

Jarek

By
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Smashwords Edition

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Cover: Detail of **The Swimming Hole** by **Thomas Eakins**

Chapter 1. Zeno

Skinny-dipping with Raylene's friends was not Zeno's idea of a fun night out. He'd only agreed because he wanted to seem tough, and hoped if he felt her up in the water and fucked her afterwards her mates would stop spreading rumours he was queer.

The cars screeched to a halt at the boat ramp. Everyone piled out and headed for the small beach until Bob's girlfriend reckoned there'd be eels and leeches in the river and refused to go down. Then the others also chickened out, saying it was too dark, probably dangerous and a stupid idea.

'Fuck you lot are wimps', Raylene yelled, grabbing Zeno's hand and dragging him down to the strip of sand. A half-moon provided enough light to see and it was hot and humid so Zeno kicked off his sandals, dropped his shorts, jocks and shirt on a rock and ran into the water, calling to Raylene to follow.

The river was wide and deep at that point with little current, so he swam upstream a few metres then drifted back expecting to meet her in the water, but the beach was empty. She'd wimped out like the other wankers; all talk and no action. More money than intelligence. He waded out in disgust and found himself in the spotlight of half a dozen powerful torches.

'You're a pathetic turd, Zeno,' Raylene's sharp voice sneered. 'Did you really think I'd want to be with a creep like you? Crawling up teachers' arses to get top marks. You think you're so bloody smart but you're just a creepy faggot who thinks he's too good for us—won't even pay footy with the boys.' Her tirade was interrupted by a high-pitched giggle, 'Bob, get your hands off my tits.

Boozy laughter.

'You're a total reject, Zeno, even your name's a fuckin disaster,' one of the guys sneered.

Loud cheers and the clink of bottles.

'Piss off back to the city, arsehole. We don't want your sort here.'

Laughing drunkenly they ran back to the parked cars and drove off.

Zeno remained rooted to the spot, too stunned to react. As the noise of revving cars faded and vision returned it brought with it a sense of liberation. He wanted to be with them even less than they wanted to be with him. At least he hadn't made a fool of himself by rushing around grabbing his clothes or covering his crotch. That would have been really pathetic.

He took a deep breath, let it out in a loud sigh, turned, stretched, grinned up at the stars and jogged a hundred metres up stream where he swam for a bit, then drifted back to the beach and wandered across the sand to retrieve his clothes. The rock was still there but the clothes weren't. He ran up to the car park. Only old food wrappers, a couple of discarded drink cans and a burnt out car wreck. He retraced his steps imagining he'd forgotten where he'd dropped his gear, but found nothing that could be used as clothing for the eight-kilometre walk home. The bastards had taken everything, even his sandals!

It was about nine o'clock, so as the only road home crossed the bridge in the centre of town he'd have to wait at least three hours for the streets to be quiet enough to risk it. A slow smile softened his face and he relaxed. It felt as if he'd been tense for months. Wound tight in a fruitless effort to be like the locals. Not appear too clever. Pretend he liked their music, jokes, films. He didn't think he was too good for them, he knew he was and hadn't been more sociable for fear of letting his guard down and being himself—too different to be acceptable in this shitty arsehole of a town. As for their pathetic football, he hated team sports. As a rabid individualist he wanted to be judged on his own merits, not on the success or otherwise of a group.

He laughed softly. He'd given it his best shot but it hadn't worked, so his parents would have to let him go back to live with his grandmother next year. Lying back on a smooth rock he saw his future in the stars. A future devoid of the local cretins. 'A small farming community,' his mother had gushed when persuading him to make the move north so they could be near his father's work as a mining engineer. 'Fresh air and simple folk who appreciate the finer things in life. We're going back to nature.'

Ha! Simple-minded and not remotely natural. The kids he knew were ignorant idiots who valued nothing except junk food, porn videos and sex with their unwholesome, loud and vulgar classmates. His mind was made up and his parents would have to accept that he was not going back to that school next year. Although he might enjoy one more week so he could pretend the walk home in his birthday suit had been fun, making their stupid joke fall flat.

A soft cough made him look into the shadows. Bloody Raylene must have come back! Probably felt sorry and brought back his clothes. A pity; he'd been looking forward to sneaking home naked. He ought to drag the bird-brained bitch into the water and drown her. Determined to ignore her he turned his back and began walking down to the river when a cultivated voice called politely, 'Zeno! May I come over?'

He knew that voice! Ms Nimffo! What the fuck was she doing there? And how did she know who he was in the dark?

'Don't be shy,' she said in a singsong baby voice as if talking to an idiot.

That did it. One thing Zeno wasn't was shy, so he wandered casually over and stood unnecessarily close, hands on hips, towering over his diminutive History teacher who, in the detail-obscuring moonlight, appeared a decade younger than her twenty-eight years.

'I live a little way up the road,' she explained, placing a tiny hand on Zeno's arm as if worried she might frighten the wild young thing away. 'Every evening I walk past here for exercise and fresh air. Tonight as I was returning I heard shouts, then saw all those flashlights. Imagining it was hooligans I remained hidden but saw and heard everything, then waited till they drove away leaving you stranded.'

It didn't occur to Zeno to wonder what she'd been doing since the cars took off, instead he smiled and said it didn't worry him, he'd walk home.

'How resourceful of you,' Adele Nimffo said with not even a hint of scepticism. 'Perhaps you'd accept a little nourishment before you set off? Coffee and a sandwich perhaps? And something with which to gird your loins? I can't imagine you want to walk home like that.'

'Wouldn't worry me,' he boasted. 'There's no need to look after me, I'm OK, honestly. Anyway, I thought single teachers weren't allowed to invite pupils home?'

'Teachers don't usually find themselves on a deserted river bank in the moonlight with a naked and handsome young student,' she said with a light laugh. 'Come on.' She hoisted a small pack onto her shoulder and led the way along the track to the main road, across it and down a short gravel road past a row of old fishermen's huts set high on stumps in case of flooding. Over the years they'd been renovated and were now desirable properties. The hum of air conditioners and television soaps floated on the hot night air. Teacher and pupil seemed to be the only people abroad as he followed her along a path enclosed by dense shrubbery and up five steps to a small entrance hall where she kicked off her sandals, then through to a tiny sitting room with polished wooden floors, a full bookcase, two comfortable armchairs and a computer desk. No television set.

With no mention of his nudity, nor any offer of the means to cover himself, Adele Nimffo tossed her backpack onto a chair and disappeared through a doorway.

'What would you like on your sandwiches?' she asked as he followed her into a cramped but sparkling kitchen in which an antique gas oven at least as old as the house occupied the extension that had once held an old wood burner. After placing every possible ingredient on the spotless bench and putting the espresso coffee maker on the gas she turned to face him. The space was so small they were almost touching. She was wearing only a halter bra and abbreviated shorts. Zeno could sense the warmth of her skin and the first twinges of an erection announced themselves.

'I need freshening up, so while I'm showering you make yourself something to eat.'

Relieved that she hadn't noticed his arousal, Zeno made a thick sandwich of ham, mayonnaise and tomatoes and had just turned off the coffee when there was a loud bang and a cry from the other side of the house. He raced towards the sound and pushed open the door. Ms Nimffo was on the bathroom floor jammed between the toilet and the shower, head at an odd angle, legs spread, her right hand scrabbling at the edge of the vanity unit in a vain effort to regain her feet.

'Oh...' she wailed. 'My head.'

Zeno knelt and tried to move her but she seemed to be stuck. 'I'm going to have to drag you out a little,' he said.

'Just do it!' she snarled. 'My neck feels as if it's going to snap.' Positioning himself between her splayed legs he took hold of an ankle in each hand and gently pulled, wondering why the sight of her cunt wasn't more exciting. It looked like the photos in the textbooks, but with more hair. And her tits weren't anything to write home about—lumps of fat with long nipples. A bit creepy really.

Having dragged her out from under he straddled her and pulled her to her feet. On the way up her mouth brushed his penis and he wondered if it was accidental and why it didn't seem more exciting. She slumped, so he had to hold her against his chest like a bag of wheat. She put her arms around him and pressed herself against his groin. He began to harden.

'My bedroom's opposite,' she whispered.

He carried her in, laid her none too gently on the bed and was about to cover her when she let out a loud cry.

'I've got cramps! I need a massage! Quick!' Before her unwilling student could withdraw she grabbed his hand and thrust it between her legs, using his fingers like a dildo, rubbing her clitoris and thrusting them into her swelling vulva. Shocked, Zeno pulled his hand away. Ignoring him she rolled onto her side, reached into a drawer of the bedside cabinet and produced a foil packet that she ripped open with her teeth. Zeno, too stunned to react, was still standing in front of her when she rolled the condom onto his erection. It was so slickly done, so fast and professional his irritation dissolved into amazement, to be replaced by anger when with surprising strength she dragged him on top and drew her legs up to her chest. His response was a combination of fury and reflex. With all the force he could muster he rammed his manhood violently into the exposed swollen slit.

'Slowly, slowly, stupid boy!' Ms Nimffo snapped. 'I don't want you coming before I'm ready! Like this...in...out...in...out...and thus she gained the maximum personal satisfaction while Zeno avoided boredom by watching his leisurely thrusting in a large mirror above a dressing table beside the bed. After observing the play of light on muscles, buttocks clenching and relaxing, he raised his body a little so he could watch his shaft sliding in and out.'

'Stupid fuckwit! Put it back in!' his instructress almost screamed 'Stay in! Stay in! Deeper! Deeper!'

Curiosity replaced the urge to pull out and leave her unsatisfied. He'd heard tales of women screaming and writhing like wild cats as they orgasmed and he wondered what she'd be like—if she ever managed to have one. Tedium was rapidly overtaking curiosity by the time soft moans became grunts then whimpers and finally loud screams of delight. That was when Zeno thought he must have ejaculated—his penis was by then too insensitive to register anything except relief. He rolled the condom off and held it up. The bulb was filled and no leaks visible.

'What'll I do with this?'

'Flush it!' his hostess growled irritably; orgasm had clearly failed to improve her mood.

Desires satiated, Ms Nimffo dressed while Zeno ate his sandwich alone in the kitchen. Unsure whether to simply leave or wish the unpleasant woman good night, he was standing indecisively at the door when she bustled into the sitting room, opened her knapsack and tossed his clothes and sandals at him.

'You'd better put these on.'

'You've had them all along?'

'Yes.'

'So those guys didn't leave me naked?'

'No.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'You needed to be taught a lesson. Now get dressed and go. And if you mention what happened in this house to anyone I'll make sure you're expelled and fail your examinations.'

Zeno merely shook his head in disbelief and scurried. There was no way he'd ever tell anyone he'd screwed that ugly bitch. A man has some pride!

As he jogged down the lane towards the main road a shadowy figure appeared and whispered, 'Zeno.'

He stopped and demanded angrily. 'Who the fuck are you?'

'George, from your Maths class. I need to ask you something.'

Zeno grabbed his collar, dragged the skinny guy to the nearest street lamp and peered at the narrow, nervous face. 'What the fuck are you doing here and what do you want?'

'Sorry, sorry...don't hit me! I shouldn't have...sorry, forget it, I...'

'I'm not going to hit you and stop being so nervous. What's this about?'

'Her!'

'Ms Nimffo?'

'Yeah. Has she...did you?...did she get you to screw her?'

'What business is that of yours?'

'None, it's just that she did it to me and I hate her so much I hang round here waiting for a chance to...to...hell, I don't know. All I know is I want to really, really hurt the bitch.'

'Why?'

'She picked me up one night when I was walking home and took me to her place. Reckoned she wanted to get to know her students better. She was making coffee when she suddenly fainted. I helped her to bed and then she got me to fuck her. At first I thought it was OK, but then she made me come over every second night for three weeks...threatened to have me expelled if I didn't. Then for no obvious reason she told me the only thing in my favour was the size of my dick, so not to bother coming by any more. Then she threatened that if I told anyone she'd deny it and make sure I failed all my exams.'

Zeno laughed wildly. 'George, mate, you're obviously a much better lover than me—this was my first and last time screwing the unlovely Ms Nimffo. I've just been unceremoniously dumped too. I think it was because I yawned and fell out of her hole during the interminable pumping.'

George giggled. 'The last bloke only lasted two days, so perhaps I'm not so bad after all.'

'Have you been checking up on her?'

'I stake out the place most nights to see if she brings someone home.'

'Kinky.'

'No. It's not like that. I hate the scrawny sow. She's stuffed up my mind. Don't really know how I feel about sex any more. I want to find out who else she's screwing.'

'What for?'

George shrugged despondently. 'Not sure. I guess I want to make her pay.'

'I thought it was only women felt like that. You know, Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'

'You reckon I'm mad?'

'Everyone needs a hobby. Who knows, you might see someone worth blackmailing.' Zeno grinned to show he wasn't serious,

'It's her I want to blackmail. Which brings me to the question, Why were you naked?'

Alex explained.

'The cunning sow! Since I've been watching she's had at least three other kids from school. You're the first one I've dared talk to about it.'

'Why me?'

'You're different somehow. You're not like the locals and won't be stuck in this place forever.' His sigh was heartfelt. 'I'll probably never leave so I have to be careful what stories and rumours get around. What do you reckon? Can we get Nimffo? Make her life hell?'

The thought was tempting, but Zeno discovered he wasn't particularly upset about it. He felt stupid. Exploited. But it hadn't damaged his self-confidence. He certainly wasn't going to lose any sleep over the fact that Ms Nimffo had used him like a dildo. In fact it had been educative to discover that vaginal sex with a female was the least interesting of all the methods he'd used to get his rocks off. Compared to his hand, pillow, blow-up doll and a previous girlfriend's mouth she didn't rate. Nevertheless he understood it might have been traumatic to an insecure spindly specimen like George—notwithstanding his apparently large cock. 'I don't know, George,' he said

making an effort to sound serious. 'All she's done is bore me witless for an hour. But I can see she's really upset you. Is it because of your girlfriend?'

George looked down and scuffed his feet. 'Yeah. I've been getting on really well with Sylvia. She's given out hints that she's ready to screw. She's a virgin. I was too till that slut in there raped me! Now...' He fell silent.

'She's spoiled the excitement?'

'Worse. I feel dirty! As if I've cheated on Sylvia. As if I'm not good enough for her now.'

Zeno pictured Sylvia and choked on his effort to stop laughing. The dumbest girl in class. Piggy little nose, lank, greasy red hair and shapeless legs. Perhaps it was her huge boobs George treasured. 'It's the opposite, George!' he said with manly certitude. 'Surely you know women appreciate a bit of experience in a man? You're now a sexy stud and instead of stuffing up Sylvia's first fuck through nervousness, as most guys do apparently, you'll give her an experience she'll appreciate forever.'

'You reckon?'

'Guarantee it. So, do you still want to get back at the witch?'

'I want to stop her from raping other young guys and threatening them with expulsion and failure. Surely you can see she must be stopped?'

'Put like that, I agree. What say we sound out the other kids you've seen here, and then decide what to do?'

'Yeah, that'll be excellent. I knew you'd be the right person to ask. You live out on the Koeran Road, don't you?'

'Yeah.'

'How're you getting home?'

'Jogging.'

'Want a lift? I've got my motorbike around the corner.'

'George, you're a lifesaver. After an hour bonking that sex maniac I can barely walk and I feel filthy. Got time for a quick swim first?'

'In the river?'

'Yeah.'

'No togs.'

'Skinny dip.'

'Naked?'

'There's no one else around.'

'I've never swum naked in my life.'

'Then you haven't lived.'

Four minutes later they'd dropped their clothes on the rocks and were leaping into the water.

'Hey! This is great. If I stand still with my legs apart the current caresses my cods. I'm getting a hard on.'

'I told you it's great.'

'Better than great! I'm going to bring Sylvia here.'

They swam and waded a few hundred metres up river then drifted back on the lazy current.

'Why have I never done this before?'

'Because you were born and bred in the arse end of the universe.'

'Is this place really so bad?'

'The place is fine; the people are narrow-minded, racist, bigoted, fundie fuckwits.'

'Yeah. I guess you're right.'

They jumped up and down to shake off the excess water.

'Fuck! You really have got a horse cock!'

George looked down in consternation. 'Is it too big?'

'I'm jealous. But honestly, you'll have to massage Sylvia's cunt till she relaxes enough to take it. Even then you'll have to go in really slowly. I've read about these things.'

'You're joking.'

‘I’m serious, mate. For goodness sake don’t just shove it in, you’ll split her in two.’

‘Shit it’s lucky I met you. I don’t think I’d have thought of that. Ms Nimffo just took it straight in and I imagined all girls would be like that.’

‘That’s because she’s a whore. Virgins are nervous, and unless they’re properly worked up their twats are tight and dry and easily hurt, especially by something as huge as yours! It’s bigger than Sebastian’s.’

‘Who’s Sebastian?’

‘A friend of my grandmother. He’s a farmer and I spend most of my holidays at his place.’

‘How do you know he’s...you know...?’

‘Got a fat long dong? Because we never wear clothes on the farm. They reckon it’s unhealthy.’

‘They?’

‘Him and Grandma.’

‘Is she naked too?’

‘Yeah, and a scrawnier bit of flesh you’re not likely to find. As tough as boots. I love her more than my parents and I’m going to live with her next year. Fuck this place and school.’

‘Shit, you’re lucky. I wish I’d got to know you before.’

‘Well, why didn’t you come up and talk to me? I was the lonely new guy who was made to feel as if I was diseased, totally stupid, unloved and on an unfriendly planet. I couldn’t just barge in and demand to be someone’s mate.’

‘I wanted to, but I felt too shy and inadequate. You’re smart and a loner and recently you’ve been sort of hanging out with those up-themselves wealthy wankers. I thought you and Raylene were on together.’

‘Well, we aren’t, and I’m definitely not one of them! Now where’s that motorbike?’

Chapter 2. Stephen

The following morning at school Zeno kept to himself, not that anyone showed interest in talking to him. At lunchtime he followed George’s cryptic signals to the back of an old shed where three other satisfiers of Ms Nimffo’s lusts were nervously waiting. An amusing recount of his own carnal misadventure soon had the neurotic victims laughing and agreeing that instead of seeing themselves as victims they should be proud at having been chosen, because it meant they were pleasant, clean, decent young men. She was the nasty one, abusing their good nature.

They agreed she had to be reported before she ruined some young guy’s life. However, it was up to Zeno, who would be leaving in seven weeks, to inform the Principal. They couldn’t do it because they were stuck in the town and would never be able to live down the shame of having been fiddled with by that hag. To their surprise he agreed without protest.

His agreement wasn’t generosity, it was self-preservation. When broached on the subject of his returning to stay with his grandmother for his last year of high school, his parents had been adamant. No way! That rebellious old biddy was already exerting her nefarious influence over him in the holidays. As for her over-sexed young farmer friend! The further Zeno lived from that reprobate the better his parents liked it. Not one to give up on his plans, Zeno had decided to get himself expelled.

‘Come in!’ The Principal had had a hard day and was not in the mood for complaining kids. ‘Stand there,’ he said firmly, pointing at a spot in front of his desk without looking up.

Zeno smiled to himself; the worse mood the old guy was in the better. During the next five minutes he counted the few remaining hairs on Mr. Noble’s bald scalp, noted his collar was beginning to fray at the neck, observed that his bony hands were hairy and he twitched his head every time he turned a page. The poor old bugger must be near retirement, Zeno reckoned. It should be easy to shock him and get kicked out.

Eventually, Mr. Noble looked up and frowned. ‘Yes?’ His voice was surprisingly pleasant—soft and deep. ‘I apologise for snapping at you when you came in. Zeno, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’ve impressed your teachers in the few months you’ve been here, well done. Now, what can I do for you.’

‘Thanks for seeing me, Sir. I want to report a rape.’

Mr Noble sat back and frowned. ‘That’s serious,’ he said softly as he stood and closed the door to the secretary’s office. Studying the student with obvious concern he invited Zeno to take one of the armchairs at the other end of the room then joined him. ‘Are you able to give me details, or is it too embarrassing?’

‘Oh, I’m not embarrassed, Sir, just angry. I like to have a swim in the evenings in the river and...’ Leaving out all mention of Raylene and her gang, Zeno gave a frank and explicit account of his misadventure with Ms Nimffo.

The Principal sat still for at least a minute then looked Zeno in the eye. ‘How old are you?’

‘Just turned sixteen.’

‘You look at least two years older, so Ms Nimffo probably thought you were of legal age.’

‘That’s not worrying me, I’m perfectly old enough to have sex and this wasn’t my first time. I’m not traumatised or anything like that, so don’t worry on that score, it’s just that I was tricked into it and then threatened with expulsion and failure if I told anyone.’

‘Are you sure you did nothing to encourage Ms Nimffo?’

‘Absolutely not, Sir! I’ve never even spoken to the woman outside the classroom. I don’t find her attractive in any way—certainly not sexually! I had no idea she’d been spying on me at the river and couldn’t imagine it was her who stole my clothes!’

‘You said it wasn’t your first sexual experience.’

‘My girlfriend offered herself for my last birthday, but Sebastian warned me that if women let you screw them, from then on they think you owe them forever. He reckons that’s crazy because they like it as much as guys and we do all the work! So I played it safe and settled for a blowjob. I think she was pleased, really.’

‘Who’s Sebastian?’ the Principal asked hastily, determined not to show his embarrassment at his pupil’s frankness.

‘A friend of my grandmother.’

‘Do you miss your girlfriend?’

‘No way. Like Seb predicted, she immediately got clingy so I was pleased to come up here to get rid of her. But this place is worse!’

‘You don’t like it here?’

‘No! Because I don’t enjoy mixing with mean minded, racist, religious bigots. The local kids don’t like me; they think I’m stuck up and call me a poofter because I don’t want to be like them.’

‘Does that worry you?’

‘Not especially.’

‘That’s good. Now...let’s recapitulate. The teacher tricked you into going to her house, then while naked in the shower she pretended to fall, then enticed you to have intercourse with her. She’s a small woman and you are a tall, fit and strong young man. You could have left at any time. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, Sir, but she didn’t entice me; she made it seem it was my duty. She’s a teacher and I’ve been programmed to obey them.’

‘I see. Did you enjoy it?’

‘It was disgusting!’

‘Yet you managed to gain an erection and maintain it for many minutes.’

‘Sir, I get erections all the time. I have to jerk off at least five times a day to relieve the pressure. Wasn’t it like that for you?’

Mr. Noble had difficulty concealing his sadness. This young man was everything he admired; everything he would love to have been. Open, honest, easy, self-confident but not bumptious. Tall, strong and handsome. Clean-cut. Desirable to women. The Principal wasn’t jealous, there was

nothing mean in his character, but he was unable to conceal the despondency in his voice. 'I wasn't so fortunate.'

'I guess it was the novelty of being lusted after by a teacher, and then I kept it up by watching myself in the mirror beside her bed.' Zeno's laugh was infectious. 'I got so bored I lost concentration and slipped out. That made her really mad and she yelled to shove it back in harder. You wouldn't believe how noisy she is when she comes. Screaming and shouting.'

The Principal turned away to hide a smile that threatened to become a roar of laughter. Never in his entire teaching career had a student been so disarmingly and hilariously honest. He knew he shouldn't laugh; they were talking about a member of his staff! His eyes watered and he took out a handkerchief, dabbing at his eyes and blowing his nose before he was in a fit state to carry on. He took a deep breath and finally managed to look the student in the eye without subsiding into laughter. 'You're amazing, Zeno. I should be shocked, but you make the whole sordid episode sound extremely amusing.'

'Well, it was pretty bizarre.'

'I agree, but you can see that a good lawyer would have you laughed out of court if you pressed charges.'

'Oh, I agree and don't want to do that.'

'What do you want then?'

'Get rid of her! I'm not the only one she's raped. At lunchtime I met four other guys who've all been taken to her lair and threatened with expulsion or failure if they don't screw her and keep quiet about it. They won't complain to you or tell their parents because they're too worried about becoming a laughing stock. You see, everyone imagines real males would be grateful for the experience; but that's not true! Those guys are traumatised. They've lost their self-respect. They're depressed, worried they're now soiled goods and don't deserve to have a girlfriend. She needs to be stopped before she does any more damage.'

The Principal sighed deeply. 'Zeno, tell them from me that there is no way that woman has any influence over such things as exams and expulsions. I don't want them to tell me themselves what she's done to them, but they must stop feeling worried. Will you do that?'

'Of course, Sir.'

'I have a problem. This is a small country high school and finding staff is very difficult. There are twenty teachers, including me. Seventeen are women and three are men. The women are well organised and aware of their rights, which is fair enough. Mr. Adams, the technical teacher and I are both near retirement. The only young male teacher is Mr. Schwartz, whose qualifications are in biology and physics, but he has to take physical education and boys' sport because no woman will do it. He's twenty-five and only here because it was a condition of his study grant that he teach in a remote community for three years. This is his third year. Next year he will be gone. He too feels he has been psychologically abused by the women who are always making jokes about his lack of sexual interest in them. The fact that he has a local girlfriend who works in the council offices only makes them more vicious. He never attends staff functions, doesn't come to the staffroom, and doesn't think he will last the next two months. He doesn't want to be a teacher any more and I can't blame him. The pupils, especially the older girls, are as bad as the female staff, always baiting him.'

'I've heard them calling him a black bastard,' Zeno said quietly, 'but he's hardly darker than me. This place is so racist! I like Mr. Schwartz. Most of the guys think he's great, it's the girls who make his life hell.'

'I know, and can do nothing about it because they're too devious.' Mr. Noble sighed deeply. 'Tell me, Zeno, do you want to stay in this school to finish your schooling?'

'No way!'

'Is that why you ignored Ms Nimffo's threats and reported her? You hoped you'd be expelled?'

'Yes, Sir.'

The Principal sat and contemplated this unusual student who appeared so up front, honest and guileless. Was it a facade? Did it denote maturity, sense and responsibility, or was he just another braggart trying to shock—willing to say anything to get what he wanted? Zeno held his gaze for a

few seconds then smiled shyly and looked around the room as if interested in what was on the walls. Intuitively, Mr. Noble realised that the lad was politely giving him space and time to think. ‘Those other boys you met, are they very upset? Will they make trouble in the future, do you think?’

‘I’m pretty sure they won’t, Sir. I told them all about my experience with Nimffo, laying it on a bit thick to make them laugh, because laughter frees the mind to see things in perspective. Then we chatted a bit and decided it’d be pathetic to feel like victims when obviously we should be proud. Nimffo wouldn’t have chosen us if we weren’t pleasant, clean, decent young men. She was the nasty one, not us.’

‘And they all seemed happier after that?’

‘Yeah. They made jokes, reckoned they now had the experience to pull a bird and get themselves laid by someone their own age. They’ll be fine.

‘Those boys are the same age as you, or a year younger! Yet you counselled them. Amazing. Where did you learn such wisdom?’

‘From Sebastian. He’s my role model. Brave, clear thinking, independent. He had an odd childhood then suffered a dreadful loss a while ago, but didn’t let it destroy him.’

The Principal sat back in his chair, satisfied that Zeno was genuine and could safely be taken into his confidence. ‘I believe your story, Zeno, and I will sort things out. Meanwhile, don’t be upset when I don’t fire Ms Nimffo. Here’s the plan. Today’s Friday. I’ve a few things to organise, but first thing on Monday morning I’ll summon her to this office and confront her with your accusations. She will deny them and go and fetch her friend, Ms Medlar, the Teacher’s Association representative. They will then threaten to take all the staff out on strike and shut the school down and sue us both if I allow you to continue with what they will call defamation.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘It happens every time there’s a complaint against any female. This is the first time for Ms Nimffo—I always thought she was a shy little thing. Just goes to show appearances don’t tell the full story. Then I will tell them I believe her, and will expel you from school immediately for malicious libel, and they’ll go away, happy to have once more proven how weak and useless men are.’

Zeno’s heart sank. This was not what he’d been expecting. ‘That means I won’t sit my final exams and will have to repeat my year at the next school. Not exactly fair.’

‘If that was going to happen it wouldn’t be fair, but it’s not going to happen. Diplomacy, Zeno, is the art of pleasing everyone. I have a plan that’s been brewing in my head for several months—years if the truth were told, but I need the weekend to make sure it is possible before going into any details. Go home and rest easy this weekend. You will sit your exams and pass them, but in secret.’

‘What do I tell my parents?’

‘Nothing yet. I’ll see you on Monday.’

The weekend was the slowest on record, but the following Monday everything happened as the Principal predicted. Ms Nimffo was profoundly shocked, burst into tears and solemnly swore that Zeno had knocked at her door pretending he wanted help with his homework, but once inside he had overpowered her and raped her. Ms. Medlar, a lean and handsome young woman in her late twenties, was sent for. It took several sniffling sobbing minutes to calm her distressed friend enough to sob relief that the lout would be expelled forthwith.

When asked why she hadn’t complained to the police, Ms Nimffo confided that she didn’t trust them not to broadcast it and thus besmirch the good name of the school. She hoped the Principal fully realised what a sacrifice she had made. He assured her he admired her courage, offered a day’s leave to recover, which was bravely refused, then closed the door behind them before sinking into his chair with such a feeling of revulsion he could barely refrain from smashing something.

At lunchtime, instead of sharing a cup of tea with Mr. Adams in the woodwork room, Mr. Noble took his sandwiches to the gymnasium for a chat with Jarek Schwartz.

During the last period a note was dispatched to Zeno's history class. Ms Nimffo read it, then with a smile of smug derision stared at Zeno. 'You are to report to the Principal's office directly after school, Zeno. I suggest you take all your schoolbooks, you won't be needing them in this school again!'

A chorus of whistles and cheers from Raylene and her mates greeted the announcement. 'Now you're for it faggot. Teach you to be such a stuck-up cunt.'

Ms Nimffo smiled.

Chapter 3. Jarek

'Everything's on track, Zeno, we're going to visit Mr. Schwartz. Bring your stuff.'

Zeno followed the Principal down the back steps and across the yard to the gymnasium. For a change it was empty of shouting kids practising gymnastics or karate or basketball. They entered, locked the door behind them and crossed to the poky office.

'Wait here and listen,' Mr. Noble whispered before knocking and entering, leaving the door ajar.

'Jarek, have you made up your mind or still thinking it over?' he asked.

'I've finished thinking' he said soberly. 'The plan's great. Exactly what I'd love to do, but there must be two responsible adults, not just me. No responsible parent would let their kids go away for a week with only one teacher and a senior student—especially not one of ours! The parents know them and their families and, quite frankly, they're trash. I couldn't work with any of them!'

'I told you to consider all the students from both senior years...well?'

'There's one, but I can't imagine he'd be up for spending six weeks living with me and packs of mongrel misfits. Apart from anything else, he's only sixteen and his exams are too important.'

'Who?'

'That guy who arrived a few months ago—Zeno.'

The Principal opened the office door and called Zeno in. 'Did you hear that?'

'Yes.' Zeno grinned shyly at Jarek's astonished face. 'Sorry for eavesdropping.' He shot out his hand as if to ward off anger.

Jarek Schwartz took it and held on, staring into Zeno's eyes as if waiting for him to shout, 'Only joking, nig-nog! As if I'd want to spend six minutes with you, let alone six weeks!' When that didn't happen he frowned and asked seriously, 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

A bizarre feeling of paralysis overcame Zeno preventing him from freeing either hand or eyes. Slight vertigo accompanied a feeling that he was being sucked into the darkness beyond the teacher's brown eyes into a pool of lonely sadness.

Jarek looked away.

Zeno breathed again and retrieved his hand, experiencing an unexpected twinge of melancholy as he did so

'Zeno doesn't know the plan yet, Jarek, I decided not to tell him until I knew you wanted him to assist. I'm sure he'll agree.'

'What plan?' Zeno was becoming annoyed with what seemed like cloak and dagger nonsense.

'The plan that all year eight and nine boys will have a week with you and Jarek; hiking, swimming and getting to know themselves and nature. There are six classes and seven full weeks left till the end of the year.'

'A week with us where?'

'I've a friend who has a cabin on several hectares of forest where he used to take his kids and friends on holidays and at weekends. There are three bunk rooms each sleeping four; an outdoor, covered kitchen area with a wood-fired stove; a small shower room with a couple of cold showers and washbasins; a decent sized recreation room for indoor games in case of rain; and a separate bedroom for the parents. He's now my age, his kids have quit the nest and the place hasn't been used for a few years. He's letting me have it for nothing as long as we tidy it up, make any minor repairs and leave it in good condition. He also owns a people-mover/minivan thing that could carry

the whole family and their gear. It's still in good order but he seldom uses it so we can borrow that too.'

'That's seven weeks and six classes...what happens on the seventh?'

'That comes first. You and Jarek will spend the rest of this week getting the place ready for the first group of ten lads that you'll pick up next Monday morning. It'll be a rush for me to organise this end, but as they aren't asked to pay a cent for the week, only provide their kid with sheets and a blanket, I don't envisage any problems.'

'What happens to the girls?' Zeno asked.

'While the boys are sweating it out in the bush, they'll be enjoying female activities, whatever they are. I'll dump that problem in Ms. Medlar's lap. She'll moan about girls missing out, so I'll promise they'll be going next year. Let the next Principal sort out that can of worms.'

'What about the classes the boys are missing?' Jarek demanded.

'When those who aren't at the camp would normally be doing Physical Education, they can catch up on the subjects they miss while away. As every junior class has different exams, they're no problem.'

'How old are these kids?'

'Thirteen and fourteen.'

'They're not going to pay attention to me when they learn I'm only sixteen.'

'So we'll tell them you're eighteen. You look it, doesn't he, Jarek?'

'Yes, he does. I had to check your records twice before I could believe it, Zeno. How come you're so young?'

'After seeing the results of my entrance exam my first High School said I'd be wasting my time in year eight; but that's not the problem; what about my study and exams this year? Zeno demanded.

'I'll get you a copy of all teacher notes so you can study in the evenings, and Jarek will invigilate your exams, which we both know you will pass. Does that suit you?'

'I hope my parents will approve.'

'Once you tell them you've been expelled they'll realise it's better than sitting at home all day. How about you, Jarek, are you going to miss your girlfriend?'

'Fuck no!' Jarek exploded. 'It's a toss up what's the most attractive part of this exercise—getting out of school or having the perfect reason to ditch the bitch. She's been putting pressure on me to get married. Hell, she can't cook, she's messy, doesn't wipe the shower down, doesn't stick to the agreed jobs schedule! Certainly not what I'd describe as life-partner material.' He glanced sideways at the Principal, grinned to himself and added, 'The sex also hasn't been up to much for a long time. This is a brilliant way to get out without causing tears and recriminations. She needn't know I won't be coming back for weekends, and you'll promise to tell no one, especially her, where the camp is?'

'I promise, as long as you keep a few spare batteries for your mobile phones. There's no electricity or phone up there. I'll ring you every morning and evening. I agree there must be no visitors. It'd be a disaster for the kids to have stray adults arriving at odd times, any rapport you'd built up would vanish and they'd become self-conscious.'

Jarek turned to Zeno. 'How about you, Zeno, are you happy to spend six weeks stuck out in the bush with me?'

Zeno had been studying the teacher. Still in his P.E. Gear he looked lean but not mean. Natural tan. Thick black hair cropped like a helmet on a well-shaped head. Small ears. Strong square jaw. Prominent cheekbones. Thick black eyebrows. Dark eyes separated by two frown lines. Hooked nose. Determined lips. Heavy five o'clock shadow. Short black hairs covering arms, chest and legs. 'I can't wait to get there,' he grinned. 'Can I call you Jarek?'

Jarek's laugh sounded a little wild even to himself. He'd given up hope of the boss's plans ever coming to fruition, but now everything was falling into place his heart sang. He'd be out of the school for the rest of the year! He draped an impulsive arm round Zeno's shoulders and a faint smell of fresh sweat and an odourless gust of breath set Zeno's pulses racing. Jarek was healthy, clean and intelligent. This was going to be a zillion times better than school.

‘As you’re now one of the staff, Zeno—albeit unpaid, you can call me Stephen,’ the Principal said shyly.

‘Wow! That’s an honour, Sir—I mean Stephen, thanks!’

‘Just makes me feel a little less ancient. OK, men. Time is of the essence so I suggest that as it’s only three thirty we drive to the property so I can show you around—that’s if we can use your ute, Jarek? The wife’s commandeered mine as usual to ferry her tame nuns around or whatever she does.’

‘Sure thing, Boss.’

‘Then on the way back I’ll introduce you to the owner. He wants nothing to do with this, so will leave you totally alone and expect you to do the same with him. As I mentioned, he’s also prepared to lend us his minibus as long as we service it. You can check it out later in the week. Then tomorrow you can take your gear and any tools you’ll need and start preparing the place for the first ten kids to arrive next Monday.’

While Jarek donned a tracksuit Zeno rang his parents to tell them he’d be late.

They piled into the front seat of Jarek’s mud splashed 4WD jacked-up ute in which he went bush most weekends, and forty-five minutes later turned off the sealed road onto a rough track that after a couple of kilometres ended at a small, overgrown parking area. Behind a dense hedge a track led about fifty metres to a substantial building nestling in a small clearing among giant rainforest trees and dense undergrowth.

‘This is no cabin, Stephen,’ Jarek said with a laugh.

The tall square structure constructed of rough sawn logs and roofed with tiles, was flanked on one side by a lean-to kitchen attached to a covered area for eating. On the other side a verandah protected the three doors of the bunk rooms.

‘What do you want to do first? Inspect the buildings or the land?’

‘You said there’s a swimming hole so let’s check that out first. I need to flush away the residue of all those sweaty kids.’

‘Excellent idea,’ Zeno agreed.

Stephen led them about a hundred metres down an overgrown sandy path to the swimming hole, a wide, placid, deep pool at a bend in the creek with a sandy beach on the nearest side and steep rocky banks on the other that dropped straight into the deep water. The creek was a tributary of the river Zeno had been swimming in before his brush with Adele Nimffo. Rainforest regrowth that surrounded and overhung the pool would have suited Tarzan. There was even a rope attached to a high, overhanging branch.

‘Come on Jarek! Race you!’ Zeno left his school clothes in a heap on the sandy beach and raced into the water. ‘It’s great! Come on you two.’

Jarek hesitated

‘What’s the matter?’ Stephen asked.

‘No togs.’

‘It didn’t worry Zeno.’ Stephen seemed almost disappointed at the teacher’s modesty.

‘Didn’t want to shock you,’ Jarek muttered.

‘I’m shocked that a guy who’s proud of his bush skills and fitness thinks twice about skinny dipping in a place like this! Where’s your sense of adventure?’

‘You’re right, I’m a fuckwit,’ Jarek mumbled as he stripped and hurled himself into the water, swimming strongly across, then clambering onto the far bank to pose on a rock like a god, before diving in again. Zeno dived, grabbed hold of Jarek’s foot and dragged him under. They chased each other through the water like kids, onto the sandy beach where they wrestled, then back into the water where Jarek escaped his pursuer’s clutches by grabbing hold of the rope and hauling himself to the top using only his arms, then screeching like a monkey before diving cleanly back causing scarcely a splash.

Years of teaching and counselling had given the Principal a fair insight into the minds of both pupils and teachers. Jarek’s manifest lack of interest in females, and Zeno’s frank admission of

similar feelings pointed to an obvious conclusion. Equally obvious was that neither realised. Normally this would not be a problem, but as they'd be together twenty-four hours a day and sharing a bedroom, Stephen thought it should be discussed sooner rather than later. The question was, how to broach it? With a sly grin he gathered up the young men's clothes and called, 'I'll go and open up the cabin. Don't be too long.'

Jarek and Zeno swung on the rope a few times, decided it was safe for the kids, swam a bit more, then reluctantly returned to dry land.

'Where are our clothes?' Jarek frowned.

'Stephen must have taken them.'

Back at the cabin Stephen told them he'd put their clothes in the ute. 'Didn't think you'd want to put them on till you were dry. Anyway, forget clothes, you look better without them,' he joked uneasily. 'Come and inspect your home for the next seven weeks.'

Jarek had no problem being naked, indeed it was his preferred state when alone; he simply felt awkward being naked with other people and was on the point of going to the utility truck for his gear when he saw Zeno blithely wandering around looking more comfortable than in his baggy school shorts and shirt. Silently he berated himself for his insecurity. It was pathetic to let ancient schoolyard bullying prevent him from doing what he wanted ten years later! Surely it was time to get over being called an ignorant savage? He used to wish his parents had never left Mauritius—until he read letters from relatives who remained there.

The warm air caressed his skin, his thighs caressed his balls, and a feeling that something good was on the way began to swell in Jarek's chest, only to shrink again when he reminded himself that nothing good happened to antisocial, self-conscious idiots like him. He knew that if he didn't change his behaviour he was doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, but feared he had little hope of doing that despite three years of Stephen's praise and encouragement.

Deep in his soul lay an acid bath of memories telling him he didn't deserve success because he was unable to stand up for himself. For the last three years he'd toed the line in a job he'd grown to hate. Acted respectable—not that he wasn't. Always feeling as if he was negotiating a path through quicksand—one false move and he'd be sucked in and drowned. He hadn't told his girlfriend to pack her bags because he didn't want to hurt her feelings. He shook his head as if to dislodge an irritant and told himself not to be a fuckwit, but grab this chance to be himself, whoever that was. With a grin he slammed his fist into his other hand. 'Yes!' a soft voice whispered in his head. 'You're going to do and say exactly what you please! You're going to be honest! You're going to...' He laughed aloud. 'Perhaps I can't change completely,' he muttered, 'but I can at least modify my dopiness.'

'What's the joke?' Stephen asked.

'Me,' Jarek admitted. 'I'm laughing at what an anal-retentive-wanker I am.'

'And?'

'And I'm going to loosen up.'

'Your anus or your attitudes?'

Zeno roared with laughter and gave Jarek a friendly shove into the large, high-ceilinged room, empty except for a couple of chairs. There'd be plenty of space for games if the weather turned sour, and there was loads of light thanks to high windows that encircled the room just below the ceiling. Doors pierced the centre of each wall. The one on their left led to an ablutions area containing two showers, two hand-basins and, through a door in the end wall, access to a small shed with a composting toilet. The door directly opposite the entrance to the recreation room opened onto the verandah of the three bunk rooms. Each could sleep four people, having bunks on either side of the door. The ablution block and the bunk rooms were in need of a good scrub, but apart from one broken window everything seemed sound. Even the mattresses that had been draped over the rafters to air were clean and not at all musty.

Returning to the recreation room Stephen opened the fourth door. 'This is your bedroom,' he announced with a flourish. It was a tiny space with just enough room for an old-fashioned double bed complete with mosquito-net frame, and a chest of drawers.

‘A double bed,’ Jarek said with a frown.

‘If it worries you, I’m sure we could find a couple of singles,’ Stephen offered.

‘They’d never fit,’ Zeno grunted, wandering to the outside door and opening it. ‘It’s a relief to see that all rooms have an emergency exit,’ he observed. ‘Great view of the hills.’

‘The view’s not important if you’re sleeping,’ Jarek snapped.

‘What’s the matter, Jarek? Are you worried I’ll snore or fart in bed?’

‘No, it’s just that I’ve never shared a bed before.’

‘Not even with your girlfriend?’ Stephen was laughing.

‘I meant with another guy.’

‘Well, if you’re frightened I’ll rape you in the night, I’ll sleep in one of the rooms with the kids, there’ll always be at least one spare bunk,’ Zeno snapped, clearly thinking Jarek was being stupid.

‘No, you won’t!’ Stephen stated firmly. ‘It’ll spoil the atmosphere for the boys if they have an adult too close. They’ll think you’re checking up on them.’

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry. I’m being stupid, as usual,’ Jarek muttered. ‘Of course we’ll share!’ He threw himself onto the bed and patted the mattress beside him. ‘Come on, partner, mark out the boundaries. Which side do you like?’

Relieved, Stephen wandered outside to sit and gaze across the valley to the far hills, remembering the happy days spent here with his friends before marriage and responsibilities and his wife’s contempt turned his life into drear days of disillusion. He knew he’d never be fit and young again, but even when he had been he hadn’t realised how precious and transient it was. Youth had definitely been wasted on him. He sighed at the ache that invaded his chest whenever he saw fit and healthy young people filled with energy and innocent hope. His life had been circumscribed by religious parents, relations, what the neighbours might think, educational expectations. Then when he became a teacher the demands of principals, and now other teachers and pupils. His whole life, he realised, had been lived obeying the whims of people he often didn’t even like or respect!

As if that wasn’t enough, the drab, narrow tunnel of his life become further constricted by the burden of a demanding and eternally dissatisfied wife. His approaching retirement was a double-edged sword; he’d be glad to leave teaching but couldn’t face the prospect of spending more time with Violet. ‘No wonder so many blokes my age top themselves,’ he muttered sadly. He sighed impatiently and tried to relax using deep breathing exercises he’d found on the Internet. Eventually he drifted into a light doze.

The Principal’s departure left Jarek and Zeno acutely aware of the proximity of the other’s body.

‘Do you wear pyjamas?’

‘No, Grandma reckons they’re unhealthy. You?’

‘Don’t own any, they always feel as if they’re strangling me.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘So what happens if we accidentally touch each other in the night?’ Jarek asked, unsuccessfully trying to sound unconcerned.

‘Then I guess I’ll have to kill you.’

‘Ha! You may be slightly taller and heavier, but I’m leaner, meaner and stronger.’

‘I’ll knife you in the guts.’

‘Is this religion speaking?’

‘No way! I’m a freethinker.’

‘That’s a relief. So what does a freethinking sixteen year old reckon we should do if we accidentally rollover and touch each other during the night?’

‘Being sensitive souls, it will be a dreadful shock to our psyches, so I guess we ought to prevent irrational reflex reactions that could result in maiming or death of the perpetrator, by desensitising ourselves.’

‘Sounds verbose and flowery enough to be possible, but how?’

‘Start with something we’re used to and gradually move into uncharted waters until we learn to control our revulsion and violent spontaneous responses?’

‘The only times I’ve touched men is to shake hands, or in sports like gymnastics and the occasional game of rugby. I’ve never touched a naked man.’

‘We did battle in the swimming hole and wrestled on the sand only half an hour ago.’

‘Ah, yes. I didn’t notice. Enjoying myself so much I forgot we were starkers. But it’s scarcely the same thing.’

‘OK, let’s start with hands.’

They sat facing each other cross-legged on the bed and held hands. After a minute their initial embarrassment dissipated and they were able to explore each other’s fingers and palms, then move on to forearms, elbows and upper arms.

‘OK, my nausea seems under control, so let’s touch each other’s heads then move on down.’

They leaned forward and ran fingers through hair, down over ears and around necks.

‘I love your heavy beard stubble,’ Zeno said dreamily, stroking Jarek’s cheek. ‘It looks so virile.’

‘Thanks. But you’re just as masculine. Are you sure you’re only sixteen?’

‘Sweet sixteen and never been kissed—by a man.’

Jarek frowned.

‘What’s it feel like to have a hairy chest?’ Zeno said quickly to break the tension.

‘Feel it and find out.’

‘It feels sexy.’

Jarek suddenly twitched.

‘Ha! Your nipples are as sensitive as mine. Fuck they’re hard, like little steel points. Make mine hard too?’

‘Like your tool?’

Zeno looked down and giggled. ‘That’s amazing; it never got as stiff as that with Ms Nimffo, or when my girlfriend sucked me off. ‘Hey! You are too. Bet mine’s harder!’

They tested the relative tumescence of their organ pipes then moved on to adjacent bits and pieces. When Stephen silently re-entered the room they were lying on their sides, gently masturbating each other while lightly brushing lips.

The Principal stopped, took a deep breath and regained control of his rational mind. There was nothing wrong with what the young men were doing. It was perfectly legal. He had always been outspoken in defence of minority rights, including sexual minorities, and had frequently abused both staff and pupils who vilified someone for their perceived sexual orientation. Surely, therefore, he had to act as if what they were doing was normal? If they were a man and a woman he wouldn’t think twice about interrupting a bit of petting. Taking a deep breath Stephen said with a calmness that astonished himself, ‘It’s getting late, guys, I guess we’d better head off. I’ll see you outside.’

‘Fuck,’ Jarek said when they were alone. ‘Stephen saw us. He’ll think we’re queer.’

‘Well we’re not! We’re adventurous children of nature. Come on. Let’s get going.’

‘What do we do with these?’

‘Too late for a quick wank to reduce the tension so I guess we’ll have to grin and bare them. Pun intended. If he wasn’t shocked before he’s not going to be now. Come on.’

It took an effort, but Stephen remained true to his recent vow and behaved as if two naked young men wandering around with rigid rods was normal, chatting calmly about plans while they locked up, returned to the ute and dressed. Then, as they drove away he realised with a shock that after a few seconds it *hadn’t* been an act! He honestly did feel their behaviour had been normal! The understanding provoked a tiny smile of pride.

Misinterpreting the smile, Jarek’s tension returned and caused him to ask nervously, ‘Stephen, were you shocked when you saw us kissing and...and stuff?’

‘The complete opposite, Jarek. Very, very relieved would be nearer the mark.’

‘Relieved? Why?’

‘Because it means you guys are going to have something to do in the evenings when all the kiddies are asleep. Because it means you like each other. Because you are both handsome, young, and energetic. Because you both looked so attractive together on that bed, swimming in the river, wandering round the hut that I felt like weeping—both from being in the presence of beauty, and

from regret that I've never been like you. Never dared step outside the mould of other people's judgements.'

'Compliments will get you everywhere, Stephen, but you're much too hard on yourself. You're a really nice guy and an excellent Principal, and the kids like and admire you.'

'Kind sentiments, Zeno, but not shared by most staff members. If I'm honest I don't like myself much—at least not my prospects. But this isn't about me, it's about the two most promising young men I've had the pleasure of knowing.'

'You're not only a great Principal, but an A-1 guy, Stephen,' Jarek said with feeling. 'I'd never have lasted here without you. You're incredibly generous, and we really appreciate it, don't we, Zeno?'

Zeno secretly wiped away a tear and nodded. Too moved by Stephen's words to speak.

'It's bloody confusing, Stephen,' Jarek said slowly, determined to say exactly what he intended and remain true to his vow to loosen up. 'We want to continue doing...what we were doing...but we don't feel we're gay—we feel exactly like we did before—completely normal.'

'That's because you *are* normal! Get that into your thick heads! I've been a 'kids help-line' telephone counsellor for twenty years and there aren't many books I haven't read on the subject of homosexuality, because thanks to religious bigotry that's the most common problem of kids, and the most frequent cause of suicide. Unfortunately, because of my position as Principal I've kept a low public profile until recently, but now I'm about to retire I feel secure enough to speak publicly, as you'll know if you've been reading the 'Letters' page in the newspaper. Despite all the hype from gays as well as their supporters, there's no such thing as a gay person. Gay is just another pigeonhole to shove people into so politicians and administrators and red necks don't have to think. It let's them pretend same-sex-oriented people are all the same and not quite human or deserving of all the human rights accorded to heterosexuals! There's no such thing as a gay type, a gay mentality, or even a gay community.'

'That's a relief—I think,' Jarek said with a frown.

'I've attempted to counsel loads of depressed young men with homosexual leanings and they're all different. All just human sexual animals who, depending on the circumstances, can gain pleasure, comfort and courage from sometimes sharing themselves with other guys. Sane, healthy men have always done this. How do you think sailors coped at sea for years at a time, or hunters away for weeks? Soldiers on lengthy campaigns? For at least two hundred thousand years men formed loving bonds of friendship and trust with other men. Bonds often reinforced by sexual pleasure.

'Contrary to popular belief, these relationships strengthened the bonds of marriage with women and were instrumental in human survival when life was dangerous. If the husband died then his lover would take on the responsibilities. Women too formed deep mental and physical bonds with each other for similar reasons.'

'You're a fountain of knowledge, Stephen.'

'I've always been interested in social science and a recent article I read declares that sexual repression causes violence. Societies in which sexual exploration and activity is permitted from the outset of interest at about the age of twelve or thirteen, are the most peaceful. The reverse is also true. Thus the U.S.A., being the most sexually repressive democratic society is also the most violent and warlike. Sexual relations between men have been the norm in most societies until the dreadful plague of Judaism and its offshoots—Christianity and Islam—reared their evil heads.'

Stephen lapsed into silence, depressed by the truth he had concealed from himself all his life; he too occasionally desired intimate contact with another man. Not sexual, just an arm around the shoulders, the occasional brotherly hug would be enough. He had no doubts about his heterosexuality, but a sexless marriage with one jealous and overbearing woman had been a constant torment. He shook his head as if to clear it, then fearing he had been misunderstood restated his case. 'All I'm saying is that a healthy, normal man needs some form of intimacy with another man to feel complete. Women still allow themselves intimacy with other women; they are always touching, hugging, kissing, even sharing beds. Foolishly, men have let themselves be

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