

From *The Forbidden Path*

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translated from the Dutch

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## Prologue

Two days before *le quatorze juillet*, when Djeu Kaname disappeared into the ocean's roll and froth, we, her companions, were left with more questions than we will ever be able to answer. Who was she, and what was her real name? What did we mean to her and, above all, what was the real reason for her fall?

Those last few seconds in Brittany before she tumbled from the rocks, that misleading prelude to everything that was hanging over her and over us as well, mark the divide between the innocent holiday outing we'd planned and the black day it became. All eleven of us - my colleagues Harley and Walter, the children and I - were walking the cliffs above the sea, an easy prey to the powerful southwest wind that blew apart the final, most obstinate wisps of morning fog. During our walk, the clear blue of seaward sky had gained ground, slowly but surely. And finally, when the sun broke through to light up the rocks and waves it was with such triumph and extravagance that the glow of warmth felt like a reward for the cold and rain we had endured in the days before.

I was kneeling beside Freis on a boulder, its worn surface holding a puddle of sparkling rainwater. Less than three meters away from us we could see the herring gulls practicing their aerial acrobatics along the steep walls of granite. They hung there at eye-level, a sensational sight. I started to explain to him the principle of the thermal, which I would have been better off not doing. Back then, however, I still assumed that my lectures on nature's phenomena were actually of some interest to him.

One of the gulls, an adult, landed white and shining on the boulder's edge. He was examining us with cocked head when the scream rang out behind us, its soaring tone blown away above the granite landscape. When we looked around we saw the others, who had walked out across the rocks ahead. Harley, Bruno and Tom were furthest from us, having expanded their lead with the same nimble eagerness with which they had taken it from the start. Closer by I saw the girls, Samantha in particular, or rather the bottle of water she had just removed from her lips, making it look as though a sunbeam were trembling in her hand. I think Erwin was standing there with them, but I may be mistaken. What I do recall is that all eyes were on Walter, who was standing on a high rock, his hair blowing wildly, his shoulders hunched strangely, looking down at something that was taking place outside my field of vision; I had not yet reached the sharp turn that led along the chasm.

I can't remember climbing up there with Freis, running probably, or even deciding to do so. I only remember Harley

climbing down, his beard like a dark shadow around his chin, and jumping from rock to rock, and that within no time I was standing beside Walter and the girls. Walter was still looking down to where I now saw a crescent-shaped reef rising from the water, some fifteen meters from the coast. The water between the reef and the sheer rock of the coastline was lighter than the sea beyond. Slowly, with a sucking noise, the water pulled back along the tips of the reef, dragging with it Djeu, face down in the waves, her raven hair fanning out like a mass of seaweed.

Walter moaned softly. Then came a stillness that rose up from inside me and hushed the wind and sea and gulls like in a silent movie. The girls and Erwin had lost their voices as well, caught in the same manic fear that made Walter shiver and quake from head to toe, until the moment when everyone started talking and screaming at the same time. A following wave crashed across the reef and Djeu vanished in the swirling water.

I started climbing down. My movements roused Walter from his state of shock. A meter or two apart we scrambled down, using our hands and knees. As I climbed I occasionally glanced over my shoulder, insofar as my coordination allowed, back at the reef and the rock basin where, when the water withdrew and lost its depth once more, Djeu was visible again for a moment. When I saw her floating body, half under, half on the water's surface, and realized that the spot where she was could be no more than two or three meters deep, I felt hope; but almost immediately afterwards, as I watched her pink raincoat balloon up around her, it struck me that it was already too late.

If anyone could have saved her it was Harley, the decisive, fearless athlete of the group. He had started in on the last leg of his descent, his first stop a rock ledge big enough to stand on, followed by the treacherous three or four meters straight down to the sea, with only a bump of granite here and there to hold on to.

Gripping the ledge with his back to the sea, so that he could not see what we saw, Harley lowered himself gingerly down the shiny, mussel-covered wall that ended in the water.

The wave that rose up about ten meters beyond the reef had stayed hidden till then. But now, as the water under Harley beat its retreat, its height revealed it quickly for what it was. Djeu's Bermuda shorts and one of her light blue gym shoes bobbed to the surface for a moment, then were sucked along towards the sharp edges of the reef. From the other direction, the wave that had swollen to ominous heights reached the reef at the same time. I could hear it coming, with the sound of a nearing squall, hissing and rising fast. The answer to the simple question I have asked myself since on more than one occasion, the question of why that particular wave had to be so much bigger than those that went before or came after, is unfathomably complex, even if only because the material causes are

unknown. The collaborative forces of wind direction, lunar phase and local current cannot be contained in a conclusive mathematical formula.

Harley stretched out one leg to touch the calm water below, just as the wave came curling up over the reef behind him. The next second a pyramid of foam rose up and came bearing down on him at high speed.

Some images fade with endless use, others seem to actually become clearer with time. The image of that wave coming in and Harley facing the wall of rock, so close to the sea's surface, constitutes a clearer, more protracted memory than that entire morning's walk. Looking back on it I think that it was already then, during those final feverish seconds, that the realization of guilt bore down on me. A child for whom we had assumed responsibility, one of our wards, was in mortal danger. One of the three of us had failed to fully discharge his duty, to keep from harm the children entrusted to us.

But running besides that fear, which was elicited by what one might call professional considerations, there was yet another, more important thought process. As the wave came rushing in, we, the three grim, resolute men on the rocks above, were caught up in the primal reflex to such situations that has become anchored in our genes and whetted by the course of evolution. One of our group was in extreme danger, and nothing, beyond the considerations of our own lives, was more important than saving Djeu.

The wave is a false woman, wrote Victor Hugo, my father's favorite author second only to Hermans. She kills, steals, hides and gestures blithely that all is well. First she rages, then murmurs innocently. And her shame is in the way she fades away.

When the wave smashed Harley against the wall of rock, I had just reached the ledge above him. The rocky reef in sea blurred darkly through the glimmering fountain of water rising up in front of me. Above the roar, the gulls were floating still.

"Being human among humans offers us the opportunity to give, and not merely to receive. And considering that our brains are constructed in such a way that we have a need to give, this is not only good for others, but also for ourselves." What I had unconsciously been looking for years earlier in Hobbes and Marx, during my study of political science, I found one becalmed autumn day in the college library. My discovery was as simple as it was enlightening: I wanted to mean something to someone else, not so much because I wanted to work my way up to the benevolence of a person like Albert Schweitzer, but because it was the only way I could feel right.

Four years have gone by since I boldly underlined that passage in my textbook. How far has my faith retreated in the meantime? And how clearly have I begun the process of conversion, with or without grave doubts, to those schools of therapy that award the highest priority to coming up for one's self, and in which the interests of the other are of secondary concern? Strength and weakness. Profit and loss.

"The idea that one can reject market mechanisms bears witness to about as much a sense of reality as being against the force of gravity," my father always used to say, his face half turned away in a profile teasing but without venom, his reading glasses slipped down to the tip of that round nose of which my own is in the process of becoming a copy. He's fifty-two now, and for more than half those years he has proved himself able to survive and prosper in what he calls the "shark pond", the trade in commercial real estate in and around Amsterdam. He is, of course, every inch the businessman, to which it behooves me to add immediately that he is a person who enjoys giving. No one has ever given me as much as he has, and to friends and acquaintances as well he is always generous, understanding and helpful. In his world, which was and - albeit it less and less - still is, to a certain extent, mine, my role has always been that of the Marxist in steel-rimmed glasses. A reputation based more on his own bantering remarks than on any conclusive evidence, unless one were to take into account the Che Guevara t-shirt I wore to tatters around the age of fourteen.

In a certain sense, my father greatly enjoys my having chosen for a life completely different from his own, my having taken a road unfamiliar to him. Which does nothing to detract from the fact that he would be more at ease had I followed in his footsteps - for that is what I sense at times, his trepidation, though never expressed in so many words, about the validity of

the road I have taken. "I'm on your side, no matter what you do," he has confided in me more than once, including back when I moved in with Elma and he could already foresee the dark clouds gathering above the love nest we had painted with our own hands. I know that those words, whatever their subtext, have never been empty ones.

My father raised me on his own, that is, with no help from my mother. There was, of course, his great-aunt Jeanne, who watched over me as my nanny between the ages of seven and thirteen. She would probably have continued doing so right up until today if my father hadn't announced at a certain point that I was now old enough to find the refrigerator on my own, and that computer games kept me sufficiently entertained even without the presence of dear old Jeanne.

Early in the evening at the end of every day, my father and I would have dinner together in the big basement kitchen of our house, or we would go to a nearby restaurant, the choice of which he often left up to me. Sometimes we would then go to the movies, where he usually dropped off quickly beside me into a brief, narcotic slumber; most of the time, however, we went home and lounged on the couch together, watching television or reading. My father is an avid reader; in that, as far as I can tell, he differs from the other "sharks" with whom he spends his days at the auction, in the site offices or at the notary's. Because of him, as a boy I met Reve, Wolkers and Mulisch in real life, fleeting encounters during signing sessions at which my father, a proud, impatient man by nature, willingly waited his turn in a long line.

During the weekends we went sailing and fishing from his boat, which lay at the yacht harbor in Hoorn, or visited the renovated farmhouses and duneland villas of those of his friends and acquaintances who had children more or less my age, so that I would have something to do as well.

My room on the top floor was large, with handmade hardwood cupboards packed with clothing, toys, videos, CDs and a fairly accurate overview of the various stages of collector's mania I passed through during my youth. Light-blue wallpaper with a pattern of gold stars covered the wall beside my bed. Each night, around the time my mother went back to the States, where she originally came from, I appointed myself the task of counting those stars, an impossibly tall order in light of their vast numbers. Every attempt ended in failure, and in the bitter determination to try again. I tried from left to right, from right to left, from bottom to top and vice versa, clinging to the idea that if I bravely persevered I would discover a system that resulted in a correct count, so that my mother's planned departure would be cancelled, and we could go on living life as usual...

At the front of my room were three windows that looked out onto the Herengracht. Thinking back on that view, the first

things I remember are not the stately homes across the water, but the trees in front of them. The brisk, fluttering glimmer of the leaves in late spring, the mesh of dark, wet branches in winter, the cheerful rummaging about of the sparrows. Compared to other children my age, who shared homes with their parents and brothers and sisters, I enjoyed a great freedom, and that - not counting the generous supply of tempting playthings with the very latest of digital gadgetry in my room - is probably why my friends enjoyed coming to my house.

I know how lucky I was to have a father like mine, so full of high spirits and unconditional loyalty, a man who didn't bat an eye at lending his boat, if not his most costly then certainly his dearest possession, to me and my reckless adolescent friends for sailing trips to Enkhuizen or Medemblik. My mother, and more people than she alone, thought my father looked like Gilbert Bécaud. In old pictures the resemblance is remarkable indeed; that same gleam in his eye, the same striking wave of hair and sable eyebrows, and those characteristically high cheekbones. He may be a little shorter than Bécaud was, for that is what he is, a rather short man. His hair these days is streaked with gray, and he wears it shorter, which makes it bristlier than before. My own hair is blond and straight, like my mother's. I look more like her on all counts; except, that is, for my short, round nose.

I am also aware, undoubtedly through my work with children to whom fate has dealt a very different hand, that I had a privileged youth, with exciting vacations, business class coming and going: trips by donkey through the Grand Canyon, diving classes on Lankawi, weekends in St. Petersburg or New York, and warm summers beside the pools or tennis courts of the southern French holiday homes my father rented from his friends. I went to prestigious schools and could count on tutoring whenever my grades took the slightest dip. Free passes to movie premieres, pop concerts or soccer finals, the best table in the house and, besides all that and lest we forget, a surname known to most capital-city residents from signs along Amsterdam's ring road or the busiest shopping street in town: Soek, a name that opens countless doors and, as I have discovered, slams others in your face.

My classmates, like my colleagues later on, and most certainly Walter and Harley, always regarded me with a certain wariness. An attitude that seems to arise from that particular brand of lower-class self-aggrandizement which dictates that one must have slept with at least two brothers or sisters in an unheated attic-room-with-bedpan before one can mean anything to anyone else. Walter lives in Amsterdam Slotervaart in a rented flat, its balcony surrounded by satellite dishes, with his two young children and his wife, who works part-time for a wholesaler in tooling equipment. His parents recently moved to

the suburbs, to Hoofddorp, after his father had spent forty-four years in the warehouse at a paper manufacturer's. Harley's father, one of nine children from a family in Brabant province, drove a cement truck until he was ruled medically unfit at the age of forty-five. Both Walter and Harley bear the hallmark of their "humble origins" like a victory pennant. From my very first day in training I sensed that our different backgrounds, and particularly the way they pictured that, formed an obstacle in my dealings with them.

"*You* can always go back," Harley once told me. "For you, this is just an interesting detour in your life. For me and Walter, this *is* our life." And saying that he raised one meaty hand, as though to stifle any objections.

Walter has never met him, my father, and Harley only for a moment, at my graduation party. But had they come to know him a bit, I think - no, I'm sure - my father would have won them over. With his twinkling eyes and short, bowed legs, with his cheerful repertoire of anecdotes, his profound knowledge of facts and apocrypha about sports, literature, painting and history, and his tireless cherishing of all things that make a day worth living, he would undoubtedly have had them eating out of his hand, at a café table, on board his boat, or wherever. And he would always have made them feel that they were his guests, who could be left wanting for nothing, because they were his son's colleagues.

During my first year at college, one of our professors had us draw up two lists: one containing our good qualities, the other the bad. Had I known then what I knew a few years later, pride of place on the list of negative qualities would have gone to: I block my father from the view of new people in my surroundings, I prefer to leave his name unmentioned. I don't dare to say loudly and clearly, always and everywhere, the way he has always done: this is my father, and I'm always on his side - even though that's the way I feel about it, and would like to say so.

I almost missed meeting Harley, Walter and the children altogether, almost missed catching more than just the glimpse of a children's home I caught the day I reported for an interview with the team supervisor at De Klimop. In the plain building in the equally unimaginative suburb of Geuzenveld, a jolt of happiness ran through me the moment I saw the hand-painted signs with the names of the various children's clusters: The Rascals, The Buccaneers, The Untouchables, The Scouts. Finally, after all the lectures, exams and hours of fighting sleep in reading rooms, I was crossing the threshold from theory to practice, to life itself. The coat racks hung with jackets, the colorful drawings on the walls, the staff - the only teachers I saw were female - and the children who, for whatever reason, were not at school at this hour, everything was so neat and bright that it gave me a great desire to be a part of it. A young woman about my age, an observation which lent the otherwise insignificant scene a certain luster, was leaning over and fussing with the zipper on a parka, while its owner - a skinny little girl with pale cheeks and dark, deep-set eyes - stood waiting patiently. I wondered who the child was and what had brought her here, to the world of practice... in those days I had only to stumble upon an appealing case in one of my textbooks and an entire universe of expectations opened before my eyes.

The interview with the team supervisor and the teacher of one of the children's groups seemed to go well, although a discussion of my age - I was four years older than the average trainee - proved inevitable. The teacher questioned me for a while about my motivation and my thoughts concerning what awaited me, and I replied calmly, without ever feeling at a loss for words.

"I'm going to be frank: you're not exactly the average applicant here," the team supervisor stated after a while. She had on a pair of bleached jeans and a suede jacket, and her lips were bright with lipstick. I liked her directness and her unerring gaze, and I had the impression that she liked me as well.

"Is that a problem?" I asked.

"No," she said, "but it *is* striking, it raises questions, that's all. What makes you think you're up to this kind of work?"

A week earlier I had been asked the very same question during a similar interview with a child welfare organization specialized in minors with drug problems, and now I could repeat the answer I'd given then, but with even more conviction.

"Because the desire to do this work, to mean something to these children, is stronger than anything else I can imagine."

"That shows you're motivated, but it says nothing about your abilities."

"As I've already mentioned, I have no experience, which is why I'm here. I would really like to do a traineeship here. Any other answer I might give would only be a sales pitch. All I can honestly say in my own favor is to tell you why I'm here sitting across from you today."

The silence that followed seemed to underscore my words.

The streets were hot and busy by the time I got outside again, the flow of rush-hour traffic leaving exhaust fumes in its wake, but still the air was clear and full of those spring smells that are unmissable, even in the city. On my way home, every push of the pedal increased my desire to find a place within the walls of De Klimop, with its long corridors and coat racks and the echoes of high voices singing "ring around the rosy". In my thoughts I could see myself sitting at a table covered in bread crumbs and milk stains, surrounded by children between the ages of four and twelve; listening to their stories about school, feeling a feverish cheek, zipping up parkas. De Klimop was my destiny, I knew that for sure; it was there and nowhere else that my efforts of the last few years were leading me, *had* to lead me.

My disappointment was immense, therefore, when a letter arrived two weeks later, informing me, with equal measures of formality and finality, that they had taken someone else. Holding in my trembling hands the polite expression of gratitude for time taken and the obligatory wishes of success in my further career, I was faced with the question of how the hell anyone else could have a right to what I had come to consider my future.

A few days the children's welfare people had let me know that my application for a traineeship there had been accepted, but my desire to take them up on it had suffered such a dramatic dip that it took me five days before I could force myself to, as the letter of glad tidings requested, "take up telephone contact".

Four weeks went by. By then I had already spent a few days with the experienced hand into whose care I had been entrusted, learning the ropes at the children's welfare organization. Looking back on it, I'm not sure I had truly reconciled myself to this second choice, but I suspect I would have if the team supervisor from De Klimop hadn't called me out of the blue at home one evening.

"Are you still interested in a traineeship, or have you already found something?" she asked with no further ado.

"I'm working on something," I said, vacillating between a little white and a bald lie.

"Well, I may have something for you."

"Really?"

"Yes, but something different. It's at a first-phase home."

"What's that?"

"A pilot project for children between fourteen and eighteen. There are eight of them in this group. The oldest one is only seventeen, but anyway... It's not particularly easy, let me say right up front. The trainee we have now has suddenly decided to go on a trip around the world. These things happen, but she's certainly put us in a tight spot. And one of our other mentors has also called in sick, it looks like she'll be away for quite a while. So what do you think?"

"I would have loved a place at De Klimop."

"I know, but this is what I have to offer. Besides, you have to start somewhere."

"When do you need to hear from me?"

"Right now, actually. I have two names on my list, and you're the first one I'm calling. When there's a fire in the house, you don't wait to put it out. Listen, maybe I was mistaken about you, maybe this isn't really what you want... I can imagine that, most trainees *are* looking for something easier."

"I'll take it," I said, afraid of the regret I might feel if I let her call the next number on her list.

"Go and take a look first," she said. "I'll give you the phone number of De Helmer, that's what the place is called. Just ask for Walter or Susan."

The address she'd given me was that of a three-story house, which had been adjoined to the building next to it. There were many such typical pre-war brick homes in the neighborhood between the Kinkerstraat and the Overtoom, with porticoes, wrought-iron balconies and hoisting hooks above the attic windows. On the sidewalk out in front was a crowded rack full of bicycles in various stages of disrepair, on the door was an unemphatic little sign that read: De Helmer.

The door was opened by a gangly child with a dense, kinky hairdo. She was about fifteen, her skin was the color of coffee, and she had the characteristically prominent forehead of some African peoples. She stood there fidgeting with the latch, all good-natured smile.

"I'm here for Walter. I've got an appointment," I said.

She blinked as though looking into a bright light, then turned and led me into the house. At the end of a shadowy hallway was a staircase in bad need of paint, and a coatrack half-buried beneath a profuse mess of leather jackets, body warmers, caps and shoulder bags. At its foot rose a mountain of odds and ends, which I saw in passing contained not only a large number of plastic bags, but also a skateboard, a hacksaw and a bike wheel without a tire. From the hallway we entered a large room with a suspended ceiling. The light from the fluorescent lamps came swirling down like a fine mist. Half the room was taken up by three U-shaped Ikea couches and a TV cabinet, the other half contained a dining-room table covered with a tarp, and a large number of metal chairs with plastic seats and backrests of various bright hues.

In the garden, which was paved with gray cinderblocks and surrounded by a high fence, sat a pale, slim man in his mid-thirties, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and a frumpish girl with a baseball cap from under which protruded a number of braids woven through with red and white ribbons. They were drinking tea and speaking in a hushed tone.

Without getting up, but with a relaxed expression, the man stuck out his hand.

"I'm Walter. This is Ayla." He pointed at the girl, who was examining me from under the visor of her cap with dark, candid eyes.

"So you're the new guy?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I hope you stick it out here longer than Debby did." The glasses she wore had thin metal frames. Her eyelashes were dark, and so long that I wondered whether the ends of them brushed the glass when she blinked.

"Join us for a cup of tea?" Walter asked. His quiet voice commanded attention with its huskiness and natural calm.

"Love to."

"How about pouring us some, Ayla?"

"Jesus, before or after I have to slice the tomatoes?" She got up with a lazy sigh that was impossible to miss.

"Philip is our guest," Walter said.

"I thought he was going to work here," she said.

"Be careful, he might still change his mind. For the moment, in any case, he's our guest."

"But only for today, right?" She walked towards the garden doors, her wrinkled top exposing the lower reaches of her pudgy stomach, including the navel piercing and the roll of flesh that stuck out over the waistband of her jeans and wiggled in soft cadence with her tired steps. From where I sat I could see the dark girl who had shown me in, sitting alone on the farthest of the couches, leafing through a magazine.

"I asked you to come by today so we'd have some time to talk," Walter said. "On Sunday almost everyone stays out until dinner time. They spend the weekend with their parents or grandparents, and some of them sleep here but go to the movies or to the Vondelpark during the day, or find some other way to terrorize the city."

"Except for her."

"Today is Ayla's turn to cook, and we have to run through her homework too. She had four unsatisfactories on her last report, and she has to make up for them at exams. And Djeu's always here, she has no family in Holland. The others will be back between five and six, and after dinner on Sunday we always have our weekly group session. A nice chance for you to get to know everyone."

As we drank our tea, Walter told me about the daily schedules and the different shifts he and his three colleagues worked in constantly changing configurations. Then he showed me around the building, which was large enough for eight bedrooms for the children and one for whichever mentor happened to be working the night shift. For the rest there were three bathrooms, a laundry room, a common kitchen on the ground floor and a smaller kitchen on the first floor for the older children. Those who had reached "phase two" were expected to cook for themselves on a regular basis, in preparation for the great leap to living on their own. There was also a cubicle that served as the mentors' office, complete with desks, filing cabinets and PCs. A little sign on the door read: "Knock before you enter."

In the children's rooms Walter provided me with a brief biography of each of the residents. It was strange, before even meeting most of the children, to get to know the smells and colors of their private domains, their possessions and clothing, the evidence of their chaotic nature or compulsive neatness.

Everything you would have expected to find was there: the David Beckham and Jennifer Lopez posters, the Visit Beautiful Turkey calendars, a Jamaican flag with a cannabis leaf on it, Céline Dion CDs, Lord of the Rings DVDs, empty packs of rolling tobacco, tea-warmers, unmade beds, make-up kits, crushed soft-drink cans, secondhand computer monitors covered with Nintendo stickers, triumphant lineups of empty breezer bottles; the entire assortment of objects that reflected both their dreams, as regurgitated by the media, and the sobering reality of everyday life.

The room that belonged to Djeu, who Walter said was actually called Dieudonné, if that was even her real name, was a paragon of simplicity and order. The most striking example of that neatness was her collection of homemade necklaces spread out on a shelf along the wall, consisting of normal plastic beads in such perfect circles and spaced out so equally that it looked as though she had used a compass and ruler. Even the different-colored beads were arranged in sequential tints.

On the nightstand beside her bed I saw a framed photograph of Djeu sitting in a rocker with an elegant African woman in white, beside her a dark-skinned boy of about fifteen in a tennis sweater; her mother and brother, Walter said. Around the bottom of the frame was draped a lavender-colored silk scarf.

"That was all she had with her when she arrived at Schiphol from Rwanda," Walter said. "That picture and that scarf, plus a letter in French saying she was here to seek asylum."

I was impressed by Walter's deliberate, respectful way of talking about the children, and by his frank words about the rules of the house, which he ran through summarily, incompletely and in some kind of associative order. "No drugs, no candles, no sleep-over guests, except on weekends and holidays, and only after staff approval, no excessive noise, cell phones are to be turned off during meals, Wednesday is housecleaning day, everyone gets 38.55 euros a month clothing allowance. Those with a job turn in two-thirds of their pay, extremely unfair of course - rather like life itself - and on weekdays it's lights-out at ten-thirty - not that anyone pays any attention to that, so we're never at a lack for things to do."

We went back downstairs, our footsteps creaking on the stairs. Halfway down Walter stopped, his face partly in shadow. I could only make out one of his eyes. Somewhere above me I heard the rumble and murmur of pipes, and a thumping sound downstairs, the slamming of a door, music, and the loud voices of the children who had returned to their habitat during my exploration.

"Don't expect any gratitude, respect or loyalty from them," Walter said. "Especially not at first. They'll put you to the test, betray you, mercilessly expose your weak spots. If you don't watch out they'll walk all over you, but if you get back on your

feet afterwards, then you'll finally get the chance to make something of it."

"That doesn't sound too good," I say.

"You're right," he said. "Shall we see how Ayla's getting on with dinner?"

That evening there was pasta with salad, and butterscotch pudding for dessert, a dinner Ayla had not only prepared but for which she had also done all the shopping herself, with a maximum budget of 2.15 euros per person. Susan, Walter's colleague, was sitting almost across from me, between Djeu and Samantha, a dark-eyed girl with the broad shoulders of an athlete and orthodontic braces behind her shiny lips. Between Ayla and me sat Freis, a skinny boy who seemed to want to disappear into his oversized jeans and parka. His narrow face was hidden behind a pair of spectacles with a heavy, outdated steel frame and huge rectangular lenses that magnified his jittery expression. This latter impression was confirmed even further by the fact that he barely dared to look at me, let alone speak a word. He answered all my questions with yes or no, and when that proved impossible he would shrug and mumble something unintelligible. I wondered whether he talked to the stuffed magpie I'd seen in his room. His hands, with their long, black-rimmed nails, were covered in a bluish-gray sheen which, judging from one of Samantha's comments, had come from replacing a gear on her bicycle. He and Djeu said nothing, only listened to the stories told by the others, who were loudly publicizing their deeds of the weekend past.

"Christ, this pasta is way too salty," Samantha said, reaching for the pitcher of lemonade. She began taking huge gulps.

"Only too salty? That's pretty good then. Are you sure it's not too salty *and* too watery, or maybe even not cooked quite long enough?" Ayla asked.

"What did you do, dump a whole package of salt into it?"

"Sam!" Susan said.

"I made two goals today." Samantha raised her bare arms and pointed her index fingers at the sky.

"It's starting to sound like forty goals, as often as you tell it," Ayla commented without looking up from her plate. "What about that save I made in the first half, when I came in on..."

"The first goal and the winning goal," Samantha butted in. "And another one too, but that was called back. The ref, you know, that asshole, you know what he said? 'One more word out of you, and you can leave the field.'"

"What in the world brought that on?" Susan wanted to know.

"Nothing."

"No, of course not," Walter said. "Aren't you going to have any salad, Freis?"

The corners of Freis's mouth turned down in contempt.

"All I said to him was that anyone could see it wasn't offside."

"If you ask me, you said something else." Ayla shoveled a big pile of pasta and sauce onto her spoon.

"Well, that was the gist of it. Besides, you didn't hear what I said anyway. You were a kilometer away, sleeping in the goal, you didn't even stick out a..."

"According to Mieke, who was right there too, you said they should ban referees from jerking off before the game, to keep them from walking around the field half-blind."

"We've got apples, have a nice apple when you're finished."

Freis nodded and slid his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose, which made it look as though his eyes had jumped up in his head.

"It wasn't offside, that's all," Samantha said. "So anyway, who's going to win the championship this year?"

"We are!" Ayla chimed in. "You bet, we're going to be the champs!"

"That dive you made, hey! Fifteen minutes later, that redhead was still limping around."

"Did you see the way she looked at me in the clubhouse? With that fake Dolce & Gabbana shit of hers?"

"She'll be having nightmares about you," Samantha said.

It was then that Tom and Bruno came in. Despite their almost identical clothing - corduroy jackets, jeans and Puma's - they were as dissimilar as could be. Tom was large and rather heavy for his age, and the wavy, flaxen hair on his head was of the kind that heralds premature baldness. Bruno, on the other hand, was strikingly small and slender, with bristly blond hair and a face smooth as a toy balloon.

"You two are late," Walter said without a trace of nastiness or sarcasm.

"We didn't know it was such a long movie. It just wouldn't end." Bruno nodded his head vigorously, not so much to emphasize his words, it seemed, but because there was no way he could keep his head from moving.

"What movie?" Erwin asked.

"*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," Tom replied, and for a split second his gaze raced by me, suspicious eyes, so close together they suggested a kind of frenzied unpredictability.

"So how was it?"

"Well, uh... long," Bruno said, and he and Tom burst out laughing.

"Hey, Walter, why don't we buy ourselves one of those chainsaws? You can do really creative things with one of those."

The boys dished themselves up some pasta and began to eat, caps still on their heads, slouching over their plates.

"Where's the hot sauce?" Tom asked. The chain he wore around his neck, I saw now, bore a little gold boxing glove.

"Where do you think?" Ayla replied.

Bruno slid his chair back brusquely and went into the kitchen, returning a little later with a large jar of hot sauce which the boys stirred through their food in truly impressive quantities. Between bites and gulps they exchanged sidelong glances. That glassy, conspiratorial display of understanding, and the way they balanced on the verge of the next jag of laughter, made me think of the Jamaican flag with the cannabis leaf I'd seen in Bruno's room.

Beside me, Freis, who had already knocked back his helping of pudding, was staring into space, longing - as I would find out later - for the moment when the green light would be given for him to roll a cigarette. His eyes, over-enlarged behind their lenses, were fixed on the blank screen of the TV, which the house rules said could only be turned on once the group session was over. He had still barely spoken a word to me, or looked me in the eye even once. I had the feeling he'd forget what I looked like as soon as I left the house.

"Do you like soccer?" asked Ayla, her question dropping me for the first time at the center of everyone's attention.

"Well, I played for a club until I was fourteen." I felt the gazes homing in on me.

"Ajax or Feyenoord?"

"Rood-Wit A, in Buitenveldert."

"No, I mean: are you for Ajax or for Feyenoord?"

Though no real soccer enthusiast or connoisseur, I promptly said "Ajax", convinced as I was that expressing that preference could do no harm here in Amsterdam.

"Oh, oh, oh," she said, shaking her head. "You hear that, Sam?"

"Sure did," Samantha said. "One more for the black list."

"All right!" Bruno exclaimed. "That means we're back in the majority. What's this?" He held up his fork to show us a shred of something green hanging from it. "Hey, who blew their nose in the sauce?"

"That's a leek, dumbo! Besides, you two couldn't kick a ball if you tried, bunch of losers!"

In reply, Tom brought forth a loud belch that formed the name of his favorite club.

"Tom!"

"Who are you for?" I asked Freis.

"He's for Ajax too," Tom answered on his behalf, kissing his fingertips appreciatively. "We're all for Ajax, except for these two nitwits."

"He was for Feyenoord too, at first," Ayla said, "the traitor. But Harley's still for Feyenoord. Harley's the only mentor who knows anything about soccer."

"My cousin's girlfriend," said Erwin, a boy with a mousy face and chapped lips who had remained more or less silent until that point. "She's a complete babe. She works at Escape and uh, she had my cousin's name tattooed on her stomach." The hair standing straight up on his head, its disorderly tufts etched in gel, made him look as though he'd probed the inside of a wall socket with his tongue.

"Why his name?" Samantha asked.

"Because she doesn't keep forgetting her *own* name," Ayla said.

"Ha ha," Erwin said. "She's got two piercings and, uh, well, that tattoo."

"Where are her piercings?"

"One in her tongue, the other one through her eyebrow."

"Oh," Samantha said disparagingly.

"Maybe she's got a piercing you don't know about."

"Okay, if everyone's finished we can clear the table,"

Walter said. "I move that Tom and Bruno fix the coffee; a fine opportunity for them to make up for being late."

The group session was in the sitting area, and most of the children slouched down lazily, smoking and nipping at their coffee. By then Saskia had arrived as well, the only resident who hadn't been at the table. She'd had permission to eat that evening at her boyfriend Eddie's house - a boyfriend whose very existence, as I'd overheard before dinner, was in fact contested by Samantha and Ayla.

Susan chaired the meeting. Her routine summary of things that had gone wrong in the last week presented a picture of the gamut of daily affairs that was rather prosaic in my eyes. In it, the mentors, above all insightful caretakers according to my romantic view, turned out to be enforcers of the rules, to say nothing of unarmed guards.

"The laundry room was a complete mess again, people; don't leave half-washed laundry hanging around."

"Oh yeah?" Saskia said. "Well, the drier's always full whenever I want to use it."

Saskia had a pale, oval face with thick eyebrows and a touch of aquamarine to her eyes. It would take a long time before I could see through the piercings, the sloppily cut black hair and the belligerent lines around her thin lips and discover that her face was actually a pretty one.

"Try to make better arrangements with the others. And we have a compost bin, guys, so please use it."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not wasting my time on that crap," Tom said. "My uncle works at the incineration plant; he says they toss everything together and burn it all at once." He gave Walter and Susan a defiant look.

"I'm sorry, but it really *is* better for the environment. But let's move on to the work roster for next week. Just to be

perfectly clear once more: nobody writes on the roster except for us. If everyone does that, it becomes a big scribbly mess, and no one can tell what's going on. So if you want to change things, come to us first and ask us to write it on the roster."

"But Harley said I could write down the switch I made last week with Djeu, on Wednesday, when I had to go to the library and couldn't do the shopping on..."

"We'll talk to Harley and agree with him that, from now on, everyone leaves the work roster to us, Saskia."

"One of you says this, the other one says that, it drives me nuts."

"Good point," Walter intervened. "I'm also in favor of trying to avoid confusion, which is why we should agree to do it like this, once and for all." His friendly pat on the shoulder smoothed away the belligerent wrinkles on Saskia's forehead.

"Okay, and now for the garbage under the coatrack," Susan continued, with a sigh that seemed to indicate that she'd now touched upon a very thorny problem indeed. Her gaze slid slowly across the children's faces, whose unmoved expressions showed that Susan's diction and body language had missed their mark. "Last Sunday, and the Sunday before that, we agreed that you guys were going to..."

"We didn't agree on anything," Saskia snapped. "You guys said you wanted us to do it, that's not like an agreement."

Susan endured the anger in Saskia's bright little eyes. "Whatever the case," she said, "this week everyone really has to take their stuff away from there. Otherwise it's all going out with the trash."

"No one better lay a finger on my stuff," Tom said with the tone of an incorrigible quarreler.

"So what's your stuff?" Walter asked.

"I don't know."

"Fine, Tom," Walter said. "All you have to do then is find out if your stuff is lying there, and take it away tonight. Then no one will lay a finger on it."

Everyone began talking and gesturing excitedly at the same time, a sudden whirlwind of disapproving shouts and heckling growls. Then the noise subsided as suddenly as it had begun; the only sound left was the quiet scratch and slurp of Tom's Torremolinos lighter, as produced by the little wheel he flicked constantly with his thumb. In the light of the flame that rose up and went out again, I saw Freis, lying almost horizontal now, his beanpole legs under the table and his eyes closed tightly, as though trying to shut out everything that was happening around him.

"Hey, Susan," Saskia shouted, "you'll never guess who Eddie and I ran into Friday night at Paradiso."

"Tell me after we've handled the other business," Susan said.

"Didn't he tell you about it? Daryl? That he saw us?" The carping defiance that had been on her face till then had made way for feigned innocence.

"We're almost finished. The only thing left is kitchen duty. Okay, who won't be eating with the group every night this week?" Everything Susan said suddenly sounded panicky. She started talking faster, her conviction crumbling. "Tom and Samantha, you two are going to cook for yourselves twice this week, and..."

"Your son seems nice. All he has to do is learn to dance a little; he looked like he'd knocked back a whole handful of pills."

Susan inhaled deeply through her nose, as though readying herself for a final mental push, then dropped her gaze. She stared at the little page of notes in her hand. In a calm, husky voice, Walter took over.

"Later, Saskia, after we're done with the other business. So how about if Freis cooks on Monday, and Tom on Tuesday? Will you be back from work on time on Tuesday, Tom?"

"Think so."

"Great, then Ayla can cook on Wednesday, when she gets home from practice."

"And what about my exam on Thursday?"

"That's right, better if you skip this week and use your free time to turn those unsatisfactories into satisfactories."

"I hope I can do that."

"I *know* you can, want to bet? Now Susan has some good news, so listen up... the vacation."

"Ibiza!" Tom screamed. "Vodka screwdrivers! Miss Tanga!"

"Hilarious, Tom," Walter said.

"It's only four weeks from now, on Saturday morning," said Susan, who seemed to be back on her feet again.

"Four weeks minus a day," Saskia corrected her.

"We've made reservations for the campground in Brittany. We're taking the van from De Klimop and one other car."

"Why can't we all go in the same bus?"

"Because you need a special license to drive a bigger bus," Samantha said. "You can only fit nine people into that thing from De Klimop."

"Okay, I'll stay here," Tom said. "Problem solved."

"Me too." Bruno looked around at the others, pleased with his own quick-wittedness.

"I said nine *people*."

"This vacation is sounding better all the time." Ayla twisted the top off her lip gloss. "Which mentors are going?"

"Walter and I are going," Susan said.

"Why not Harley? He's the one who knows the place so well, right?" She started putting on her lipstick. "He's the one who went climbing there, and hang-gliding."

"With those munchkins from De Klimop?"

"No, he went there on his own, too."

"Harley has other plans for the summer," Walter said.

"Yeah, fourteen days in a pup tent with his girlfriend," Samantha said.

"With his motorcycle, you mean."

"With his motorcycle, you mean," Samantha echoed Erwin's bawling. "Who did you *think* I was talking about, dumbo?"

"They say it's fantastic there," Susan said. "You can look out over the sea, and it only takes a couple of minutes to get to the beach."

"Can you swim there?" Bruno asked.

"If you know how... there's enough water," Susan replied.

"Yeah, and it's cold enough to freeze your balls off."

"Well, Tom," Ayla said, mocking him openly, "I wouldn't worry about that too much if I were you."

Before Tom could say anything back, Walter spoke up.

"One thing, guys: don't anybody dream of taking even one little pill or a few crumbs of grass along with him. The French have absolutely no sense of humor about things like that."

After the old business had been dealt with, and after everyone had been given the chance to complain about the pigeons shitting on the balcony, about the stinking drain in the bathroom and the unauthorized use of other people's bicycles, and after Tom had rolled out a prolonged belch that formed the word B-r-i-t-t-a-n-y, we suddenly heard Djeu speak, for the first time that evening, and so quietly she could barely be understood. "I just wanted to ask whether we could move Jaws."

Jaws, as I recalled from Walter's tour, was the goldfish. His bowl was on the bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room.

"Why?" Erwin wanted to know.

"Because every time someone puts down something heavy, a pile of plates or a pitcher of lemonade or something, I see him jump."

For about four seconds her words swam through the smoky room, like the frightened fish along the glass walls of his cell. Throughout the conversation Freis had been staring absently into space, leaning an elbow on his knee so that his arm and one gangly hand dangled listlessly, and with an aimless look that betrayed no reaction to what was being said, if he even reacted at all. But now he sat up straight and pushed his glasses up onto his nose. "Can we turn on the TV?"

Two weeks later I started my traineeship, during which I was to become further acquainted with the eight children and their four mentors, who worked in rotating shifts. In addition there was the "hostess" who helped out in the morning, the housekeeper, the team supervisor - Agnes, the same woman who had hired me and who dropped in unannounced about twice a month - and the social workers who liaised with the children's parents. I grew accustomed to the overwhelming number of rosters for the allotment of chores, and to the standard evaluation forms that allowed each child to earn the minimum of 6500 daily points needed to avoid the loss of privileges. It was the tried-and-true methodology of reward and punishment, with emphasis on the former, that ruled at De Helmer. Five hundred points for getting up on time, another five hundred for coming home on time, one thousand for attending the group session, five hundred for doing the shopping. Those who earned more points than absolutely necessary could come home later on occasion, those who acquired too few could spend Saturday night moping around their room with a bag of potato chips.

Most of my time at first was spent shadowing the on-duty mentors, and listening carefully to their conversations with the children and with each other. The two kinds of conversation were very different. That difference, along with the topography of my new surroundings, was one of my first discoveries. Inside De Helmer was a world with its own rules of etiquette, its own demands, noises, odors and idiom. But there was another world too, in the much smaller "broom closet", the nerve center crammed with files and forms where both the children's shadowy pasts and their goals for a sunnier future were duly documented. It was in the broom closet that the mentors wrote down and filed their daily impressions with the industrious ill grace of coolies. There they drank coffee together, discussed their private lives and, more frequently, those of the children. This latter activity, due to the room's closed-door policy - "knock before you enter" - tended to quickly degenerate into gripe sessions.

A variety of grapevines existed in the other rooms of De Helmer as well: the children's circle of gossip concerning their mentors, that of sub-groups concerning other residents of the house, and occasionally, in total violation of all agreements and instructions and all the more heated for that, the gossip by children *and* mentors concerning other children and mentors. Along with this there existed too a brand of resolute solidarity to which a person could suddenly fall prey, when the group turned as one against that individual.

In the broom closet I spent many an hour leafing through dossiers consisting of reports from social workers who had interviewed the children's parents and family doctors and the results of talks with the children themselves as noted by psychologists or psychiatrists, as well as the whole battery of tests they had undergone during their careers as problematic cases.

I discovered, for example, that Tom's father had spent more than half his life in penal institutions, serving sentences for burglary, robbery, possession of firearms and narcotics. His mother had thrown Tom out of the house at the age of twelve, after which had lived with friends for a while, until the day his mother was called to task for his long-term truancy. What followed could be summarized as a series of lesser and more serious offences: assault, theft, vandalism and arson: his most serious *faux pas* had been the time he'd kicked another boy into unconsciousness. It sometimes happened that I was sitting alone in the broom closet when there came a tapping at the door, and I would find myself facing the protagonist of my embarrassingly intimate reading material, a sudden transformation from a character on the page into the living creature in the doorway that seemed like a reprimand for my prying.

Gradually, I was assigned my first tasks. The first was to accompany Saskia to the surgeon, to have removed from her jaw a bone splinter that was causing a painful inflammation. In the tram on the way there we talked about her high school class, and about her plans to leave De Helmer.

"After this summer, I'm going to move back in with my mother." The light from outside fell on her pale skin with its tinge of green, contrasting sharply with her wispy black hair which, as I had been told, she ran the scissors through and dyed herself every few weeks. There were smears of mascara under her eyes, and her coat was torn at one shoulder.

"That's what I hear."

"My mom's new husband is going to renovate the attic for me, with central heating and a bay window."

"That's nice of him."

"When I go home at the weekend, he's the one who always makes breakfast. *She* never gets out of bed before eleven."

I nodded, and wondered whether we were thinking the same thing at that very moment: about what I had read concerning that Sunday afternoon when she'd incurred a concussion and three broken ribs, after her mother's new husband knocked her down the stairs for calling him a rotten asshole.

"How do you think they do that, take out a bone splinter?"

"I think it's over real fast, and they give you an anesthetic."

When she came back to the waiting room after the operation she didn't collapse in tears, the way I'd imagined for a moment

while leafing through *Physician's Money Digest*. It was only during the hazy ride home, during which we barely spoke and she simply stared out the window, holding a wad of sterile gauze to her lips, that I first experienced what it was to actually mean something to someone, to have my presence serve a purpose. She would have been worse off if I hadn't been sitting next to her.

"Are you looking forward to Brittany?" I asked after a while, just to distract her.

"I don't know," she said, then gazed silently into space. "If Susan wasn't going along, maybe."

I decided to ignore the comment. When in doubt, do nothing, my father had always told me. "It's lovely," was all I said.

"You've been there before?"

"Close by, a long time ago," I said. "With my parents."

"We went to Fuengirola twice with my father. Ever been there?"

"No."

"It's complete shit. I don't like the sun."

"The beaches in Brittany are hundreds of meters wide, and it all disappears every six hours."

"Where does it go?"

"Under water. The difference between high and low tide there is huge."

"In Fuengirola the beaches never go away." She took the bundle of gauze away from her mouth and stared at the red spot on it, as though confronted with a fascinating riddle. "She can be such a complete bitch, you know, Susan."

There was yet another task allotted to me: replacing the rosters on the bulletin board that had been defaced with scribbles, arrows and chicken scratches. The "gag-me-with-a-spoon" list, on which everyone was allowed to enter a maximum of two things he or she refused to eat, had also been partly obscured with dumb jokes along the lines of "fur burgers" and "parrot juice".

In the kitchen, Djeu was busy preparing a rice dish. She sang quietly as she worked, her voice high and sweet, a song with unintelligible words. Occasionally Walter came by to see how it was going or to casually offer her a bit of assistance. Of all the mentors, he was the only one who seemed to have won her confidence, the one to whom she dared turn of her own accord - preferably when there was no one else around, or when the other person, like me at that moment, seemed absorbed in his own affairs. The thin tone in which she sang, along with her stiff movements and vulnerable appearance, made me think back to the day I had seen her wearing a bright yellow raincoat with a hood, and how that had summoned up for me the image of a huge chick, an association that grew stronger the more I saw and heard of her.

Around four-thirty, Tom came in looking white and listless as a ghost. With every step he took on his plastic slippers little clouds of white plaster puffed out, like a character in a comic book who has invisible exhaust pipes in the heels of his gym socks. Having started as an off-payroll hoddy for a construction firm, where he was able to play hooky while carrying bricks and pushing wheelbarrows, he'd then worked his way up to sometimes-assistant and, later, official right hand to one of the plasterers. Tom now spent five days a week, from seven to three-thirty, smoothing down walls and ceilings.

"You didn't change the bit about me not doing chores on Friday, did you?!" he shouted to me.

I shook my head. "But I hope you'll forgive me for having omitted your footnote."

He gave me a suspicious look.

"That line at the bottom, the one in red."

A smug little smile broke through on his dusty, spattered face. The comment: "For a hot lick job, call 020-2764598 and ask for Agnes" had been his doing after all. With Susan's help I had discovered that the phone number was that of De Klimop, and the mouth being recommended that of the team supervisor, the lesbian with the tight black-leather pants and short blonde hair who was noted for her unrelenting haste, and for a curt, businesslike manner that bade ill for any idiot foolish enough to ask her to render oral services to his member.

"I'm going to hit the shower," Tom said. He disappeared down the hall, clutching in one hand a dust-proof plastic lunchbox that would one day be turned into a clump of countless layers of gypsum, in the other his snowy white, thickly plastered tennis shoes.

A few days earlier I had met his mother. She had come in for one of her periodic talks with Tom, during which Walter, as Tom's personal mentor, acted as arbiter. Forty-five minutes late, and with signs of exhaustion on her oval face framed by its chestnut-brown curls, she was dropped off by a four-wheel drive pickup in camouflage colors, its enormous tires apparently designed to take out any roadblock they might encounter. Walter asked whether I could sit in on the talk, but his request had met with Tom's categorical refusal.

Later I heard from Walter that it had been a tiring session, during which mother and son had seemed particularly bent on avoiding all eye contact. Tom's mother had repeated what I had already come across in their dossier: that ever since his birth her son had brought her nothing but misery, and that he would have to do a lot of changing if he ever hoped to move in with her again. Tom, in turn, had stuck to his proclamation that he wouldn't move back in with her if it was the last thing he did. Despite Walter's attempts to make peace, the talk had again become bogged down in the same old song-and-dance - the kind of harassed self-justification that paves the way from the aggrieved to the vengeful.

"That's the damned thing about it," Walter said after dinner, while we were having our coffee in the broom closet. "The parents demand that the children change, and the children - before they're willing to be reconciled - demand that the parents change first. Neither of them seems to realize that they themselves are the only ones who can change, even if it's only in their willingness to try to work things out together in a different way."

"Maybe, sometimes, there just nothing you can do about it," I commented.

"Sometimes there isn't. But then we usually don't get a single step closer to our goal. As long as there's that stubborn refusal, they just stay locked up in a circle of resentment and rage. You know the fourth commandment?"

"Honor thy father and thy mother?"

"Whether they like it or not, that's the best thing they can do. As soon as they gain a little respect for their parents, things go a lot better, I've seen that so often."

"But what about Tom's mother and that boyfriend of hers with his shaved head, did you see that souped-up tank he drives around in? It's not hard to imagine Tom not..."

"I know what you're going to say, Philip... but it doesn't work that way; his parents, his the grandparents, even his mother's boyfriends: they're all important to Tom, even if

they've behaved miserably, which is most of the time. Never fall into the trap of going along with the children in their criticism. Never slam anyone, not even if you think humanity would be no worse off if they choked to death on a fishbone, not even if the kids themselves think that's what they want to hear you say. Deep in their hearts, it hurts them, it makes them even more lonely and insecure. Let me tell you this: we go on with our lives at home, with our own loved ones, family, friends and neighbors, but they don't have anyone else. We stand behind the kids, that above all, but we also stand behind the parents, you know what I mean? Even behind that egotistical, nymphomaniac bitch on stiletto heels with her jacked-up XTC Rambo."

In the living room, Djeu was busily setting the table while the other kids, having returned from work, school or club, were still in their rooms. Except for Samantha and Ayla, who were lounging on the couches, dangling their legs over the armrests and talking to each other in earnest tones while keeping their eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"I still think it would be better to have it on my arm," I heard Samantha say.

"According to Erik," Ayla said, "you know, that guy from Alkmaar with the metal plate in his hip? He says the best place is on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal, in the basement below the Hell's Angels bar. But he also says that guy has these helpers, so you have to make sure he does it himself. If one of those yo-yo's has been smoking, you might as well do it yourself with a bottle of ink and a razor blade, that's what Erik says."

"Have you got a minute?" asked Walter, who had suddenly appeared in the doorway behind me.

"You two aren't going to sneak off and gossip about us, are you?" Samantha said. Her dark brown eyes gleamed for a moment. Like her dark, curly hair, she had probably inherited those eyes from her Cape Verdean father.

"I wouldn't dare," Walter said.

"Well, don't."

Harley was at the computer in the broom closet, the back of his denim shirt turned to me. Over his shoulder I could see a number of Harley Davidsons on the screen.

"I've got it, Walter," Harley said in that falsetto that in no way seemed to match his impressive build. "A racer, from 1918, there are only three of them still on the road. One of them belongs to Arnold Schwarzenegger."

"Well, that's a real commendation."

"I'd give my good right arm for one of those babies." Harley took a drag of his roll-up and let the smoke curl from his mouth as he leaned back and stared at the ceiling. His real name was Gerard, but no one called him that. I had worked about five

shifts with him by then, and had come to admire him for the natural, relaxed way he dealt with the kids. His approach was more playful, less circumspect than Walter's. He didn't hesitate to arm wrestle with Bruno or Tom, something that would have been unthinkable for Walter, or to tell the girls a dirty joke. You only had to look at the children's faces to see who was watching over them on that particular day.

By the same token, however, at around ten o'clock during Harley's evening shifts, when the children were supposed to go to their own rooms, the cheerful atmosphere would slip into a sort of irritation, and it took much longer for the mandatory quiet to descend over De Helmer than it did when Walter was on duty.

"What does one of those things cost, anyway?" I asked, more out of courtesy than any sincere interest.

"A hundred thousand dollars, easy. If it's even for sale."

"Let's see," Walter said. "Looking at it optimistically, you net twenty thousand a year. So that adds up to five years' salary."

"But if I stop eating and drinking, and if I sleep in the park and only use the phone when I'm here," Harley said.

"You long for the things you can't have, just like a porno addict."

"Not that you know anything about porno... or motorcycles." Harley was speaking to me now. "You're not a biker, are you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That's the crappy thing about this job: everyone's so predictable. A mildly tormented youth, left-wing sympathies, a little environmental consciousness, French movies."

"Wait a minute," Walter said. "When Philip here applied at teacher's college, they thought he was maybe a little too unconventional. Isn't that right, Philip?"

"Why? Did you come in wearing that Ralph Lauren jumper?" The words sounded every bit as mocking as he'd meant them to.

"Harley and I were just talking," Walter said. "This week we'd like you to deal with a couple of things on your own. You're ready for it."

"It's real simple," Harley chimed in. "Walter and I go to a bar, so you won't have anyone looking over your shoulder. If they kill each other, or if the place goes up in flames, all you have to do is call 112. And if it's anything important, you call Walter on his cell phone."

"We were thinking of having you do a daily assessment," Walter said. "Do you have a preference for anyone in particular?"

"Like Tom?" Harley asked, sounding neutral.

"Sounds good," I said.

"We were thinking more along the lines of Freis," Walter said.

"That should be like rolling off a log," Harley added.

"Freis is fine, too" I said.

"Agreed. Oh, and one other thing. It would be great if all that garbage under the coatrack was cleaned up by Sunday evening. You know how it is, it's been dragging along for so long. Maybe you could take the kids one by one and sort things out. Today's Wednesday, so that gives you four days. What do you think?"

"I'll do what I can."

The agreement was that Elma and I would call before we came by, but I violated that rule in cold blood and with aforethought. Her blue Volkswagen Golf, I saw, was parked near the corner of her street. On Tuesday evenings she played squash in Buitenveldert, and she always took the car. Tuesday was an exception as far as that went; otherwise, she took the bike everywhere. Strange, I thought, how much I still knew about her, probably more than her own mother. But I also realized that now, six months after we'd stopped living together, the part of her life I didn't know was growing by leaps and bounds. Someday she would drive a different make of car and stop playing squash, and I would know nothing about it. The things I didn't know about her would gradually surround my valid knowledge like a deep, dark sea, would isolate it like an atoll too minor to be on the map.

On the second floor above the carpet dealer, whose showroom had been rented to him since time immemorial by Soek N.V., a sliding screen had been inserted in one of the two windows, to keep the mosquitoes out and Elma's tabby cat, Joris, in. Waving his tail, and with what looked to me like a strange smile on his face, the striped tom was peering down at the street from behind the meshwork of his new prison. Elma was terrified that her own desire for fresh air would result in his escape, and that, after an already risky landing on the sidewalk, Joris would be confronted with the baffling and unsatisfying aspects of life without cat food and testicles.

When I came into the house, Elma was walking around barefoot in a T-shirt and shorts, drying her short, wet hair with a towel. During the last few months we'd lived together, whenever I arrived home from classes or the library and walked through our front door, my heart had pounded in my chest. And as soon as I saw the coat she'd worn that morning hanging on the rack, or heard the first signs of her presence coming from the living room or kitchen, I was barely able to suppress a shout of relief. Each time anew I feared she would be gone, or that something terrible had happened to her, and to avoid the ominous silence of an empty house filled with premonitions, I often waited in the park until it was time for her to come home from work.

"Sorry for not calling first," I said. "But I was in the neighborhood. If it's inconvenient, just tell me."

"It's fine," she said. "Only next time, call."

She herself had violated our agreement only once, the night she rang my doorbell looking as though she'd just heard that the world was going to end within twenty-four hours.

While she made coffee in the kitchen, I sat with Joris purring on my lap and let my gaze travel over the familiar objects in the room. A few photos, including one of the two of us, had disappeared since my last visit. The slow and inevitable clean-up, which still felt to me like a form of blasphemy. To my relief, the enlargement of the picture I had taken of her with her own Nikon, under the trees along Lake Como after a lunch of grilled fish and white wine, was still on its shelf. Now that I no longer lived here and saw things, to a certain extent, through the eyes of a visitor, I noticed that I was barely irritated at all by the shoes under the table, the magazines on the couch, the stained teacup and the plate with the remains of breakfast, or by the pile of unopened mail and advertising material. I didn't even feel the urge to put the carton of milk back in the fridge. There where I had once seen only chaos, I now saw above all a pleasant apartment done up in soft pastel tints. Elma had gone on living here after we broke up, and my father, my professional rescuer, had found another place for me, which he did without complaining or even raising Elma's extremely reasonable rent.

We talked for a while about her work at the institute and her plans for a trip to the United States in the fall.

"So how's your traineeship coming along?" Elma asked at last. Her skin looked different, I noticed, healthier, and her arms had more muscle to them.

"Quite nicely," I said, and then launched into the story about De Helmer that had been burning inside me all evening.

She had always been a good listener, Elma, and this time too she let me rattle on, her smooth legs tucked beneath her on the couch, without ever making me feel that I was boring her or keeping her from more important things. Funny, I thought at the end of the evening, back when we still lived together we would have scored straight A's on an exam concerning each other's shortcomings. Maybe I shouldn't have begrudged her her carefree ways. The ease with which she stepped over piles of clothing and walked around with a crumbly toasted-cheese sandwich while looking for the telephone that she never put back on its base station seemed almost endearing to me now.

When we said goodbye in the hallway, she said: "I hope your work gives you what you're looking for."

Her face was warm and smooth in the muted light from the ceiling lamp, the lines on her skin so fragile and foreign; as though a new face was appearing behind the one I knew. There are little actions that wipe away all good resolutions at a swoop, that cause a strange sort of heaviness to rise up, a groundswell of sensuality that is not so much fiery as wistful. I caressed her cheek. Then I let my hand drop and kissed her on the forehead. This time I didn't hug her, didn't pull her to me, didn't feel her body's sad hesitation.

I cycled at a leisurely pace through the quiet streets of the city, beneath a dome of the deepest blue with a sickle of moon that sometimes popped up straight ahead of me, then disappeared behind the dense crowns of trees and the darkened roofs. I thought about what she had said to me that evening: "You're changing, Philip." I couldn't judge whether that was true, but I did know that, lately, other people seemed to *me* to have changed. What I wondered was whether the change in them was the result of how they adapted to the change in me. Put a difficult child in a different, more understanding environment, and his behavior improves. Sameroff and Chandler's transaction model, I knew from school, showed that development is the result of the ongoing interaction between a child's personality and his environment. Development, that seemed like a better word for it than change. For a long time now, I had been hoping for something better. Maybe I was starting to find out how to make that happen. The air was pleasantly warm, the streets stretched out before me in all their safe simplicity. I was through wasting time, I told myself, I would free myself of my errors and doubts. The years that really counted were laid out clearly before me.

When I got home I found, between the cars parked near my houseboat, a vagrant. Sitting on a sheet of cardboard, he was eating pickled herring from the jar with his knobby, dirty hands. Unruffled, as though it was the most normal thing in the world, he went on with what he was doing while I locked up my bike with a loud rattle and tug of chains, barely two meters away from him. I had just closed the door behind me when the phone rang. The display showed an unfamiliar Amsterdam number, starting with 612. When I picked up the phone I thought I heard someone breathing quietly, but despite my repeated requests the other party didn't say a word. I hung up and went into the bathroom, took the sweater I had washed by hand that morning off the radiator and folded it. A little later I crawled into bed with the book by a famous Hungarian-American family therapist I had borrowed from Walter, who had recommended it to me with the words "you have to read this." In his eyes I had seen the celestial light of the devoted disciple. Leafing through the book I discovered that several passages had been underlined in pencil. Beside one of the passages about "one's lot in life", accompanied in the margin by an exclamation mark, I read: "Unfair living conditions justify a person in making demands without giving in return, like a newborn child." Very different indeed from Machiavelli's claim that "**he who has power has the right, and he who has no power therefore has less right**", a quote I'd come across in my first year of political science. I read on, but whether it was the unwieldy text or that mysterious phone call, I soon found

myself unable to concentrate on the insights of Walter's shining example.

I got up, went into the living room and slid the videotape into the player, a proven remedy for sleeplessness. They were images of Elma, made the time I had accidentally left the camera on after charging the battery. In her light green nightgown she was reading the morning paper on the couch, a cup of tea on the armrest beside her. Seeing her like that made me calm. I loved the trivial gestures with which she pushed a lock of hair from her forehead, turned a page or scratched her shin. Every time, and this time too, I lapped up the everyday, pointless gestures that never failed to move me with a deep sense of pleasure and loss. As though she was with me, even though she no longer belonged to me.

The accidental images had been made only a few days after I'd seen her in the park. I had been sitting on a bench again, along the bike path, killing time in order to avoid putting the key in the lock and finding a frighteningly empty house. It was my custom to carefully observe the park's visitors, and while doing so I always had to smile at what my father had said once. The park, he claimed, was an oxygen-enriched habitat for vagabonds, drunkards, junkies, fortune-tellers, jugglers, dogs and madmen. "You're forgetting the normal people," I'd told him. "Oh," he said, "you mean the ones with the bare torsos covered in blue lines, knees and elbows packed in plastic, ears hooked up to the headphones of their portable CD-players, the ones who go gliding past you with condescending grace?"

Then I saw Elma walking along beside her bicycle. I automatically looked at her tires, but neither of them were flat. She looked tired, and it seemed as though she, like me, was in the park because she could think of no better way to postpone getting home. I was going to shout to her, but instead I got up and crossed the bike path, intending to come up behind her, put a hand on her shoulder and kiss her. I realized then, however, that she would ask me what I was doing in the park, and I started thinking about how I could answer that question. The upshot was that I didn't speak to her after all, but simply walked along behind her for a few minutes unnoticed. And for the first time it occurred to me I could always stay with her this way, that I could live with her happily as long as she didn't know I was there.

On the screen, meanwhile, Elma had stood up from the couch and gone out of the room. I stared at the patch of wooden floor where, evening after evening, she had tried to teach me The Dance. The Dance was a choreography her grandparents had come up with in the 1950s, and which had been further refined by her parents and finally developed to an even more fevered state of complexity by Elma and her brothers. An outsider couldn't make head or tail of it, which was part of the

pleasure Elma's family had always derived from it. On the fourth evening that we practiced at home - my own confidence in my ability to ultimately learn that bit of nonsensical choreography had not yet been completely destroyed - we had a flaming difference of opinion.

"What I don't understand," I said, "is that, after that double pirouette you just did, you took two steps back. You told me: one step."

"Only if you spin to the left."

"But before that we did a double pirouette, to the right, and then we *did* take two steps back."

"Yeah, but you only do that after you've already made a double pirouette to the right."

I wasn't giving up, not yet. "So if you make a double pirouette to the right two times in a row, then you take two steps back; after a double pirouette to the left and then a double pirouette to the right, you take one step back."

"That's right. At least, if you didn't shuffle to the right in between."

It was then that I collapsed onto the couch with a loud sigh and said farewell to The Dance.

I ran the tape forward until she came back into the room, dressed for work now, and zipped up her high black boots. Then, as I knew she would, she picked up her purse from the table, rummaged through it for her keys and her cell phone and, after a bit of annoyance, finally plucked them from among the apples in the fruit bowl. After that she would walk offscreen, and there would be nothing left for me to see but our room and the traces of our lives in it.

I turned off the video recorder and stared out the window for a while. On the misty water of the Amstel, the ducks were letting themselves be carried downstream. I wondered where they would end up by daybreak, and whether they would come flying back to this spot.

The glowing red ciphers on my alarm clock said 1:33 when the phone woke me. It was the same number as before, and again no one spoke when I answered. For a moment I considered dialing the number on the display, to find out who was pestering me, but I decided against it, knowing that would only guarantee a sleepless night. I turned off the phone's buzzer and went back to sleep.

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