed no opportunity to remind everyone of her vaguely Central European heritage and mysterious quantities of Gypsy Blood.

'If you want,' muttered Robert ungraciously. The silly fat cow was obviously off her rocker. He might as well humour her, but she'd better not start getting personal. She wasn't going to top up her gossip files with his secrets.

'Bring me the black lacquered box from the top left-hand drawer of the sideboard.' Robert fetched it and placed it beside her. Extracting a silken cloth emblazoned with a five-pointed star, Susie deliberately and calmly placed it in the centre of the table, smoothing out the creases. The cards, she placed with ritualised seriousness around the outside of the cloth, taking care not to touch it. 'I only use the Major Arcana. An art student painted these for me. Aren't they sexy? Nothing like the Medieval ones, thank goodness, they were far too influenced by Christian myths.' She placed another cloth over everything and, taking Robert's hands, placed them face down on top, plonking her own clammy little fat ones on top.

'Obviously,' she said carefully, 'it is not possible to foretell the future - that would make a nonsense of free will. Most of what happens to us is by chance. Twenty years ago, if Sanjay had arrived two days later at the hotel in Rovinj, he would never have met Monique, and you would not have been born. That was a chance encounter.' She looked at Robert to gauge his reaction, but he was giving nothing away. 'You've as much chance of picking up a card that has something relevant to say about you, as one that doesn't,' she explained. 'What it can indicate is not your future, but steps you can take to balance your life. The Tarot is an ancient guide to enlightenment and harmony.' She gave a slightly tipsy burp, and winked, erasing the mystical atmosphere. Robert grinned. He couldn't stay cross with Susie for long.

'It all sounds so pompous, doesn't it?' she giggled. 'Actually I was only looking for an excuse to hold your hands.' She cackled throatily as he jerked them away.

Monique smiled to herself.

'Robert,' said Susie sweetly, gazing into his eyes, 'don't take life so seriously, you'll never get out of it alive.' This set off another paroxysm of mirth. 'Now,' she continued after several attempts to catch her breath, 'when I remove the cloth I want you to choose any five cards and place them face up, in any order, one on each point of the star.'

It seemed oddly important which ones he chose.

Susie gave them her full attention. 'At your head is The Moon. Dogs in moonlight, baying at menacing figures. There is some fear in your mind. Something you don't understand is troubling you. It's an unhappy card on its own; so let's see the others. At your left hand is The Hanging Man, perfectly happy to be seeing the world from a new perspective - that's positive. Perhaps you need to reconsider some of your opinions? Remember, these cards refer only to you. At your right hand is The Devil. Black and white, both sexes in one, Yin and Yang, staring straight at you. Everyone has parts of their character they cannot accept. We must face squarely these devils within; for only by confronting our fears can we conquer them.

'Now the base, the foundation on which you stand. On the left is The Charioteer. He wears a mask to protect himself from the slings and arrows of the world. There are flames at his head, heart and groin, indicating intellect, passions and desires. He grasps the reins firmly because unless he can force all three aspects of his character to work together in harmony, then his chariot of life will veer from side to side and may over-turn. Your other support is Strength. A slim woman easily

controlling a powerful centaur, grasping his hair firmly. It means, make your brain control your body. Brute strength is of no use.' She paused. 'So, there you are; fearing something; requiring a new perspective on old problems; having to face the devil within and needing to control yourself.' She looked up with an almost malicious smile.

'That's not as silly as I thought it was going to be,' Robert said thoughtfully. 'It's sensible at least, even if fairly obvious.'

'Do you want to know what's likely to happen if you follow the directions?'

'Can't do any harm.'

'Don't you believe it.'

Robert selected his second set of cards.

Susie took a deep breath in an attempt to quieten her heart. She had doted on Robert since his birth. A desire to somehow force him inside her own body, to possess him utterly, had precipitated violent urges to squeeze, fondle, lick, kiss and eat the gurgling, happy infant. Having no children herself, she rationalised this fixation as repressed maternal instincts. As Robert grew older, both he and Monique began to resent her intrusive, at times almost abusive, attentions and she had forced herself to stop seeing him, arranging to visit only when Robert was at school or when there was no chance of their being alone.

Eventually, Susie had conquered the urge to possess every atom of this young creature - until tonight. His unexpected entrance - gold chain at smooth brown throat, the contours of his chest visible beneath the thin shirt - had caused flames to spurt, not from Robert's head, but inside her own, and a quote from goodness knows where flitted at the edge of thought. The Love-God uses the shapes and colours of young men, adorning them with all the reflected splendours of Beauty, so that the sight of them will truly set us on fire with pain and hope.

Old desires had been re-kindled. It was at least twenty years since she had felt anything like this, but she had not forgotten. The cards had been a ploy to keep Robert in the room as long as possible. She hadn't been joking when she said she wanted to touch his hand. She wanted to... She shook her head in an effort to dislodge the unwelcome thoughts. In her heart she was still the attractive eighteen-year-old, swept off her feet by Jeff.

Risking another glance at the slim, handsome young man on the other side of the table, she suddenly understood something else, something that lifted the burden and drew forth a sad smile. Even if she could become her eighteen-year-old self again, she could never possess Robert in the way she dreamed. As the realisation became conscious thought, everything became bearable and, with a sigh of regret for the things that never happen, she returned her attention to the cards.

'You sure know how to pick 'em,' she mumbled. 'This time at your head we have Judgement. Someone looking at their own reflection in the mirror. Remember, these cards only refer to you. The judgement of others is irrelevant. You must judge yourself. If you are contented with the way you are managing your life, then you will be in balance. If not...' She drew an expensively ringed finger across her throat. 'At your left hand sits Death. Not physical death, but the death of ideas. It supports the hanging man in the previous layout. Note the flowers springing from the split-open back of the skull? They indicate that if you are prepared to kill off desires, thoughts and actions that are wrong for you, then a new life will spring forth. On your right hand is The Sun. Apollo standing in a blaze of light. It's the best card in the pack and indicates everything will turn up roses - if your base is strong. So let's look.'

Robert gazed at the two remaining cards. The left one showed a ruined tower split in two by a flash of lightning, with two figures thrown back in shock. The other presented an even more grotesque scene - two naked people in chains, overlooked by a living, weeping barred window set in a blood-red wasteland.

'The Tower suggests you will experience enlightenment, or revelation, which usually arrives as a blinding flash of understanding. Your other support is the last card in the pack, The World.' She stopped talking, picked up the card and rubbed it as though trying to erase the image before

continuing. 'Not a pretty scene, not a happy card, but it contains an essential truth. No matter what you do, what balance and harmony you may achieve in your own life, you still have to live in the world of men. There, it is never in peace and harmony. It is always hard, cruel, and indifferent. Accept that, and you will not know despair. Fight it, and you will live in chains.' Susie looked down thoughtfully at the cards before gathering them together and placing them carefully in their box.

Robert turned to his mother and was surprised to see tears.

'Oh, Susie, you have said it so cleverly. It is so true. Look at me, all emotional and weepy. How silly.' Monique blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes. 'It's made me think about my life, how wonderful it has all been. It's so easy to get tied up with petty irritations and forget about what makes life worthwhile. Thanks, Susie.'

'Yeah...thanks, Susie...That was spot on you know? I'm really amazed, it's helped a lot...you know to...sort out ideas and...things.' Robert grew silent.

Susie smiled gently, demon exorcised. She patted him on the hands. This time he did not withdraw. 'It has nothing to do with the cards, Robert. It's what's inside your head and heart, that counts.'

Jeff poked his head around the door, raised his thumb to indicate a successful conclusion, and whispered, 'They're going.'

Good-byes were said, appreciation offered, and soon the Karims too were on their way home; Sanjay's head filled with the evening's business, Monique's with her dreams, and Robert's with thoughts he wished would go away. He had yet to face the devil within.

Chapter Three

Robert's new school retained little of past splendours. The two-storied brick edifice with its high, mock-Tudor gables and tiled roof, stood bleakly in a sea of asphalt. Road widening and the encroachment of suburbs had reduced the once graceful front lawns and shady trees to a narrow strip of suffering grevilleas skulking behind a wire-mesh fence. Where three hundred students had once been educated in semi countryside, seven hundred pupils now crammed the relocatable classrooms, thronged corridors, shouted, swore, fought, played, strutted, flirted and studied, amongst graffiti, rubbish bins, discarded soft-drink cans and abandoned food wrappings.

In the high-ceilinged entrance lobby a chipped plaster copy of a fig-leafed discus thrower strained on a plinth before a cheap and much faded reproduction of a cubist still life. Elaborately framed but poorly executed portraits of past headmasters lined the other wall. The smell was of polish, disinfectant and bodies. Across a wide corridor, double doors led to the quadrangle in which hundreds of students were milling, waiting to start the third term. The noise was the noise of schools everywhere. Through an archway to the right, Robert found the front office. A prettyish young woman greeted him pleasantly. He introduced himself.

'Mr Pinot, (she pronounced it pie not) looks after new students. He'll have your details. Go down the stairs at the end of the corridor and his office is directly in front of you.' She indicated the direction he should take. 'Oh, by the way, pupils are not allowed in the front entrance, they have to go round the back. The main entrance is only for staff and visitors.' Switching off the winning smile she retreated to her keyboard.

Following the secretary's directions through chipped, sour cream painted corridors, Robert eventually discovered, as promised, a door labelled Guidance. It was ajar. He knocked firmly, having been told by his father that a timid knock denotes an uncertain man.

'Come in! Welcome to the dungeon. You must be the new chap, no one else would knock.' The voice was educated, yet somehow lazy.

The low-ceilinged room was carpeted in scuffed beige with half a dozen once-comfortable chairs arranged in a circle around a low table. A few dead flowers left over from the previous term sagged in a dry vase. Four garish paintings disfigured the walls, and a photograph of a rowing team was prominently displayed behind the paper-strewn desk. The voice belonged to an old man. At least to Robert he seemed old, with a face as grey as his sparse hair. Thick-lens glasses lent his somewhat fishy, chinless head an added watery dimension. He was neatly dressed in worn tweed suit, white shirt and dark blue tie. Brown shoes gleamed. Warren Pinot was sixty-five and due to retire at the end of the year.

Although a relatively broad-minded man of wide interests and culture, his early years in the classroom had been dogged by severe control problems, caused mainly by an essential dullness combined with lack of imagination that rendered him incapable of arousing interest. His promotion to guidance counsellor had solved one problem by creating another. Unworldliness is not particularly useful when dealing with the problems of adolescence.

‘Come over to the desk and we’ll get the paper work out of the way. I’m Mr Pinot, and you, I imagine, are...’ he checked the paper in front of him, ‘Robert Karim?’

Robert nodded.

‘Your file has arrived from your last school. They were sorry to lose you. I hope you will do as well here.’ He turned to his computer terminal and, after several false starts and a couple of muttered imprecations, induced the printer to give birth to Robert’s timetable. ‘The entire school is on line now. All relevant details are entered into these things twice a day. Attendance, results, behaviour, assignments. At the touch of a button, well, several buttons, I can have an up-to-the-minute profile of any of the school’s seven hundred and twenty-six students,’ he announced proudly as though he had invented the thing himself.

‘And a brave new world to you,’ muttered Robert.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It’s an amazing world, Mr Pinot.’

‘Quite so. Quite so.’

The distorted chimes of a glockenspiel burst from a wall-mounted loudspeaker.

‘Oh, good. We have missed Assembly,’ whispered Mr Pinot in the conspiratorial tone of a naughty schoolboy. ‘At the beginning of a new term, assembly always takes the whole first period, so we have forty minutes to clarify any problems - such as why you are not wearing a uniform.’

Robert blinked. ‘Wha...? I mean, I beg your pardon, Sir. I didn’t think I’d have to wear one, the seniors didn’t at the old school.’

‘Well they do here, and even though you will have only two terms with us, we can’t make exceptions, can we?’

Robert decided not to question this assumption. ‘I don’t think my parents will be able to afford it, Sir.’

‘They won’t have to. We keep a supply of second-hand uniforms of all sizes. You pay a small deposit, which is refunded if the uniform is returned in good order. Now, slip off your mufti while I go and find something suitable. It is too small in there for both of us, so wait here.’ At Robert’s look of incomprehension he laughed. ‘Mufti - non-uniform clothing! Take everything off and place it in this plastic bag.’

Robert looked at the open door.

‘Don’t worry, no one will come in, but you can close it if you want.’ He bustled through to his storeroom.

Robert closed and locked the door to the corridor, removed his clothes, and jammed them into the bag, wondering whether the order would have been the same if Mr Pinot had known he wasn’t wearing underclothes. At least there was a decent electric heater. He wandered around, enjoying the titillation of nudity in a strange place. On the desk was a photograph of Mr Pinot and his wife, with a young man and woman in black robes. He picked it up.

‘Those are my two children at their graduation,’ he was informed by the re-emerging guidance counsellor. ‘Goodness, I didn’t realise... I mean... Ah... Yes... Golly, ha, ha... You modern young men are more easygoing about... ah... things than we oldies. Yes indeed.’

Robert turned to face him, hands behind his buttocks. Warren Pinot wasn’t sure what to do. He coughed, looked away, coughed again and, visibly gathering his forces, smiled manfully. A multitude of thoughts raced. He glanced at the door. Thank goodness it was locked. Could this be a set-up? There had been an appalling case recently when a teacher had suicided after an accusation of sexual harassment. His heart thumped and sweat sprang from his brow. A careful look at Robert’s face was reassuring; it appeared empty of guile. Tension evaporated as realisation dawned... the boy wanted to be looked at. As fear drained, the guidance counsellor found himself amused by the situation, curious as to who would falter first.

Robert’s face remained modestly untroubled as the elderly man’s eyes flicked from neck to shoulders and chest, lingering briefly on dark nipples before following a line of hair from the flat navel to where it broadened into a dense triangle, framing manhood. He’ll have to keep up the exercise to avoid an early gut, thought Mr Pinot waspishly, observing Robert’s well-muscled abdomen and thighs. Finding it impossible to extract pleasure from perfection, he had earlier noted with satisfaction the lad’s slightly crossed front teeth and the small mole above his lip.

‘You are going to break a few hearts, if you haven’t done so already,’ he said mildly, carefully eliminating any suggestion of censure from his voice.

Robert fidgeted slightly and began to sweat. He had judged Mr Pinot correctly, but this was going on too long. It was essential he didn’t get an erection. He was seeking approval, not ridicule. After the previous day’s confidence-undermining event on the hill, he desperately needed reaffirmation of his worth. It was easy to be praised for being a good student or sportsman, but to make someone accept you simply for yourself, unadorned by achievements – that was another thing altogether! This behaviour had been part of his life ever since he could remember. Susceptible adults could easily be charmed into complicity. Many places provided opportunities to play his game. A few weeks previously he’d torn a muscle. If the physiotherapist had been surprised to find her young patient naked in front of her desk, she hid it convincingly. ‘Oh, well done. That makes my work easy. And what a wonderful body,’ had been her only comment.

Robert was aware of what he was doing and, knowing it could be dangerous, had thought long and hard about his reasons. Just about everyone was shocked when confronted by nudity, especially male nudity. If he could manipulate someone into not only accepting his nakedness as natural but also approving of him in that state, that was success. However, there mustn’t be any hint of conscious sexuality! He had to maintain an aura of innocence. He was starting to panic. Sweat seeped from armpits and blood began surging to his loins. Covering his genitals would be fatal. He risked a glance at Mr Pinot. Surely he wasn’t getting aroused? That was never part of the scheme! The unwelcome thought calmed him. These exhibitions were for Robert’s benefit alone - the witness merely a passive tool.

‘You look very fit.’ Mr Pinot conceded defeat.

‘I am,’ Robert agreed cheerfully. ‘Takes plenty of exercise though.’

‘Mmm. Well put these on. We don’t stock underpants!’ he added with a hint of reproof, handing over a pair of brown long trousers, a cream shirt, beige pullover and brown blazer emblazoned with the school’s crest and motto. He had even found a pair of brown socks.

Robert dressed quickly. Everything fitted perfectly except for the trousers, which were a bit tight. Mr Pinot went to find another but they were even smaller. Robert promised that tomorrow he would wear black shoes - and underpants.

‘Sit down.’ The guidance counsellor, at ease with both himself and his guest, indicated the ring of chairs. ‘I’ll take you to your first class and introduce you to the teacher as soon as assembly’s finished. We’ve another twenty minutes.’

Mr Pinot had one excellent quality; he could listen. Robert found himself prattling on about what he had been doing over the previous two weeks, and was describing the unpleasant incident in the park on the hill, when he stopped short, biting his lip.

‘Carry on, dear boy, you speak so fluently it is a joy to listen.’

It was too late to stop and Robert found he didn’t really want to, so he told everything, leaving no detail out. As is often the case he found it easier to talk to a stranger than to his own parents. But as the thought surfaced, iced water trickled into his guts. Shit! Pinot’s not a stranger. He’s a bloody teacher!

Mr Pinot’s face gave nothing away. He sat still for so long that Robert wondered if he had fallen asleep with his eyes open. Eventually he pursed his lips and, taking a deep, impressive breath, pronounced his verdict. ‘You have been delivered from error by your innocence,’ he intoned gravely. ‘That woman was clearly bent on entrapping a man. Your reaction to her, um, display, was that of someone with a pure heart. Her subsequent irrational assault on you and the insults you endured have been excellently explained to us by the Bard. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. You scorned her invitation, she vented her anger.’ Mr Pinot sat back, nodding his head in self-congratulation.

Robert scorned the reference to hell and a pure heart, but appreciated the positive slant. As soon as he’d seen the guidance counsellor he’d known. Funny how he could pick them. He looked earnestly into Mr Pinot’s eyes. ‘Thank you, Sir. I’m glad I talked with you. I was worried I’d done something to provoke her.’ He sounded so sincere and his relief so heartfelt that Mr Pinot couldn’t resist a smile of pride. He seldom offered advice – having too many problems of his own – but when he did it was pleasant to find approval. Robert, on the other hand, realised he had found, if not an ally, Mr Pinot’s type usually followed winners, at least someone who didn’t wish him ill. As good a beginning as he could hope for.

By lunchtime on the second day, Robert had met his teachers and seen all the students in the options he was taking. For the first five minutes after lunch, everyone went to their homeroom to listen to notices, pick up newsletters, and pay sports and other school fees. The din was deafening. Positive first-impressions were dimming to disillusion. So far, he’d met no one he wanted to know better. Of course the stupid uniform didn’t help. Instead of presenting a unified image it looked as though they had all rummaged around in a grab bag of old clothes and only a lucky few had succeeded in snatching something that fitted or suited. His father had laughed like a drain at breakfast that morning. ‘They’ll make a conformist of you yet,’ he’d snorted.

Wanting to forget all about it now that he had told someone the details, Robert had decided not to tell his parents about Mr Pinot’s interpretation of the events on the hill. He wondered idly if he should become a Catholic. Confession seemed to suit him. With a sigh of relief he realised that his worries about a new school were unfounded and it should be plain sailing from then on. He vowed to keep his head down, be his own man and work his butt off with no distractions.

Robert’s sporting reputation had preceded him, and the unconcealed relief on the faces of the football team, identical in all but names to those he’d left behind, when told he was too busy to play, was rewarding – no one was going to lose their place on the team. He had always considered himself at least a fringe-dweller of the “intellectual” brigade, but the weedy individuals huddled into a sunless corner of the common room were almost caricatures of the type; humourless egg-heads interested only in their own opinions.

A pimply group of bible-bashers had been given equally short shift. There was more work to be caught up on than anticipated, so he wouldn’t have time for friends anyway for a while. The only person he liked so far was his Art History teacher. In his forties, Mr Rands was bald, witty, quick thinking, and treated his students as equals—a real plus in a teacher.

Miss Henderson hushed the mob, called the roll, dished out forms on Vocational Guidance, answered a few questions and then gazed around vaguely. ‘Robert Karim? I have a message for you

from the sports master. You are required to select a compulsory extracurricular sports activity. Go to the gymnasium now, and don't be late for next period.'

'I'm not doing sport, Miss.'

The teacher's raised eyebrows started a snigger that continued as she drawled, 'Don't argue with me, young man. Unburden your woes onto Mr Vaselly.'

It sounded too stupid to be true. Robert was starting to lose his cool. First the bloody uniform and now compulsory activities. What was this place, a kindergarten or a high school? He wasn't in the mood for any more crap. He'd dig in his heels with this Vaselly.

The sports master was in his early twenties, about the same height as Robert but leaner and more visibly muscled. Dark blond hair shorn to a short bristle, deep-set blue eyes, prominent cheekbones, small square chin, strong shoulders and the lean legs of a long-distance-runner, made him appear altogether tougher, stronger and harder than the student. After a conversation with Mr Vaselly one was left with the impression of intensity and health. Robert grudgingly admired the man's obvious fitness, but admiration turned to contempt when he snapped, 'What do you want?'

'Apparently, I have to take an activity.' Robert deliberately avoided the 'Sir', and hoped he looked as uncompromising as his opponent.

'That's right, take this list, choose one, and let me know.' The teacher thrust a bit of paper at Robert and turned away in dismissal.

'But I don't need to do sport. I'm fit enough. My other school covered slightly different topics in some subjects so I have to catch up.'

Mr Vaselly swung back as though slapped. 'Tough luck! This school has a rule that all students must do some physical activity. At your level, you're expected to use your lunch-breaks or before and after school. A minimum of one hour per week!'

Robert scanned the list. 'There's nothing I want to do.'

The PE teacher had seen the new student crossing the playground and wondered what he was like. These sporty-looking kids were usually either up themselves or riddled with insecurities. This one was already getting stropy. Classroom control had cost him sweat and tears and he wasn't about to let a smart-arsed newcomer tell him what to do. 'Bring me your choice after school tomorrow.' He slammed back into his office.

Not wanting to be late for Maths, Robert raced off.

Between periods he studied the list in despair. There was nothing he wanted to spend five minutes on, let alone sixty. Team sports - never again. Gymnastics? Too tall. Golf? Ten-pin bowling? What sort of a place was this? Tramping? Badminton? Table-tennis? This is the point beyond which I will not be pushed, he thought, congratulating himself on an elegant turn of phrase, and here I make my stand!

Last period was timetabled for study/research, and Mr Vaselly was rostered as minder. They don't even trust us to study alone, Robert thought despairingly. It's a bloody borstal. Uniforms, compulsory activities, no trust. He was beginning to regret his decision to change schools. As soon as the teacher entered, a chill settled on the room. Like a caricature Nazi - cold, Aryan, arrogant - he gave no sign of recognition to any one, let alone Robert. At first he stood, hands on hips, in front of the blackboard as though daring anyone to disturb the peace. After fifteen minutes he wandered around, ending up at the back of the room in the aisle beside Robert's chair, leaning against the wall and writing notes on a clipboard.

Robert looked to where Vaselly's legs prevented exit and, slumping back, found himself wondering what sort of bloke the sports master really was. I'll find a way of getting around his pathetic, prison camp mentality, he thought with irritation. And if he doesn't move soon I'll shove my compass into his thigh! He leaned forward to get on with his work and let his leg sag sideways till it touched Vaselly's knee. That'll make the bastard move. There was no reaction. Refusing to give in, Robert left his leg there till the end of the period. The sole result, a dismal ache in the groin from holding his leg in one position too long. Round one to Vaselly.

At home, both Monique and Sanjay thought he was making a fuss about nothing.

‘It is necessary that you meet socially with other students, chérie. It would be foolish to become a recluse. The activity will give you an opportunity to meet students from other classes and make new friends. It is unhealthy to reject others.’

His father took the same line. ‘People are going to think there’s something wrong with you if you avoid them. It’s never a good idea to draw unwanted attention to yourself.’

‘I’ll spend intervals in the common room and meet other students there.’ Robert was not convinced by parental argument; they hadn’t met Mr Vaselly! Somehow the man had issued a challenge and Robert felt honour-bound to pick up the gauntlet. Not that he understood his motives any better than the outbursts of anger that occasionally ripped through his brain; he was simply determined to make up his own mind about whether he’d do an activity.

‘Please yourself, son, you probably know best.’

Robert doubted that, but intended to do it anyway. He racked his brains for a solution. Tomorrow he’d keep an eye on Mr Perfect Vaselly, and find a chink in his armour.

Tailing his prey was easier than anticipated. Between periods he twice had time to follow Vaselly for a few minutes. At interval and again at lunchtime he tracked him from the gymnasium to the staff-room. I could get had up for stalking, he reflected humourlessly. Other teachers greeted the PE teacher in a friendly enough fashion, so they certainly didn’t dislike him. As for the students, the boys either ignored him or got smartly out of his way as though nervous. Several girls made flagrant attempts to gain his attention. Two tried to brush his thigh, unsuccessfully, and there were a couple of muted wolf-whistles. Vaselly appeared totally unmoved. Basilisk-like, he walked with the articulated grace of one of Asimov’s robots. Perhaps he wasn’t human after all, and there was nothing to discover?

After school, Robert went to the Library to check reference books for an assignment. While waiting for the librarian, he flicked through a copy of the previous year’s School Magazine. Staring at him from page three was a photo of Vaselly, followed by a short piece welcoming him as the newest member of staff. Robert scanned this briefly, then re-read a line. Represented his university in Wrestling.

An idea trickled into his head. Robert grinned, completed book issuing, thanked the librarian and smiled at the school motto emblazoned in gold on a wooden shield above the door: Per Angusta - Ad Augusta. Through hardship to glory! Huh! He’d soon see how classical the school was.

‘What have you decided?’ Mr Vaselly’s mood hadn’t improved.

‘Wrestling.’

‘We don’t do it.’ Flat and final.

‘Well we ought to. This school is supposedly based on classical traditions and wrestling is one of the Graeco-Roman sports. Besides, you’re a wrestler.’

‘Modern! Wrestling’s changed over the last two thousand years. Come on, you’re wasting time!’

‘But, Sir, I’ve always wanted to learn wrestling.’ A lie, and in a cajoling whine to boot. Nauseating, but all’s fair in love and war, Robert rationalised. ‘Do you think I’m not good enough to be taught by you?’ His tone making it obvious that what he really meant was, do you think you are too good to teach me?

‘Don’t get smart with me!’

‘Afraid I’ll beat you?’ This set blood pounding. He couldn’t believe what he was saying. All his school life he’d been the perfect pupil – quiet, polite, thoughtful, on time with everything, never putting a foot wrong. Now here he was getting into a slanging match with a teacher.

Mr Vaselly stood calmly, legs apart, arms folded, eyes a calculating squint. Unable to hold the stare, Robert lowered his gaze and, in growing apprehension, wondered why Vaselly hadn’t responded to the insult.

‘I’m far too busy.’ The teacher’s relaxed, almost smiling response felt like a slap in the face.

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