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The truth is, if old Major Dover hadn't dropped dead at Taunton races Jim would never have come to Thursgood's at all. He came in mid-term without an interview, late May it was though no one would have thought it from the weather, employed through one of the shiftier agencies specialising in supply teachers for prep schools, to hold down old Dover's teaching till someone suitable could be found. 'A linguist,' Thursgood told the common room, 'a temporary measure,' and brushed away his forelock in self-defence. 'Priddo.' He gave the spelling 'P-R-I-D' – French was not Thursgood's subject so he consulted the slip of paper – 'E-A-U-X, first name James. I think he'll do us very well till July.' The staff had no difficulty in reading the signals. Jim Prideaux was a poor white of the teaching community. He belonged to the same sad bunch as the late Mrs Loveday who had a Persian lamb coat and stood in for junior divinity until her cheques bounced, or the late Mr Maltby, the pianist who had been called from choir practice to help the police with their enquiries, and for all anyone knew was helping them to this day, for Maltby's trunk still lay in the cellar awaiting instructions. Several of the staff, but chiefly Marjoribanks, were in favour of opening that trunk. They said it contained notorious missing treasures: Aprahamian's silver-framed picture of his Lebanese mother, for instance;

Best-Ingram's Swiss army penknife and Matron's watch. But Thursgood set his creaseless face resolutely against their entreaties. Only five years had passed since he had inherited the school from his father, but they had taught him already that some things are best locked away.

Jim Prideaux arrived on a Friday in a rainstorm. The rain rolled like gun-smoke down the brown combes of the Quantocks, then raced across the empty cricket fields into the sandstone of the crumbling façades. He arrived just after lunch, driving an old red Alvis and towing a second-hand caravan that had once been blue. Early afternoons at Thursgood's are a tranquil time, a brief truce in the running fight of each school day. The boys are sent to rest in their dormitories, the staff sit in the common room over coffee reading newspapers or correcting boys' work. Thursgood reads a novel to his mother. Of the whole school therefore only little Bill Roach actually saw Jim arrive, saw the steam belching from the Alvis' bonnet as it wheezed its way down the pitted drive, windscreen wipers going full pelt and the caravan shuddering through the puddles in pursuit.

Roach was a new boy in those days and graded dull, if not actually deficient. Thursgood's was his second prep school in two terms. He was a fat round child with asthma and he spent large parts of his rest kneeling on the end of his bed, gazing through the window. His mother lived grandly in Bath; his father was agreed to be the richest in the school, a distinction which cost the son dear. Coming from a broken home Roach was also a natural watcher. In Roach's observation Jim did not stop at the school buildings but continued across the sweep to the stable yard. He knew the layout of the place already. Roach decided later that he must have made a reconnaissance or studied maps. Even when he reached the yard he didn't stop but

drove straight on to the wet grass, travelling at speed to keep the momentum. Then over the hummock into the Dip, head first and out of sight. Roach half expected the caravan to jack-knife on the brink, Jim took it over so fast, but instead it just lifted its tail and disappeared like a giant rabbit into its hole.

The Dip is a piece of Thursgood folklore. It lies in a patch of waste land between the orchard, the fruithouse and the stable yard. To look at, it is no more than a depression in the ground, grass-covered, with hummocks on the northern side, each about boy-height and covered in tufted thickets which in summer grow spongy. It is these hummocks that give the Dip its special virtue as a playground and also its reputation, which varies with the fantasy of each new generation of boys. They are the traces of an open-cast silver mine, says one year, and digs enthusiastically for wealth. They are a Romano-British fort, says another, and stages battles with sticks and clay missiles. To others the Dip is a bomb-crater from the war and the hummocks are seated bodies buried in the blast. The truth is more prosaic. Six years ago, and not long before his abrupt elopement with a receptionist from the Castle Hotel, Thursgood's father had launched an appeal for a swimming pool and persuaded the boys to dig a large hole with a deep and a shallow end. But the money that came in was never quite enough to finance the ambition, so it was frittered away on other schemes, such as a new projector for the art school, and a plan to grow mushrooms in the school cellars. And even, said the cruel ones, to feather a nest for certain illicit lovers when they eventually took flight to Germany, the lady's native home.

Jim was unaware of these associations. The fact remains that by sheer luck he had chosen the one corner of Thursgood's academy which as far as Roach was concerned was endowed with supernatural properties.

Roach waited at the window but saw nothing more. Both the Alvis and the caravan were in dead ground and if it hadn't been for the wet red tracks across the grass he might have wondered whether he had dreamed the whole thing. But the tracks were real, so when the bell went for the end of rest he put on his wellingtons and trudged through the rain to the top of the Dip and peered down and there was Jim dressed in an army raincoat and a quite extraordinary hat, broad-brimmed like a safari hat but hairy, with one side pinned up in a rakish piratical curl and the water running off it like a gutter.

The Alvis was in the stable yard; Roach never knew how Jim spirited it out of the Dip, but the caravan was right down there, at what should have been the deep end, bedded on platforms of weathered brick, and Jim was sitting on the step drinking from a green plastic beaker, and rubbing his right shoulder as if he had banged it on something, while the rain poured off his hat. Then the hat lifted and Roach found himself staring at an extremely fierce red face, made still fiercer by the shadow of the brim and by a brown moustache washed into fangs by the rain. The rest of the face was criss-crossed with jagged cracks, so deep and crooked that Roach concluded in another of his flashes of imaginative genius that Jim had once been very hungry in a tropical place and filled up again since. The left arm still lay across his chest, the right shoulder was still drawn high against his neck. But the whole tangled shape of him had stiffened, he was like an animal frozen against its background: a stag, thought Roach on a hopeful impulse, something noble.

'Who the hell are you?' asked a very military voice.

'Sir, Roach, sir. I'm a new boy.'

For a moment longer, the brick face surveyed Roach from the shadow of the hat. Then, to his intense relief, its features

relaxed into a wolfish grin, the left hand, still clapped over the right shoulder, resumed its slow massage while at the same time he managed a long pull from the plastic beaker.

'New boy, eh?' Jim repeated into the beaker, still grinning. 'Well that's a turn up for the book, I will say.'

Rising now, and turning his crooked back on Roach, Jim set to work on what appeared to be a detailed study of the caravan's four legs, a very critical study which involved much rocking of the suspension, and much tilting of the strangely garbed head, and the emplacement of several bricks at different angles and points. Meanwhile the spring rain was clattering down on everything: his coat, his hat and the roof of the old caravan. And Roach noticed that throughout these manoeuvres Jim's right shoulder had not budged at all but stayed wedged high against his neck like a rock under the mackintosh. Therefore he wondered whether Jim was a sort of giant hunchback and whether all hunch backs hurt as Jim's did. And he noticed as a generality, a thing to store away, that people with bad backs take long strides, it was something to do with balance.

'New boy, eh? Well *I'm* not a new boy,' Jim went on, in altogether a much more friendly tone, as he pulled at a leg of the caravan. 'I'm an old boy. Old as Rip Van Winkle if you want to know. Older. Got any friends?'

'No, sir,' said Roach simply, in the listless tone which schoolboys always use for saying 'no', leaving all positive response to their interrogators. Jim however made no response at all, so that Roach felt an odd stirring of kinship suddenly, and of hope.

'My other name's Bill,' he said. 'I was christened Bill but Mr Thursgood calls me William.'

'Bill, eh. The unpaid Bill. Anyone ever call you that?'

'No, sir.'

'Good name, anyway.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Known a lot of Bills. They've all been good 'uns.'

With that, in a manner of speaking, the introduction was made. Jim did not tell Roach to go away so Roach stayed on the brow peering downward through his rain-smeared spectacles. The bricks, he noticed with awe, were pinched from the cucumber frame. Several had been loose already and Jim must have loosened them a bit more. It seemed a wonderful thing to Roach that anyone just arrived at Thursgood's should be so self-possessed as to pinch the actual fabric of the school for his own purposes, and doubly wonderful that Jim had run a lead off the hydrant for his water, for that hydrant was the subject of a special school rule: to touch it at all was a beatable offence.

'Hey you, Bill. You wouldn't have such a thing as a marble on you by any chance?'

'A-sir-what-sir?' Roach asked, patting his pockets in a dazed way.

'Marble, old boy. Round glass marble, little ball. Don't boys play marbles any more? We did when I was at school.'

Roach had no marble but Aprahamian had had a whole collection flown in from Beirut. It took Roach about fifty seconds to race back to the school, secure one against the wildest undertakings and return panting to the Dip. There he hesitated, for in his mind the Dip was already Jim's and Roach required leave to descend it. But Jim had disappeared into the caravan, so having waited a moment Roach stepped gingerly down the bank and offered the marble through the doorway. Jim didn't spot him at once. He was sipping from the beaker and staring out of the window at the black clouds as they tore this way and that over the Quantocks. This sipping movement, Roach

noticed, was actually quite difficult, for Jim could not easily swallow standing up straight, he had to tilt his whole twisted trunk backward to achieve the angle. Meanwhile the rain came on really hard again, rattling against the caravan like gravel.

'Sir,' said Roach but Jim made no move.

'Trouble with an Alvis is, no damn springs,' said Jim at last, more to the window than to his visitor. 'You drive along with your rump on the white line, eh? Cripple anybody.' And, tilting his trunk again, he drank.

'Yes, sir,' said Roach, much surprised that Jim should assume he was a driver.

Jim had taken off his hat. His sandy hair was close cropped, there were patches where someone had gone too low with the scissors. These patches were mainly on one side, so that Roach guessed that Jim had cut his hair himself with his good arm, which made him even more lopsided.

'I brought you a marble,' said Roach.

'Very good of you. Thanks, old boy.' Taking the marble he slowly rolled it round his hard, powdery palm and Roach knew at once that he was very skilful at all sorts of things; that he was the kind of man who lived on terms with tools and objects generally. 'Not level, you see, Bill,' he confided, still intent upon the marble. 'Skew-whiff. Like me. Watch,' and turned purposefully to the larger window. A strip of aluminium beading ran along the bottom, put there to catch the condensation. Laying the marble in it, Jim watched it roll to the end and fall on the floor.

'Skew-whiff,' he repeated. 'Kipping in the stem. Can't have that, can we? Hey, hey, where'd you get to, you little brute?'

The caravan was not a homely place, Roach noticed, stooping to retrieve the marble. It might have belonged to anyone, though it was scrupulously clean. A bunk, a kitchen chair, a

ship's stove, a Calor gas cylinder. Not even a picture of his wife, thought Roach, who had not yet met a bachelor, with the exception of Mr Thursgood. The only personal things he could find were a webbing kitbag hanging from the door, a set of sewing things stored beside the bunk and a homemade shower made from a perforated biscuit tin and neatly welded to the roof. And on the table one bottle of colourless drink, gin or vodka, because that was what his father drank when Roach went to his flat for weekends in the holidays.

'East-west looks okay but north-south is undoubtedly skew-whiff,' Jim declared, testing the other window ledge. 'What are you good at, Bill?'

'I don't know, sir,' said Roach woodenly.

'Got to be good at something surely, everyone is. How about football? Are you good at football, Bill?'

'No, sir,' said Roach.

'Are you a swat, then?' Jim asked carelessly, as he lowered himself with a short grunt on to the bed, and took a pull from the beaker. 'You don't look a swat I must say,' he added politely. 'Although you're a loner.'

'I don't know,' Roach repeated and moved half a pace towards the open door.

'What's your best thing, then?' He took another long sip. 'Must be good at something, Bill, everyone is. My best thing was ducks and drakes. Cheers.'

Now this was an unfortunate question to ask of Roach just then for it occupied most of his waking hours. Indeed he had recently come to doubt whether he had any purpose on earth at all. In work and play he considered himself seriously inadequate; even the daily routine of the school, such as making his bed and tidying his clothes, seemed to be beyond his reach. Also he lacked piety, old Mrs Thursgood had told him

so, he screwed up his face too much at chapel. He blamed himself very much for these shortcomings but most of all he blamed himself for the break-up of his parents' marriage, which he should have seen coming and taken steps to prevent. He even wondered whether he was more directly responsible, whether for instance he was abnormally wicked or divisive or slothful, and that his bad character had wrought the rift. At his last school he had tried to explain this by screaming and feigning fits of cerebral palsy, which his aunt had. His parents conferred, as they frequently did in their reasonable way, and changed his school. Therefore this chance question, levelled at him in the cramped caravan by a creature at least halfway to divinity, a fellow solitary at that, brought him suddenly very near disaster. He felt the heat charging to his face, he watched his spectacles mist over and the caravan begin to dissolve into a sea of grief. Whether Jim noticed this, Roach never knew, for suddenly he had turned his crooked back on him, moved away to the table and was helping himself from the plastic beaker while he threw out saving phrases.

'You're a good watcher, anyway, I'll tell you that for nothing, old boy. Us singles always are, no one to rely on, what? No one else spotted me. Gave me a real turn up there, parked on the horizon. Thought you were a juju man. Best watcher in the unit, Bill Roach is, I'll bet. Long as he's got his specs on. What?'

'Yes,' Roach agreed gratefully, 'I am.'

'Well, you stay here and watch, then,' Jim commanded, clapping the safari hat back on his head, 'and I'll slip outside and trim the legs. Do that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Where's damn marble?'

'Here, sir.'

'Call out when she moves, right? North, south, whichever way she rolls. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Know which way's north?'

'That way,' said Roach promptly and stuck out his arm at random.

'Right. Well, you call when she rolls,' Jim repeated and disappeared into the rain. A moment later Roach felt the ground swaying under his feet and heard another roar either of pain or anger, as Jim wrestled with an off-side prop.

In the course of that same summer term, the boys paid Jim the compliment of a nickname. They had several shots before they were happy. They tried Trooper, which caught the bit of military in him, his occasional, quite harmless cursing and his solitary rambles in the Quantocks. All the same Trooper didn't stick, so they tried Pirate and for a while Goulash. Goulash because of his taste for hot food, the smell of curries and onions and paprika that greeted them in warm puffs as they filed past the Dip on their way to Evensong. Goulash for his perfect French which was held to have a slushy quality. Spikely of Five B could imitate it to a hair: 'You heard the question, Berger. What is Emile looking at?' – a convulsive jerk of the right hand – 'Don't gawp at me, old boy, I'm not a juju man. *Qu' est-ce qu'il regarde, Emile, dans le tableau que tu as sous le nez? Mon cher Berger*, if you do not very soon summon one lucid sentence of French, *je te mettrai tout de suite à la porte, tu comprends*, you beastly toad?'

But these terrible threats were never carried out, neither in French nor English. In a quaint way, they actually added to the aura of gentleness which quickly surrounded him, a gentleness only possible in big men seen through the eyes of boys.

Yet Goulash did not satisfy them either. It lacked the hint of strength contained. It took no account of Jim's passionate Englishness, which was the only subject where he could be relied on to waste time. Toad Spikely had only to venture one disparaging comment on the monarchy, extol the joys of some foreign country, preferably a hot one, for Jim to colour sharply and snap out a good three minutes' worth on the privilege of being born an Englishman. He knew they were teasing him but he was unable not to rise. Often he ended his homily with a rueful grin, and muttered references to red herrings and red marks too, and red faces when certain people would have to come in for extra work and miss their football. But England was his love; when it came down to it, no one suffered for her.

'Best place in the whole damn world!' he bellowed once. 'Know why? Know why, toad?'

Spikely did not, so Jim seized a crayon and drew a globe. To the west, America, he said, full of greedy fools fouling up their inheritance. To the east, China-Russia, he drew no distinction: boiler suits, prison camps and a damn long march to nowhere. In the middle . . .

Finally they hit on Rhino.

Partly this was a play on Prideaux, partly a reference to his taste for living off the land and his appetite for physical exercise which they noted constantly. Shivering in the shower queue first thing in the morning they would see the Rhino pounding down Combe Lane with a rucksack on his crooked back as he returned from his morning march. Going to bed they could glimpse his lonely shadow through the perspex roof of the fives court as the Rhino tirelessly attacked the concrete wall. And sometimes on warm evenings from their dormitory windows they would covertly watch him at golf, which he played with a dreadful old iron, zigzag across the playing fields, often

after reading to them from an extremely English adventure book: Biggles, Percy Westerman or Jeffrey Farnol, grabbed haphazard from the dingy library. At each stroke they waited for the grunt as he started his backswing and they were seldom disappointed. They kept a meticulous score. At the staff cricket match he made seventy-five before dismissing himself with a ball deliberately lofted to Spikely at square leg. 'Catch, toad, catch it, go on. Well done, Spikely, good lad, that's what you're there for.'

He was also credited, despite his taste for tolerance, with a sound understanding of the criminal mind. There were several examples of this, but the most telling occurred a few days before the end of term, when Spikely discovered in Jim's waste basket a draft of the next day's examination paper, and rented it to candidates at five new pence a time. Several boys paid their shilling and spent an agonised night memorising answers by torchlight in their dormitories. But when the exam came round Jim presented a quite different paper.

'You can look at this one for nothing,' he bellowed as he sat down. And having hauled open his *Daily Telegraph* he calmly gave himself over to the latest counsels of the juju men, which they understood to mean almost anyone with intellectual pretension, even if he wrote in the Queen's cause.

There was lastly the incident of the owl, which had a separate place in their opinion of him since it involved death, a phenomenon to which children react variously. The weather continuing cold, Jim brought a bucket of coal to his classroom and one Wednesday lit it in the grate, and sat there with his back to the warmth, reading a *dictée*. First some soot fell which he ignored, then the owl came down, a full-sized barn owl which had nested up there, no doubt, through many unswept winters and summers of Dover's rule, and was now smoked

out, dazed and black from beating itself to exhaustion in the flue. It fell over the coals and collapsed in a heap on the wooden floorboard with a clatter and a scuffle, then lay like an emissary of the devil, hunched but breathing, wings stretched, staring straight out at the boys through the soot which caked its eyes. There was no one who was not frightened; even Spikely, a hero, was frightened. Except for Jim, who had in a second folded the beast together and taken it out of the door without a word. They heard nothing, though they listened like stowaways, till the sound of running water from down the corridor as Jim evidently washed his hands. 'He's having a pee,' said Spikely, which earned a nervous laugh. But as they filed out of the classroom they discovered the owl still folded, neatly dead and awaiting burial on top of the compost heap beside the Dip. Its neck, as the braver ones established, was snapped. Only a gamekeeper, declared Sudeley, who had one, would know how to kill an owl so well.

Among the rest of the Thursgood community, opinion regarding Jim was less unanimous. The ghost of Mr Maltby the pianist died hard. Matron, siding with Bill Roach, pronounced him heroic and in need of care: it was a miracle he managed with that back. Marjoribanks said he had been run over by a bus when he was drunk. It was Marjoribanks also, at the staff match where Jim so excelled, who pointed out the sweater. Marjoribanks was not a cricketer but he had strolled down to watch with Thursgood.

'Do you think that sweater's kosher,' he asked in a high, jokey voice, 'or do you think he pinched it?'

'Leonard, that's very unfair,' Thursgood scolded, hammering at the flanks of his Labrador. 'Bite him, Ginny, bite the bad man.'

By the time he reached his study, however, Thursgood's laughter had quite worn off and he became extremely nervous. Bogus Oxford men he could deal with, just as in his time he had known classics masters who had no Greek and parsons who had no divinity. Such men, confronted with proof of their deception, broke down and wept and left, or stayed on half pay. But men who withheld genuine accomplishment, these were a breed he had not met but he knew already that he did not like them. Having consulted the university calendar, he telephoned the agency, a Mr Stroll of the house of Stroll and Medley.

'What precisely do you want to know?' Mr Stroll asked with a dreadful sigh.

'Well, nothing *precisely*.' Thursgood's mother was sewing at a sampler and seemed not to hear. 'Merely that if one asks for a written *curriculum vitae* one likes it to be complete. One doesn't like gaps. Not if one pays one's fee.'

At this point Thursgood found himself wondering rather wildly whether he had woken Mr Stroll from a deep sleep to which he had now returned.

'Very patriotic bloke,' Mr Stroll observed finally.

'I did not employ him for his patriotism.'

'He's been in dock,' Mr Stroll whispered on, as if through frightful draughts of cigarette smoke. 'Laid up. Spinal.'

'Quite so. But I assume he has not been in hospital for the whole of the last twenty-five years. *Touché*,' he murmured to his mother, his hand over the mouthpiece, and once more it crossed his mind that Mr Stroll had dropped off to sleep.

'You've only got him till the end of term,' Mr Stroll breathed. 'If you don't fancy him, chuck him out. You asked for temporary, temporary's what you've got. You said cheap, you've got cheap.'

'That's as may be,' Thursgood retorted gamely. 'But I've paid you a twenty-guinea fee, my father dealt with you for many years and I'm entitled to certain assurances. You've put here – may I read it to you? – you've put here *Before his injury, various overseas appointments of a commercial and prospecting nature*. Now that is hardly an enlightening description of a lifetime's employment, is it?'

At her sewing his mother nodded her agreement. 'It is *not*,' she echoed aloud.

'That's my first point. Let me go on a little—'

'Not too much, darling,' warned his mother.

'I happen to know he was up at Oxford in thirty-eight. Why didn't he finish? What went wrong?'

'I seem to recall there was an interlude round about then,' said Mr Stroll after another age. 'But I expect you're too young to remember it.'

'He can't have been in prison *all* the time,' said his mother after a very long silence, still without looking up from her sewing.

'He's been somewhere,' said Thursgood morosely, staring across the windswept gardens towards the Dip.

All through the summer holidays, as he moved uncomfortably between one household and another, embracing and rejecting, Bill Roach fretted about Jim, whether his back was hurting, what he was doing for money now that he had no one to teach and only half a term's pay to live on; worst of all whether he would be there when the new term began, for Bill had a feeling he could not describe that Jim lived so precariously on the world's surface that he might at any time fall off into a void; for he feared that Jim was like himself, without a natural gravity to hold him on. He rehearsed the circumstances of their first

meeting, and in particular Jim's enquiry regarding friendship, and he had a holy terror that just as he had failed his parents in love, so he had failed Jim, largely owing to the disparity in their ages. And that therefore Jim had moved on and was already looking somewhere else for a companion, scanning other schools with his pale eyes. He imagined also that, like himself, Jim had had a great attachment that had failed him, and which he longed to replace. But here Bill Roach's speculation met a dead end: he had no idea how adults loved each other.

There was so little he could do that was practical. He consulted a medical book and interrogated his mother about hunchbacks and he longed but did not dare to steal a bottle of his father's vodka and take it back to Thursgood's as a lure. And when at last his mother's chauffeur dropped him at the hated steps, he did not pause to say goodbye but ran for all he was worth to the top of the Dip, and there to his immeasurable joy was Jim's caravan in its same spot at the bottom, a shade dirtier than before, and a fresh patch of earth beside it, he supposed for winter vegetables. And Jim sitting on the step grinning up at him, as if he had heard Bill coming and got the grin of welcome ready before he appeared at the brink.

That same term, Jim invented a nickname for Roach. He dropped Bill and called him Jumbo instead. He gave no reason for this and Roach, as is common in the case of christenings, was in no position to object. In return, Roach appointed himself Jim's guardian; a regent-guardian, was how he thought of the appointment; a stand-in replacing Jim's departed friend, whoever that friend might be.

2

Unlike Jim Prideaux, Mr George Smiley was not naturally equipped for hurrying in the rain, least of all at dead of night. Indeed, he might have been the final form for which Bill Roach was the prototype. Small, podgy and at best middle-aged, he was by appearance one of London's meek who do not inherit the earth. His legs were short, his gait anything but agile, his dress costly, ill-fitting and extremely wet. His overcoat, which had a hint of widowhood about it, was of that black, loose weave which is designed to retain moisture. Either the sleeves were too long or his arms too short for, as with Roach, when he wore his mackintosh, the cuffs all but concealed the fingers. For reasons of vanity he wore no hat, believing rightly that hats made him ridiculous. 'Like an egg cosy,' his beautiful wife had remarked not long before the last occasion on which she left him, and her criticism as so often had endured. Therefore the rain had formed in fat, unbanishable drops on the thick lenses of his spectacles, forcing him alternately to lower or throw back his head as he scuttled along the pavement which skirted the blackened arcades of Victoria Station. He was proceeding west, to the sanctuary of Chelsea where he lived. His step, for whatever reason, was a fraction uncertain, and if Jim Prideaux had risen out of the shadows demanding to know whether he had any friends, he would probably have answered that he preferred to settle for a taxi.

'Roddy's such a windbag,' he muttered to himself as a fresh deluge dashed itself against his ample cheeks, then trickled downward to his sodden shirt. 'Why didn't I just get up and leave?'

Ruefully, Smiley once more rehearsed the reasons for his present misery, and concluded with a dispassion inseparable from the humble part of his nature that they were of his own making.

It had been from the start a day of travail. He had risen too late after working too late the night before, a practice which had crept up on him since retirement last year. Discovering he had run out of coffee, he queued at the grocer's till he ran out of patience also, then haughtily decided to attend to his personal administration. His bank statement, which had arrived with the morning's post, revealed that his wife had drawn the lion's share of his monthly pension: very well, he decreed, he would sell something. The response was irrational for he was quite decently off, and the obscure City bank responsible for his pension paid it with regularity. Wrapping up an early edition of Grimmelshausen nevertheless, a modest treasure from his Oxford days, he solemnly set off for Heywood Hill's bookshop in Curzon Street where he occasionally contracted friendly bargains with the proprietor. On the way he became even more irritable and from a callbox sought an appointment with his solicitor for that afternoon.

'George, how can you be so vulgar? Nobody divorces Ann. Send her flowers and come to lunch.'

This advice bucked him up and he approached Heywood Hill with a merry heart only to walk slap into the arms of Roddy Martindale emerging from Trumper's after his weekly haircut.

Martindale had no valid claim on Smiley either professionally or socially. He worked on the fleshy side of the Foreign

Office and his job consisted of lunching visiting dignitaries whom no one else would have entertained in his woodshed. He was a floating bachelor with a grey mane and that nimbleness which only fat men have. He affected buttonholes and pale suits, and he pretended on the flimsiest grounds to an intimate familiarity with the large backrooms of Whitehall. Some years ago, before it was disbanded, he had adorned a Whitehall working party to co-ordinate intelligence. In the war, having a certain mathematical facility, he had also haunted the fringes of the secret world; and once, as he never tired of telling, worked with John Landsbury on a Circus coding operation of transient delicacy. But the war, as Smiley sometimes had to remind himself, was thirty years ago.

'Hullo, Roddy,' said Smiley. 'Nice to see you.'

Martindale spoke in a confiding upper-class bellow of the sort which, on foreign holidays, had more than once caused Smiley to sign out of his hotel and run for cover.

'My dear boy, if it isn't the maestro himself! They told me you were locked up with the monks in St Gallen or somewhere, poring over manuscripts! Confess to me at once. I want to know all you've been doing, every little bit. Are you well? Do you love England still? How's the delicious Ann?' His restless gaze flicked up and down the street before lighting on the wrapped volume of Grimmelshausen under Smiley's arm. 'Pound to a penny that's a present for her. They tell me you spoil her outrageously.' His voice dropped to a mountainous murmur: 'I say, you're not back on the beat are you? Don't tell me it's all cover, George, *cover*?' His sharp tongue explored the moist edges of his little mouth, then, like a snake, vanished between its folds.

So, fool that he was, Smiley bought his escape by agreeing to dine that same evening at a club in Manchester Square

to which they both belonged but which Smiley avoided like the pest, not least because Roddy Martindale was a member. When evening came he was still full of luncheon at the White Tower where his solicitor, a very self-indulgent man, had decided that only a great meal would recover George from his doldrums. Martindale, by a different route, had reached the same conclusion and for four long hours over food Smiley did not want they had bandied names as if they were forgotten footballers. Jebedee, who was Smiley's old tutor: '*Such* a loss to us, bless him,' Martindale murmured, who so far as Smiley knew had never clapped eyes on Jebedee. 'And what a talent for the game, eh? One of the real greats, I always say.' Then Fielding, the French medievalist from Cambridge: 'Oh, but what a *lovely* sense of humour. Sharp, mind, sharp!' Then Sparke from the School of Oriental Languages and lastly Steed-Asprey, who had founded that very club in order to escape from bores like Roddy Martindale.

'I knew his poor brother, you know. Half the mind and twice the brawn, bless him. Brain went all the other way.'

And Smiley through a fog of drink had listened to this nonsense, saying 'yes' and 'no' and 'what a pity' and 'no, they never found him' and once, to his abiding shame, 'oh come, you flatter me', till with lugubrious inevitability Martindale came to more recent things, the change of power and Smiley's withdrawal from the service.

Predictably, he started with the last days of Control: 'Your old boss, George, bless him, the only one who ever kept his name a secret. Not from you, of course, he never had *any* secrets from you, George, did he? Close as thieves, Smiley and Control were, so they say, right to the end.'

'They're very complimentary.'

'Don't flirt, George. I'm an old trooper, you forget. You and

Control were just like that.' Briefly the plump hands made a token marriage. 'That's why you were thrown out, don't deceive me, that's why Bill Haydon got your job. That's why he's Percy Alleline's cup bearer and you're not.'

'If you say so, Roddy.'

'I do. I say more than that. *Far* more.'

As Martindale drew closer Smiley caught the odour of one of Trumper's most sensitive creations.

'I say something else: Control never died at all. He's been seen.' With a fluttering gesture he silenced Smiley's protests. 'Let me finish. Willy Andrewartha walked straight into him in Jo'burg airport, in the waiting room. Not a ghost. Flesh. Willy was at the bar buying a soda for the heat, you haven't seen Willy recently but he's a balloon. He turned round and there was Control beside him dressed up like a ghastly Boer. The moment he saw Willy he bolted. How's that? So now we know. Control never died at all. He was driven out by Percy Alleline and his three-piece band so he went to ground in South Africa, bless him. Well, you can't blame him, can you? You can't blame a man for wanting a drop of peace in the evening of his life. I can't.'

The monstrosity of this, reaching Smiley through a thickening wall of spiritual exhaustion, left him momentarily speechless.

'That's ridiculous! That's the most idiotic story I ever heard! Control is dead. He died of a heart attack after a long illness. Besides he hated South Africa. He hated everywhere except Surrey, the Circus and Lord's Cricket Ground. Really, Roddy, you mustn't tell stories like that.' He might have added: I buried him myself at a hateful crematorium in the East End, last Christmas eve, alone. The parson had a speech impediment.

'Willy Andrewartha was always the most God awful liar,' Martindale reflected, quite unruffled. 'I said the same to him

myself: "The sheerest nonsense, Willy, you should be ashamed of yourself."' And straight on as if never by thought or word had he subscribed to that silly view: 'It was the Czech scandal that put the final nail into Control's coffin, I suppose. That poor fellow who was shot in the back and got himself into the newspapers, the one who was so thick with Bill Haydon always, so we hear. *Ellis*, we're to call him, and we still do, don't we, even if we know his real name as well as we know our own.'

Shrewdly Martindale waited for Smiley to cap this, but Smiley had no intention of capping anything so Martindale tried a third tack.

'Somehow I can never quite believe in Percy Alleline as Chief, can you? Is it age, George, or is it just my natural cynicism? Do tell me, you're so good at people. I suppose power sits poorly on those we've grown up with. Is that a clue? There are so few who can carry it off for me these days and poor Percy's such an *obvious* person, I always think, specially after that little serpent, Control. That heavy good fellowship; how can one take him seriously? One has only to think of him in the old days lolling in the bar of the Travellers', sucking away on that log pipe of his and buying drinks for the moguls; well, really, one does like one's perfidy to be subtle, don't you agree? Or don't you care as long as it's successful? What's his knack, George, what's his secret recipe?' He was speaking most intently, leaning forward, his eyes greedy and excited. Only food could otherwise move him so deeply. 'Living off the wits of his subordinates; well, maybe that's leadership these days.'

'Really, Roddy, I can't help you,' said Smiley weakly. 'I never knew Percy as a force, you see. Only as a—' He lost the word.

'A striver,' Martindale suggested, eyes glistening. 'With his sights on Control's purple, day and night. Now he's wearing it and the mob loves him. So who's his strong left arm,

George? Who's earning him his reputation? Wonderfully well he's doing, we hear it from all sides. Little reading rooms at the Admiralty, little committees popping up with funny names, red carpet for Percy wherever he goes in the Whitehall corridors, junior ministers receiving special words of congratulation from on high, people one's never heard of getting grand medals for nothing. I've seen it all before, you know.'

'Roddy, I can't help you,' Smiley insisted, making to get up. 'You're out of my depth, truly.' But Martindale was physically restraining him, holding him at the table with one damp hand while he talked still faster.

'So who's the cleverboots? Not Percy, that's for sure. And don't tell me the Americans have started trusting us again either.' The grip tightened. 'Dashing Bill Haydon, our latter-day Lawrence of Arabia, bless him; there you are, it's Bill, your old rival.' Martindale's tongue poked out its head again, reconnoitred and withdrew, leaving a thin smile like a trail. 'I'm told that you and Bill shared *everything* once upon a time,' he said. 'Still he never was orthodox, was he? Genius never is.'

'Anything further you require, Mr Smiley?' the waiter asked.

'Then it's Bland: the shopsoiled white hope, the redbrick don.' Still he would not release him. 'And if those two aren't providing the speed, it's someone in retirement, isn't it? I mean someone pretending to be in retirement, don't I? And if Control's dead, who is there left? Apart from you.'

They were putting on their coats. The porters had gone home, they had to fetch them for themselves from the empty brown racks.

'Roy Bland's not redbrick,' Smiley said loudly. 'He was at St Antony's College, Oxford, if you want to know.'

Heaven help me, it was the best I could do, thought Smiley.

'Don't be silly, dear,' Martindale snapped. Smiley had bored

him: he looked sulky and cheated; distressing downward folds had formed on the lower contours of his cheeks. 'Of course St Antony's is redbrick, it makes no difference there's a little bit of sandstone in the same street, even if he was your protégé. I expect he's Bill Haydon's now – don't tip him, it's my party not yours. Father to them all Bill is, always was. Draws them like bees. Well, he has the glamour, hasn't he, not like some of us. Star quality I call it, one of the few. I'm told the women literally bow down before him, if that's what women do.'

'Good night, Roddy.'

'Love to Ann, mind.'

'I won't forget.'

'Well, don't.'

And now it was pouring with rain, Smiley was soaked to the skin and God as a punishment had removed all taxis from the face of London.

3

'Sheer lack of willpower,' he told himself, as he courteously declined the suggestions of a lady in the doorway. 'One calls it politeness whereas in fact it is nothing but weakness. You *featherhead*, Martindale. You pompous, bogus, effeminate, nonproductive . . .' He stepped widely to avoid an unseen obstacle. 'Weakness,' he resumed, 'and an inability to live a self-sufficient life independent of institutions' – a puddle emptied itself neatly into his shoe – 'and emotional attachments which have long outlived their purpose. *Viz* my wife, *viz* the Circus, *viz* living in London. Taxi!'

Smiley lurched forward but was already too late. Two girls, giggling under one umbrella, clambered aboard in a flurry of arms and legs. Uselessly pulling up the collar of his black overcoat he continued his solitary march. 'Shopsoiled white hope,' he muttered furiously. 'Little bit of sandstone in the street. You bombastic, inquisitive, impertinent—'

And then of course he remembered far too late that he had left the Grimmelshausen at his club.

'Oh damn!' he cried *sopra voce*, halting in his tracks for greater emphasis. 'Oh damn, oh *damn*, oh damn.'

He would sell his London house: he had decided. Back there under the awning, crouched beside the cigarette machine, waiting for the cloudburst to end, he had taken this grave

decision. Property values in London had risen out of proportion, he had heard it from every side. Good. He would sell and with a part of the proceeds buy a cottage in the Cotswolds. Burford? Too much traffic. Steeple Aston, that was a place. He would set up as a mild eccentric, discursive, withdrawn, but possessing one or two lovable habits such as muttering to himself as he bumbled along pavements. Out of date perhaps, but who wasn't these days? Out of date, but loyal to his own time. At a certain moment, after all, every man chooses: will he go forward, will he go back? There was nothing dishonourable in not being blown about by every little modern wind. Better to have worth, to entrench, to be an oak of one's own generation. And if Ann wanted to return, well, he would show her the door.

Or not show her the door according to, well, how much she wanted to return.

Consoled by these visions Smiley arrived at the King's Road, where he paused on the pavement as if waiting to cross. To either side, festive boutiques. Before him, his own Bywater Street, a cul-de-sac exactly one hundred and seventeen of his own paces long. When he had first come to live here these Georgian cottages had a modest, down-at-heel charm, with young couples making do on fifteen pounds a week and a tax-free lodger hidden in the basement. Now steel screens protected their lower windows and for each house three cars jammed the kerb. From long habit Smiley passed these in review, checking which were familiar, which were not; of the unfamiliar, which had aerials and extra mirrors, which were the closed vans that watchers like. Partly he did this as a test of memory, a private Kim's game to preserve his mind from the atrophy of retirement, just as on other days he learnt the names of the shops along his bus route to the British Museum; just as

he knew how many stairs there were to each flight of his own house and which way each of the twelve doors opened.

But Smiley had a second reason which was fear, the secret fear that follows every professional to his grave. Namely, that one day, out of a past so complex that he himself could not remember all the enemies he might have made, one of them would find him and demand the reckoning.

At the bottom of the street a neighbour was exercising her dog; seeing him, she lifted her head to say something but he ignored her, knowing it would be about Ann. He crossed the road. His house was in darkness, the curtains were as he had left them. He climbed the six steps to the front door. Since Ann's departure, his cleaning woman had also left: no one but Ann had a key. There were two locks, a Banham deadlock and a Chubb Pipekey, and two splinters of his own manufacture, splits of oak each the size of a thumbnail, wedged into the lintel above and below the Banham. They were a hangover from his days in the field. Recently, without knowing why, he had started using them again; perhaps he didn't want her to take him by surprise. With the tips of his fingers he discovered each in turn. The routine over, he unlocked the door, pushed it open and felt the midday mail slithering over the carpet.

What was due? he wondered. *German Life and Letters? Philology? Philology*, he decided; it was already overdue. Putting on the hall light he stooped and peered through his post. One 'account rendered' from his tailor for a suit he had not ordered but which he suspected was one of those presently adorning Ann's lover; one bill from a garage in Henley for her petrol (what, pray, were they doing in Henley, broke, on the ninth of October?); one letter from the bank regarding a local cashing facility in favour of the Lady Ann Smiley at a branch of the Midland Bank in Immingham.

And what the devil, he demanded of this document, are they doing in Immingham? Who ever had a love affair in Immingham, for goodness' sake? Where *was* Immingham?

He was still pondering the question when his gaze fell upon an unfamiliar umbrella in the stand, a silk one with a leather handle and a gold ring with no initial. And it passed through his mind with a speed which has no place in time that since the umbrella was dry it must have arrived there before six fifteen when the rain began, for there was no moisture in the stand either. Also that it was an elegant umbrella and the ferrule was barely scratched though it was not new. And that therefore the umbrella belonged to someone agile, even young, like Ann's latest swain. But that since its owner had known about the wedges and known how to put them back once he was inside the house, and had the wit to lay the mail against the door after disturbing and no doubt reading it, then most likely he knew Smiley, too; and was not a lover but a professional like himself, who had at some time worked closely with him and knew his handwriting, as it is called in the jargon.

The drawing room door was ajar. Softly he pushed it further open.

'Peter?' he said.

Through the gap he saw by the light of the street two suede shoes, lazily folded, protruding from one end of the sofa.

'I'd leave that coat on if I were you, George, old boy,' said an amiable voice. 'We've got a long way to go.'

Five minutes later, dressed in a vast brown travelling coat, a gift from Ann and the only one he had that was dry, George Smiley was sitting crossly in the passenger seat of Peter Guillam's extremely draughty sports car, which he had parked in an adjoining square. Their destination was Ascot, a place famous for women and horses. And less famous perhaps as the

residence of Mr Oliver Lacon of the Cabinet Office, a senior adviser to various mixed committees and a watch-dog of intelligence affairs. Or, as Guillam had it less reverentially, Whitehall's head prefect.

While at Thursgood's school, wakefully in bed, Bill Roach was contemplating the latest wonders which had befallen him in the course of his daily vigil over Jim's welfare. Yesterday Jim had amazed Latzy. Thursday he had stolen Miss Aaronson's mail. Miss Aaronson taught violin and scripture, Roach courted her for her tenderness. Latzy the assistant gardener was a DP, said Matron, and DPs spoke no English, or very little. DP meant Different Person, said Matron, or anyway foreign from the war. But yesterday Jim had spoken to Latzy, seeking his assistance with the car club, and he had spoken to him in DP, or whatever DPs speak, and Latzy had grown a foot taller on the spot.

The matter of Miss Aaronson's mail was more complex. There were two envelopes on the staffroom sideboard Thursday morning after chapel when Roach called for his form's exercise books, one addressed to Jim and one to Miss Aaronson. Jim's was typewritten. Miss Aaronson's was handwritten, in a hand not unlike Jim's own. The staffroom, while Roach made these observations, was empty. He helped himself to the exercise books and was quietly taking his leave when Jim walked in by the other door, red and blowing from his early walk.

'On your way, Jumbo, bell's gone,' stooping over the sideboard.

'Yes, sir.'

'Foxy weather, eh Jumbo?'

'Yes, sir.'

'On your way, then.'

At the door, Roach looked round. Jim was standing again, leaning back to open the morning's *Daily Telegraph*. The sideboard was empty. Both envelopes had gone.

Had Jim written to Miss Aaronson and changed his mind? Proposing marriage, perhaps? Another thought came to Bill Roach. Recently, Jim had acquired an old typewriter, a wrecked Remington which he had put right with his own hands. Had he typed his own letter on it? Was he so lonely that he wrote himself letters, and stole other people's as well? Roach fell asleep.

4

Guillam drove languidly but fast. Smells of autumn filled the car, a full moon was shining, strands of mist hung over open fields and the cold was irresistible. Smiley wondered how old Guillam was and guessed forty, but in that light he could have been an undergraduate sculling on the river; he moved the gear lever with a long flowing movement as if he were passing it through water. In any case, Smiley reflected irritably, the car was far too young for Guillam. They had raced through Runnymede and begun the run up Egham Hill. They had been driving for twenty minutes and Smiley had asked a dozen questions and received no answer worth a penny, and now a nagging fear was waking in him which he refused to name.

'I'm surprised they didn't throw you out with the rest of us,' he said, not very pleasantly, as he hauled the skirts of his coat more tightly round him. 'You had all the qualifications: good at your work, loyal, discreet.'

'They put me in charge of scalphunters.'

'Oh my Lord,' said Smiley with a shudder, and, pulling up his collar round his ample chins, he abandoned himself to that memory in place of others more disturbing: Brixton, and the grim flint schoolhouse that served the scalphunters as their headquarters. The scalphunters' official name was Travel. They had been formed by Control on Bill Haydon's suggestion

in the pioneer days of the Cold War, when murder and kidnapping and crash blackmail were common currency, and their first commandant was Haydon's nominee. They were a small outfit, about a dozen men, and they were there to handle the hit-and-run jobs that were too dirty or too risky for the residents abroad. Good intelligence work, Control had always preached, was gradual and rested on a kind of gentleness. The scalphunters were the exception to his own rule. They weren't gradual and they weren't gentle either, thus reflecting Haydon's temperament rather than Control's. And they worked solo, which was why they were stabled out of sight behind a flint wall with broken glass and barbed wire on the top.

'I asked whether "lateralism" was a word to you.'

'It most certainly is not.'

'It's the "in" doctrine. We used to go up and down. Now we go along.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'In your day the Circus ran itself by regions. Africa, satellites, Russia, China, South-East Asia, you name it; each region was commanded by its own juju man, Control sat in heaven and held the strings. Remember?'

'It strikes a distant chord.'

'Well today everything operational is under one hat. It's called London Station. Regions are out, lateralism is in. Bill Haydon's Commander London Station, Roy Bland's his number two, Toby Esterhase runs between them like a poodle. They're a service within a service. They share their own secrets and don't mix with the proles. It makes us more secure.'

'It sounds a very good idea,' said Smiley, studiously ignoring the innuendo.

As the memories once more began seething upward into his conscious mind, an extraordinary feeling passed over him: