



Christopher Bernard

Shadow in the Water

HE DOESN'T SEE it till it's almost too late. A flat oval of darkness under the choppy glimmering of this little finger of Atlantic held in a cramp of rocks below him, it hasn't moved in the time he's been there. Then something disturbs it, or it's grown bored and restless, and irritably it shifts up, growing as it moves toward the surface.

Not a shark, the boy thinks. A shark wouldn't have been able to wait: they have to move constantly. It may have been resting, of course. He's

never heard of black sharks, at least not this size. He bends down and squints for a better look. But all that does is strain his eyes, blur his vision. The object seems to stop. He shakes his head: maybe he imagined it moving in the first place. Maybe it's just a rock, in sharp contrast to the light sand surrounding it.

The choppy water glimmers and glints, like a molten mirror, sending momentary, leaping, melting crescents of light flashing into his eyes ~ like flames in a fireplace, creating momentary images, of grotesque human faces, strange animals, birds, fish, hills, islands, promontories, cities, continents, worlds, that immediately vanish in a weltering confusion of shadow and brightness. It fascinates him to watch it, but it hurts his eyes. He focuses again past the surface of the water, trying to see the shadow again. But it seems to have disappeared.

He gets up and moves along the edge of the small grotto, trying to get a view under the surface. But whatever it was is gone. There's nothing but the watery patchwork of reflections and refractions and the view of a dimness of sand stretching below out to the bay and to the ocean, beyond.

He rises quickly, one and two stairs at a time, up the long staircase hugging the cliff, toward the pavilion. The rift in the clouds, through

which the sun briefly stabbed, has closed again. The leaden Atlantic sweeps behind him, feathered with white-caps crossing short-lived sandbars, toward a horizon dim under a northeaster pausing between squalls. At the top landing, he turns and takes a deep breath of the clam-smelling air and his eyes slowly sweep the horizon.

A streak of silver shines glumly far out ~ impossible to say how big it is: an immense gash or just a small, nearby rip in the clouds.

He steps into the faux-Victorian pavilion with its charming, if misleading, historical air (it was built in the forties by a contractor nostalgic for the pre-war world of his childhood), whose eccentric presence among the cut-rate bungalows of Aldington the boy has a particular fondness for that he hides from family and friends: unusual tastes being considered "gay" and not much tolerated. He likes the pavilion's romantic profile, overhanging the shattered edge of the sea-rumpled shore. He likes its loneliness and shabbiness, its sagging roof, paint-blistered supports, splintered railing, its general sense of misfittedness. The pavilion's far edge overhangs the cliff, offering a view, if one cares to look, straight down the granite face to a catchment of rocks and bay water far below. He leans over and stares at the disheveled water, rock and sand beneath him; then up

and out over the cloudy view. A spread of terns swoops above him and then down toward the distant ocean.

The chill of the air makes him shiver a little, pleasantly.

The gray, breezy formlessness around him responds to what he feels inside him, walled off by nothing more than his skin: sensitive yet resilient and broodingly alert, if to nothing in particular: intent simply on its own awareness; a consciousness unfocussed yet firm as the grasp of a wing. Not of self, exactly ~ rather, of everything that is not self: an access of almost pure sensation, without the barriers that usually mark the self's appeals, fears, resentments. . . .

The sound of the surf below mounts suddenly up to him on a wind from the sea.

It's as if for a moment he'd been in an enormous room and someone has just opened a door, and the wind from outdoors rushes in.

A silly thought: here he is already outdoors, "exposed to the elements," unprotected (the pavilion is a mockery of protection ~ it's part of its charm). And he smiles a smile not cynical or embarrassed or ashamed, as if someone might be listening to his thoughts and judging them. It's a slight, almost imperceptible, little quizzical smile at a thought he is having, a feeling of fellowship with the wind and the sea and the shut-in sky, with

the rocks beneath him and the narrow warren of grottoes he had explored earlier alone, with the clouds now smothering the sky, the terns, and the gulls he is suddenly aware of, squealing in the dingy light.

Good thing, bad thing? But how could anything this nice, this comforting, be anything but good, be anything but wonderful? Nobody else has ever mentioned anything like it among the people he knows. He can imagine the puzzled looks of his family, the sarcastic comments of his friends. Yet it's an experience he has often had . . .

He feels himself turning inward, as if his shoulders were a windbreaker and his head a hood protecting something inside him.

A few spots of rain hit his face and arms. He glances briefly upward, then turns and heads back, hunched slightly, toward the house.

. . .

His aunt, as she comes in from the deck, gives him one of her glazed smiles, trying to look through him in the disconcerting way she has.

"You were away awfully long," she says, with light irony. "Some day we're going to lose you to pirates."

She must have been the one who called him. At that distance he never could tell who was shouting. It had sounded like his mother, though it might as easily have been his sister.

"Al-an!"

And he had responded, reflexively: "I'm com-ming!"

And started jogging, suddenly self-conscious, toward home at the end of Pilger Road.

Anne Guinne looked up as he jogged past her house; he gave her an embarrassed little wave. His family still tease him that he's to marry her when he grows up, though everyone knows she likes Freddie McNamara. That he feels suddenly so self-conscious ~ something that has begun happening to him increasingly, for no reason, in the midst of doing things he's been doing since childhood ~ infuriates him: why this sudden hot wave of painful shyness, one more time, out of nowhere?

It was far from dinner time: why did they shout for him? He was furious at the shouter, whoever it was, and then at Anne, for having caught him hurrying off obediently, at the sound of command. He felt a withering scorn for himself: what a wimp he was becoming. Then, sensing he was blushing, even though there was nobody close enough to notice, or care, he became even angrier. And ran faster.

By the time he got home he felt barely in control. Then, after pausing on the porch to catch his breath (to appear to have hurried would have been intolerably humiliating), he entered in haughty silence, glowering at the rug.

His aunt's smile has always disturbed him, set as it is,

slightly strained and immobile, assertive and thin.

"I was down on the beach," he replies, flatly, to her question where he's been, "exploring the grottoes."

"You should be careful down there. It's dangerous when the tide turns."

"I know, I'm always careful." He shrugs impatiently. "Where is everybody?"

"At the McBrides. To pick up your sister."

The McBrides. His sister had been part of a slumber party with their irritating daughter, Patty: a prideful girl who had seduced his sister's friendship for reasons that remained mysterious. Yes she was pretty, in a slick kind of way, yes she was from a rich family, yes they had famous friends ~ Patty never let anybody forget that the star of "WonderLand" had once spent a weekend with them ~ but how could Kristy stand the girl's pomposity, her overbearing boastfulness? She had hypnotized Kristy, who trailed around her in awe. It was demeaning.

His aunt wanders out of the room, then wanders back.

"By the way," she says, "Billy and Jacques stopped in. They said they'll be at the diamond."

Then wanders out again.

Alan's pulse quickens at the mention of his two best friends ~ or rather, his once best friend and the summer's exotic interloper.

The deck presents a broad view of the neighborhood: the

nearby alley and streets, the narrow pits of backyards, the black smudged parking lot at the corner, the embarrassed facade of the neighborhood grocery store and a blinking drugstore opposite it, the vacant playground that had seen a dramatic fall in use since little Cindy Blake was found raped and unconscious under the jungle gym two summers ago, and behind that, the corner of a baseball diamond that hosted local league games, complete with uniforms and hot dog vendors, bleachers and an elementary dugout, that give Aldington a charge of community spirit it otherwise might have lacked completely.

Behind the steep storm fencing built around home plate, a baffle of metal curved like a chainmail catcher's mitt, Alan sees two distant forms, huddled together, half-submerged in a single blurry patch. One of them is waving his arm excitedly.

His curiosity aroused, Alan leaves the house, after telling his aunt where he's going, retrieves his bike from the garage, rides awkwardly out the yard and, once he's gathered speed on the Raleigh, flies fast as the wind toward the diamond.

Fast as the wind down Rorers Alley, past the backyards and backdoors of the Teazels' and the Wentworths', the Mackeys' and the Sprouills', the Pattersons' and old man Porter's, around the corner on Ashberry, past the Valero gas station, with its green and

white pumps and cut-rate cutout design, past the Rite-Aids and the Starbucks, where locals hang out behind ranks of laptops, past the Bridgestone tire store and the under-patronized Olive Garden, past Joe Strozzi's grocery store and the Italian laundry, then down Mace Street, just missing a cobalt-blue SUV lurching out a blind driveway as its horn blurts at him, past more of Aldington's bungalows ~ these, nameless and ostentatious, inflated and pathetic, since he did not know, and his family did not know, and none of his friends knew, anyone who lived there, and would not lower themselves to find out who they were, let alone dance attendance on them, or cultivate their acquaintance, or even deign to be aware of their existence, so beneath anyone's notice they were, living, as they dared to do, several blocks away ~ and yet why was that such an insurmountable barrier? Alan vaguely wondered, without doing anything about it ~ then past the edge of the macabre playground (its recent history has colored its identity, it seems, permanently) and on to the raised glove of the storm-fenced diamond, the fence hanging above home plate like a cowl of mesh stockings. The wind combs his hair and cleans his mind with the fresh salt smell of the ocean; his eyes tear lightly in the slipstream his bike makes, and his lungs heave with a pleasant surcharge of

energy, an expending of unexhaustible strength.

He skids to a halt at the edge of the diamond. Something had caught his eye: he had seen his two friends, sitting in the bleachers behind home plate, but there was something strange about their faces.

The two boys were still huddled together, as though planning something between them, though now the distinction between them was clearer: Billy in his dun blue T-shirt and faded jeans, his small crew-cut head stood out more clearly against Jacques' squat head and rough curls, his gray half turtle neck and brown corduroys. But there was something odd about their faces: it was as though they were wearing masks.

Alan wipes his eyes; the watering caused by the rushing air might have blurred his vision. But when he looks again, again he sees masks instead of faces. The masks are not clearly defined: they seem like grotesque representations of the boys' regular faces, more battered, twisted, frozen into strange expressions, false faces, though false expressions of what exactly ~ anger, sadness, sarcasm, joy? All he can see clearly is their rigidity. They look older; they look old.

The two figures stop and the "masks" turn toward him, morphing into faces slightly distorted behind the mesh. Alan wipes his eyes, which are still tearing, then pedals ahead.

Jacques grins his usual weirdly insincere grin as Alan bikes up to them. Billy looks at him with the usual blank expression he's had in front of Alan since Jacques became his new best friend.

"'Ey," Jacques says, with a noticeable accent, and giving Alan a cool look. "We stopped by your house. Your aunt said so?"

"Hi." Billy looks him furtively in the eye. Alan reacts with the uneasiness he has grown to expect whenever he finds the two boys together.

"I was down at the grottoes," he says, staring at Billy.

"Romantic!" Jacques grins with a cheeriness in his plump, childish face that mixes strangely with his sarcasm. "Boning a mermaid!"

"I was stood up," he says.

Some things it is better not to divulge, or only speak of obliquely, in code, to be understood only by the few who see things, who feel, as you do. Once or twice Alan had tried to share his experiences by the shore with his family ~ bad idea! He'll never do that again. He was met with blank stares, appalled or pitying, pauses of a disturbed silence so tangible he could feel them sag opaquely through the air like crystallized honey ~ and if he couldn't trust his family with even a hint of such delicate experiences, then who could he trust them with? His best friend? Not even him.

So Alan has never told them, as he hadn't told anyone, the real reason for his visits to the grottoes, or for his long walks in the evening, alone, along the shore.

"They are all beaches," says Jacques, with his odd childish smile. Alan and Billy look at each other and start laughing. "Why are you laughing?" Jacques protests, grinning. "Do you deny all mermaids are beaches?"

"No!" crows Billy. "That I'd never deny!"

The two once-best-friends laugh even harder. Alan notices, even as he laughs, something strange in Billy's face: a watchfulness, careful even while seeming to give way to hilarity. Then Alan realizes what it is: Billy isn't abandoning himself as he seems to be; he is gauging Jacques' reaction, measuring his own reaction, testing it, against the reactions of his new friend. There's a hint of caution, even anxiety, in his alertness.

Jacques never entirely takes his eyes off the eyes of either Alan or Billy. Jacques looks back and forth between the other two boys, grinning, in a tight triangular pattern of gazes. His relentless gaze seems to demand acknowledgment, a returning gaze, which then provokes Jacques' clear yet strangely equivocal eyes to challenge you in turn once again, in a spiraling, accelerating whirl of looks back and forth, like an ever more

tangled, invisible cat's cradle. Alan suddenly sees this, and realizes it's what Jacques always does, what at first had put him off the French boy, made him distrustful. There is no escaping it while you are with Jacques, his command of your immediate and constant attention. It's like a strong beacon probing you even when you are trying to hide, to be left alone behind a wall of polite disregard, to pretend to be invisible. Jacques will not let you be invisible: he sees you. He sees through you.

Alan feels a flush of warmth as Jacques's eyes pull at him and at Billy, back and forth, sticky, prodding. It's exciting, it's disturbing. He notices Billy is flushed, and he wonders if the color has risen in his own face.

The laughter stops as suddenly as it started.

A large bird flaps over them, its shadow crossing the diamond.

Billy and Alan avoid each other's eyes. The shadow of the mesh fence falls across their faces as the sun drops briefly beneath the clouds in the west. A child shouts in the distance.

Alan feels uneasy again. Jacques and Billy are giving each other furtive looks; he feels subtly left out, and he wonders what they were so deeply involved in discussing when he first saw them.

Billy is slumped on one of the bleachers, his tall, skinny figure slouched forward almost

in embarrassment at its own bony awkwardness, his usual shy smile slipping in and out of his features. Jacques stands on the brown gravel, a portly figure with a stance at once aggressive and smarmy, with his typically unembarrassed, sly look ~ a look that both intrigues and irritates Alan, with its whiff of cockiness, but that hypnotized Billy from the start.

Jacques showed up one day two months before, the son of the sexy, mysterious Mrs. Delroy by a previous marriage who had come to spend the summer with her at Aldington. His father was a Frenchman from Brittany and had taken Jacques after the divorce to live with him in Brest where he worked as an "avocat" in the local administration. It was because of this that Alan learned about the Napoleonic code, in which any accused person is presumed to be guilty and must prove his innocence in court ~ an attitude that strikes Alan, used as he is to the presumption of innocence in the English and American legal systems, as shocking, even evil. And Jacques's shrugging assertion that, after all, everyone is guilty of something he reacted to with a passionate denial ~ so passionate it upset him for some time afterward.

Mrs. Delroy is American and had lived with her husband in France until the marriage broke up for reasons that, though never discussed ~ perhaps because they were never discussed ~ had a shadow over

them. She had remarried, to a coarse, ugly man from Flushing who ran a small factory in an inland city and owned several houses, one of them a Victorian nearby, on Grand Street, just off Cliff Road. Then Jacques appeared near the pavilion one morning in June, walking by himself along the cliff with a little swagger that fit his short, stout figure just absurdly enough to disarm anyone approaching him.

He soon befriended the only two boys in the neighborhood close to his own age. The two Americans were at first put off by his French accent and strange mannerisms, his odd opinions and behavior, sometimes overly polite, then unpredictably personal, almost invasive ~ but they also felt sorry for him because of his parents' divorce, something unknown in the immediate families of the other boys but considered tragic, and the cause of an uneasy pity.

Until Jacques's appearance, Billy and Alan had been summer best friends, going back two years, pal'ing around the cliffs and beaches, the neighborhood drugstores and playgrounds and general stores on foot and bike, exploring the town and the sparse countryside beyond and the dunes and coves and grottoes of the shoreline at the foot of the cliffs. They shared the usual interests of the local boys ~ collecting baseball cards and comic books, crabbing when the tide was low, swimming at

all hours. Alan hid behind a pose of detachment and faint, smiling indifference, Billy behind a mask of aw-shucks innocence and countrified ignorance. In this way each was able to feel secretly superior to the other, without either one calling the other's bluff or losing face in a naked confrontation.

All this changed with the appearance of Jacques, who played a much more aggressive game at establishing himself in new territory. He played only briefly the shy, awkward foreigner, unused to the peculiar ways of American boys: he soon learned something it often took Americans a lifetime to learn: that nothing and no one here would or indeed could stop him from spreading himself as far as he dared go, as long as he knew what he wanted and was unencumbered by too much respect for other people. The borders here were open: all one need do was invade without hesitation and without scruple. The law wouldn't stop you. And the forces of social punishment were powerless.

His first target was Alan. The attempted seduction failed, however: Alan found Jacques's elaborate attempts to win his "friendship" almost grotesque, and when he began to quietly undermine his friendship with Billy, Alan pulled back, not knowing how else to handle Jacques's weird, charming aggression except by withdrawing, his usual defense

when alarmed. He didn't know what to tell Billy, since Jacques's attacks were never overt, never something you could put your finger on, but were the subtlest and most undercutting of insinuations, tones of voice, shrugs and sighs and weary head shakes, rolling of the eyes and pitying looks. In the war of body language, Alan realized he and Billy faced in Jacques something hopelessly out of their league. They swung at empty air as he pitched at them, illicitly and casually, curve ball after curve ball. It baffled Alan: he sensed there was something deeply strange, even wrong, going on, but he couldn't tell what it was, to himself or anyone else, and would have been at a loss to explain it. Billy, on the other hand, seemed taken in. Less than a month after Jacques's appearance he and the French boy had become inseparable.

Again Alan wonders what they had been talking about so closely together, and why they became so constrained on his approach. What were they trying to hide? He's no goody-goody, they could speak up in front of him. Why didn't they trust him? The thought hurt especially in the case of Billy. They'd had their private mischief nights together, they didn't hide what they did from each other.

Of course maybe they'd been talking about *him*. The thought raises the skin on the back of his neck. What can they have said? What does he have to hide?

Nothing, he thinks too quickly ~ nothing they can accuse him of, Napoleonic code or not ~ and anyway that doesn't work here. Nothing they can know. And he thinks, uneasily, if there might not be something he has done or said, even thought, even felt, that he could be accused of, that might come back to haunt him. It has happened before, out of his own ignorance and stupidity, that little trip-up he hardly noticed at the time, yet for which, later, someone came down on him, hard and unforgiving.

But nothing is clear ~ neither Jacques nor Billy say or do anything he can put his hand on and either deny or affirm, or even precisely understand.

They are spattered by a sprinkling of rain.

"Let's go to your house," Jacques says to Billy as he brushes the spritz from his face.

Billy shakes his head.

"My parents are away. They don't let me bring anyone home when they're away."

"As if they'll ever know!" retorts Jacques. "I promise I won't burn your house down. Even if I smoke."

"You brought cigarettes?!"

"Maybe I have," Jacques replies, slyly. "But I am not taking them out in the rain!"

And another spattering of rain raises large spots on Jacques's pullover and Billy's T-shirt.

"Let's go, let's go!" Jacques goads.

Billy seems torn, but it's clear what he'll decide. He follows Jacques as the French boy walks quickly off the diamond. Alan follows, walking his bike.

The rain starts coming down more heavily, and they start to run.

A few minutes later they're at Billy's house. They stand on the porch out of the downpour while Billy, after fumbling at the lock, finally pushes in the heavy white door that scrapes uneasily against the thick rug inside.

"It's about time," Jacques says, with smiling sarcasm, as they tumble into the silent house. "You wanted us to drown out there?"

Soon they're in the living room, and Billy looks out the window, pressing his nose against it like the little boy he still half is, his breath clouding the pane.

"It'll stop soon," he says.

When he turns, Jacques is switching a cigarette back and forth like a pendulum a foot from Billy's face.

"Does Billy want a cigarette, a cigarette, a cigarette?" Jacques says in sing-song, still smiling.

Billy grabs and Jacques jerks it away, and they play like that till Billy, exasperated, throws himself on Jacques and they roll on the floor. Jacques suddenly howls.

"Look, you've crushed it!" Jacques cries as he gets up. He stands and raises the cigarette,

broken in two places in a weird zigzag with tobacco bursting through the torn paper. "It looks like your broken dick!" he leers at Billy.

"It looks like your broken dick!" Billy comes back furiously, and throws himself on Jacques, who howls with laughter and squeezes out of Billy's grasp like a slippery pig.

"I have another one, though," Jacques says, magically flashing another cigarette in the air. Though not crushed, it is flattened and bent. "Uh, uh!" he grunts warningly as Billy again lunges at it. "You don't want to crush this one too?" As the two of them pause, Jacques gives Alan a casual side glance. "Anyone have a match?"

Alan shakes his head. "Not me," he says with an uncharacteristic sneer. "You're the one with the foreign vices."

The fight with Billy had happened as though he wasn't even there: deliberately insulting him by ignoring him. Even the cigarette, which Alan longed for as much as any fourteen-year-old, despite the warnings he'd heard all his life against tobacco, had been flashed at Billy alone, as though Alan were irrelevant, a spectator.

Don't forget you're not one of us.

Jacques wrinkles up his nose and snickers at him. It is the first steady eye contact Jacques has given Alan, he realizes with a sting of anger,

since he pedaled up on his bike at the diamond.

As magically as before, Jacques flashes a match before the faces of the two boys, the tip aflame.

"Hah!" Jacques again howls, as Billy, and Alan too, reach out, pleadingly. "Not yet!" And he blows out the match. "We are going to have a little game, first. First the game, then ~ cigarettes!"

"Okay," the other boys impatiently agree, "okay!"

Jacques looks at Billy.

"Give me your keys."

"What for?"

"Just give them to me."

Jacques stares at Billy insolently.

Billy just stares back and fetches the keys from his trousers.

The three keys hang from a long, gold-colored chain, and keys and keychain gleam dully in the light from the rainy window.

Jacques takes the keys from Billy's hand and raises them, swinging like a pendulum in the dimness.

"I am going to hypnotize you," he announces.

"No way!" says Billy, with a stupid grin

"Yes! I am going to hypnotize both of you." And Jacques turns to Alan.

"One at a time!" Alan objects.

Jacques seems to consider, then says, "Okay ~ one at a time." He turns back to Billy. "You first."

"Why me?"

"Because you are the more docile subject."

"Docile?" Billy repeats, with a vacant look.

"Easier." Jacques gives him a cockily serious look.

Billy considers briefly, then says, "Well, okay, as long as you don't make me do anything stupid." He looks at Alan appealingly. "Make sure he doesn't."

"Okay," says Alan.

Billy stops again.

"What will it feel like?"

"Don't worry," says Jacques, "you won't feel a thing. It'll be like sleeping! But even better ~ you'll be living your dream."

Billy looks satisfied at that idea. "All right. What do I do?"

"Just sit down there and get very relaxed."

Billy sits gingerly on the edge of an overstuffed chair and stares up at Jacques. Alan pulls back a few feet to watch.

Billy has a quivering look on his face, partly anxious, partly pleading. He glances, plaintively, at his old friend Alan but getting no help from that side, gazes back at Jacques, his eyes dodging uneasily across Jacques's face.

Jacques's expression closes briefly as his eyes lock on Billy's. Or it tries to: he can't quite hide a look of malice and glee poking from behind his deadpan lips, his solemn eyes, his pert, pug nose.

He drags up the coffee table and sits on it.

"If you break . . . !" Billy cries out.

"Sh!" commands Jacques.

He stares at Billy solemnly; Billy stares back at Jacques, seemingly paralyzed. He gulps. Jacques also gulps. His shoulders suddenly slacken; Jacques also slackens his shoulders.

"Now," says Jacques, in a soft voice, "relax. Relax. Relax . . . Relax . . . relax" His voice trails off.

Billy licks his lips; after a moment, Jacques licks his own.

"Now . . . " Jacques speaks gently, almost tenderly. "Into my eyes, see."

Billy stares into his hypnotist's eyes, then suddenly blows him a kiss. He starts giggling; Alan laughs.

"This is ser-i-ous!" Jacques shouts in a despotic whine.

"Okay!" says Billy. He settles down and stares again into Jacques's eyes. Suddenly he blushes, but keeps staring.

Jacques raises the key chain in front of Billy's face and begins swinging the keys in a slow arc.

"See the keys as they swing." Jacques speaks quietly, his voice rhythmic and gentle. "Hear my voice. The keys are pretty, the room is warm, my voice is calm. Isn't my voice calm? Notice how calm is my voice, how calm is the air, how calm is the sound of the rain against the windows"

Alan becomes aware of the sound of the rain and glances at the water-streaked glass.

Suddenly Billy takes a deep breath, holds it for a moment, then slowly exhales. Jacques stops speaking and follows him, breathing in, holding it a moment, then exhaling. He continues, calmly, slowly.

Billy's eyes are glued to the keys swinging a few inches from his face.

"Your eyes are heavy, they are getting heavier, they feel like there are weights on your eyelids, they are pulling your eyelids down over your eyes."

Alan sees Billy's eyelids flutter as if from sleepiness, twitch and flutter, then suddenly open wide and suddenly close.

"There, there," says Jacques, "there, you are almost there, you are almost there."

Jacques breaks into a radiant grin of self-satisfaction.

"Now," he continues, still in a slow, soothing voice, "now you see in front of you a baseball diamond. You are standing at home plate, and you have to walk across the diamond to second base. You can see the diamond clearly in front of you, with the pitcher's mound and the pitcher's plate and the white bags, dirty and torn, of the bases, and the green outfield beyond the diamond. It is a hot day, there is not a cloud in the sky. The playing field is empty, the stands are empty, only you are there. Now, imagine yourself

walking toward second base from home plate. You walk slowly, calmly. With each step, you go a little deeper into the trance. You walk, one slow step at a time, across the diamond. Deeper . . . deeper . . . into the trance. . . . Deeper . . . deeper . . . You cross the diamond. You cross the gravel and the green of the grass. You feel the sun on your head, on your shoulders, on your face. It is so hot today, you are sweating. You hear a bird singing on a telephone wire near the stands. You feel the soft grass under your feet and a soft breeze against your face. When you get to second base, you will be in a deep trance. You walk slowly across the diamond. You are almost there. You are surrounded by the green field. You are under a clear blue sky. Nod your head once when you get to the second base."

Jacques stops and stares at Billy's face with a triumphant look. Billy's head droops. His lips open slackly. Then, after a long wait, Billy nods, with almost unbearable slowness.

"He's under!" Jacques calls out gleefully.

Billy's mouth hangs open and a bubbly thread of drool dribbles down his chin. His forehead is beaded with sweat. A single tear clings to his left eyelid.

"Now you are asleep!" Jacques can barely keep the crowing out of his voice. "You will do whatever I tell you. Do you hear me?"

He looks at Alan with a glare of victory, as if to say, "See what I can do, see what I can do to your friend!"

"Yes," Billy says in a drawling monotone.

"What did I just say?"

"That I will do ~ whatever you say."

"That's right! And you will not remember doing it after you wake up. Repeat it."

"And I will not ~ remember ~ doing it ~ after I wake up."

"Good! You are an excellent subject. I give you an A! Now we will try some tricks."

Jacques pauses, apparently wondering what he should try to do with Billy. He vigorously scratches his curly head. Again he glances at Alan.

"I know! It is hot on the diamond, you are sweating. Raise your arm!"

Billy raises his arm.

"Someone is coming up to you. He is carrying a bucket of ice. He takes out an ice cube and puts it against your arm. It feels so good after all the heat from the sun. It feels blissful."

Billy smiles.

"But he holds it there too long, now you are cold, now you are shivering . . ."

And Billy starts to shiver. Jacques looks down at Billy's arm, then points to it to Alan, as if to say, "See what I have done!"

Alan sees Billy's arm covered with goosebumps as he shivers and his teeth shake.

"He takes the ice cube away! You no longer feel cold! You feel fine!"

Billy stops shivering, and the goosebumps disappear.

"Now," says Jacques, "now, I want you to bark like a dog!"

"Arf! Arf!" goes Billy. "Arf!"

"You are a big dog! A German shepherd!"

"Woof! Woof!"

"Now you are a little dog, a Yorkshire terrier!"

"Yip! Yip! Yip!"

"Now you are whining because your owner will not let you go outside to play with the other dogs!"

And Billy whines, sounding just like Alan's old dog, Precious, who would whine whenever she was teased.

"Now you are a dog wanting to play! Get down on all fours!"

Billy does so. He rocks back and forth on his arms and legs.

"Roll over on your back with your legs in the air, like a dog that wants its belly scratched!"

Billy rolls over and sticks his arms and legs in the air.

"Now pant! Pant like a dog!"

Billy pants, his arms and legs still in the air. His tongue sticks out, drool dribbles from his mouth.

"Now you are a cat begging for dinner!"

Billy rolls over on his arms and legs and starts to crawl around the rug.

"Me-ew! Me-ew!" he goes.

He rubs against Jacques' legs, raising his face pleadingly.

"Me-ew!"

"Now you are a kitten playing with a piece of string!"

Billy suddenly tumbles over the rug, then curls up around an imaginary string, biting at it.

"Mi-iw! Mi-iw, mi-iw!" he goes.

"Another kitten tries to take the string away from you!"

Billy hisses at the imaginary kitten.

"You fight the other kitten!"

Billy rolls around the floor, hissing and scratching.

"Now you are a big cat, a big Tom, and you are fighting another big Tom over your territory and your females!"

Suddenly Billy's growls and hisses grow strident and harsh, and he rocks around the room, knocking over a chair and throwing the rugs in disarray.

Jacques is almost weeping with laughter and triumph as he dances around the room, dodging Billy's snarling attacks. Alan watches in fascination.

"Stop! Freeze!" Jacques suddenly shouts.

Billy freezes, his hand like a claw about to strike, his teeth glaring like fangs, his throat gurgling angrily.

Jacques stops and stares at Billy frozen, nearly off-balance. Jacques walks around him, appraising him from various angles as though examining a statue. He grins; he strokes his chin. He looks at Alan. "How

long you think he can stand like that?"

Alan takes a guess. "Three minutes?"

Jacques's grin turns to disgust.

"Three minutes!" he repeats, mimicking Alan. "Three hours!" He looks back at his handiwork. "He will be very stiff when he wakes up!"

Billy is already beginning to quiver. Saliva starts drooling again from his open mouth.

Suddenly Jacques commands "Relax!" Billy goes limp and slumps to the floor, panting.

"Maybe it's time to wake him up," Alan says, uneasily.

"One more trick!" says Jacques.

"Billy!" he says, turning back to his subject. "Sit up!"

Billy immediately pulls himself up.

Jacques squats, facing him. Alan kneels on one of the tousled rugs.

"Billy," says Jacques, "you are going to go back in time. You are going to go back one year at a time. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am ~ going to go ~ back ~ in time ~ one year ~ at a time."

"Good! At my count of three, you will go back one year at a time. One, two, three! You are twelve. . . . You are eleven. . . . You are ten. . . .

You are nine. . . . You are seven. . . . You are six. . . ."

Billy's face slackens and droops as Jacques speaks.

"How old are you, Billy?"

Billy's face rises, shyly.

"Six," he says, in a small voice.

"What grade are you in?"

"First grade."

"Do you like your teacher?"

Billy blushes.

"Oh! Billy's in love with teacher! It's true, it's true! Are you in love with your teacher?"

Billy pouts, silent, a deep red blush covering his cheeks. His face twists in a kind of angry panic.

"Okay, Billy, now you are going to go back in time even more! At my count of three, you will go back one year at a time. One, two, three! You are five. . . . You are four. . . . You are three. . . ."

Billy's face seems to grow even younger. His cheeks seem to fill out, his eyes, still closed, seem to grow rounder under their lids.

"Hi, Billy! Say, 'Hi!'"

Billy gives back a little child's high-pitched "Hi!"

"Oh, Billy's a big boy! Isn't Billy a big boy! Isn't Billy a big boy!"

Billy giggles and shakes as if tickled.

Suddenly Billy repeats, in a squeaky childlike voice, "Big boy, big boy!" And he waves his arms like a toddler not entirely sure of his balance.

"Where's Mommy? Where's Mommy?"

"Mommy? Mommy?" Billy says, with a grave look. He seems to grope around him, his arms still waving, his mouth working in contortions of uncertainty, his eyes (still closed) looking for something. Then it strikes him. "Mom-my! Mom-my!" And Billy bursts into a wail and a torrent of drool and tears.

Nearly beside himself with laughter, Jacques has jumped up, pulling back from the windmill of waving arms from this teenager flailing away like a toddler. The room overflows with the wailing of the grown-up baby and the hysterical laughter from Jacques, and from Alan too. After pulling himself together, but still weak with laughter, Jacques commands: "Billy! Be quiet!"

And Billy immediately becomes quiet.

"Now you are even younger. You are two. . . . You are one. . . . You are six months old. . . . You are in your crib. What do you do when you are alone in your crib? Do what you do when you are alone in your crib!"

After a brief pause, Billy curls up on the rug, sticks his thumb in his mouth and, with his other hand, begins to rub his genitals.

Jacques turns purple. He staggers around the room, gasping with laughter. He stops and watches Billy, sucking his thumb and feebly masturbating on the rug, then falls into another laughing fit. Then he turns to

Alan as if displaying his work to an audience. Alan feels paralyzed, unable to decide how he should react. He laughs weakly.

"Maybe you should wake him up now?" he asks feebly.

Jacques pauses in mid-laugh and seems to consider.

"No. No!" he says. "One more trick!

"Billy!" he commands. "You are going to advance in age, one year at a time. You are one. . . . You are two. . . . You are three. . . ." And he counts until: "You are twelve. . . . You are at home in Philadelphia. You are alone, your parents are away. They have let you stay at home for the first time without a babysitter, they say you are too old to need a babysitter, you are almost grown up!"

Billy has stopped and now sits erect on the rug when Jacques tells him he is twelve. He listens intently to Jacques.

"Your parents trust you. They think you can take care of yourself. They trust that you will not burn down the house! So you have the house entirely to yourself. You are free to do anything you want to do! Anything you want to do! Anything you want" ~ Jacques draws closer to Billy's face as he speaks, and these last words he whispers almost into his ear ~ "to do!"

Billy seems apprehensive; his eyes flutter behind their lids.

"Do you remember that day, Billy?" Jacques speaks gently,

almost in a whisper, drawing back from him. "It was not so long ago. Do you remember what you did?"

Billy violently shakes his head.

"Yes, Billy ~ yes! You remember! I know you remember. You are there, in the empty house, it is raining outside, you can hear the rain beating softly against the window . . ."

Again Alan becomes acutely aware of the rain hitting the windows nearby. This time he feels no impulse to look: he imagines them more clearly than he could possibly see them.

" . . . you listen, satisfied that you are alone completely, no one can see you, no one can hear you. Your parents will be out for the rest of the afternoon, you will have the house to yourself for many hours. So. You begin to walk up the stairs to the second floor . . ."

Billy begins to whimper softly.

" . . . up, up the stairs, softly, gently, one step at a time . . . you are safe, nobody can see you, nobody can hear you, nobody will ever know what you will do, nobody will ever find out!"

Billy starts trembling violently.

". . . up . . . up . . .
Billy . . . up . . ."

Alan watches, fascinated: he wants to know what is going to happen next, what Billy is going to do ~ but the uneasiness he has felt all afternoon hits

him forcefully. Something wrong is happening; he and Jacques are about to find out something neither of them should know.

"Maybe you should stop," he says. "You're hurting him."

Jacques looks disdainfully at Alan.

"He is hurting himself."

Billy is shaking and shivering, with a look of alarm, almost panic, on his face. The armpits of his shirt are dark with sweat. His breath comes out in whimpers and pants, and he shakes his head, back and forth, mechanically, as if trying to say "no, no, no," like an anxious doll.

Jacques looks at Alan with a serene look of accomplishment. After a moment, he shrugs and turns back to Billy.

"Billy," says Jacques, "Billy: you are on a sunny beach. You are under a warm sun. A cool breeze blows in from the sea. You can hear the sounds of other kids playing on the beach. They shout, they laugh. Lie back and feel the sun and the breeze and listen to the waves and the shouting and laughter down the beach."

Almost immediately, Billy stops shaking. He takes a deep breath and lies back, a look of bliss on his face, in an abandoned sprawl across the floor's torn rugs.

Jacques looks coolly again at Alan.

"Well?"

Alan gazes wonderingly at his friend, suddenly the image of bliss.

"Do you want to try it?"

Alan glances at Jacques with alarm. His first impulse is to say "No way!" But the harsh code of boyhood dictates that one always accepts a challenge, even when one is afraid ~ especially when one is afraid.

Against the voice inside him shouting, "Don't do it!" he says, with a cocky shrug, "Sure," while thinking, *I saw what you did. I'll only pretend to be hypnotized.*

Jacques crawls over to him and raises the keychain with its three keys in front of his eyes. Billy sighs blissfully where he is lying on the rug. The keys begin to swing.

Jacques is a good hypnotist, no doubt, but he seems to have only way to "work" a subject: he says, to Alan, the same things, in the same order, that he said to Billy. Jacques made a mistake (Alan thinks): he hypnotized Billy so easily partly because Billy trusts Jacques. But Alan doesn't trust Jacques as far as he can throw him. Alan has reached the point where he wouldn't have believed Jacques if he had said the sun had risen that morning; in fact, it was only at this moment he realizes just how deep his distrust of the French boy goes.

Alan paid close attention to how Jacques hypnotized Billy; he also paid close attention to how Billy behaved in a trance. And he decides to use what he has learned to fool Jacques into thinking he too has "gone under."

He listens to Jacques's falsely soothing words as he watches the keys swing on the chain; he feels himself growing sleepy and heavy, but catches himself before slipping under ~ instead, he closes his eyes at the first sign of sleepiness, then lowers his head in a droop.

It's working. Jacques, so intoxicated by his success with Billy, pays no attention to the fact that Alan has gone under far too quickly. And Jacques immediately begins to "deepen" the trance he thinks Alan is in, using the same baseball diamond scene he used for Billy: a silly idea anyway, and based on Jacques's mistaken idea that all Americans love baseball ~ Billy is a passionate fan, but Alan only cares about the cards. Alan secretly pinches the skin on his thigh to keep himself awake.

" . . . Now," says Jacques, "nod when you reach the second base."

Alan lets his head droop almost to his chest, lets his mouth open and his saliva drool. After waiting what feels like the right time, he slowly nods his head.

Jacques says nothing at first, and Alan wonders if he was fooled. Then Jacques sighs and giggles: he sounds satisfied, even delighted, with his work.

Suddenly Alan feels Jacques's mouth almost against his ear.

"Excellent!" whispers Jacques. "You are an excellent subject!"

Alan can smell Jacques's breath, and winces slightly.

"Now we are going to have a little game," whispers Jacques. "Just the three of us. You and Billy and me."

Alan feels his face go hot.

"You will not remember anything I tell you to do. Nothing we do will you remember. It will pass away like a dream!"

Why is he whispering to him? . . . Why isn't he telling Billy? . . . What is he up to? . . .

He hears Jacques crawl across the rug; then lets his eyelids open a crack and watches as Jacques leans over and whispers in Billy's ear.

Jacques stands up, looking back and forth between Alan and Billy, his face flushed.

"Alan," he says, "get up on your hands and knees!"

Alan does so, uneasily.

"Crawl over to Billy!"

Slowly, he crawls up to his old friend's side.

"Now," Jacques says, almost beside himself with excitement, "Billy: take off your clothes!"

Billy shakes his head violently.

"Alan!" Jacques says, still excitedly. "Take off your clothes!"

Alan follows Billy and shakes his head violently as well.

"Okay, don't then!" says Jacques. "Lie down next to each other!"

Uncertainly, the two boys do so, gingerly. Alan can feel his old friend lying at full

length by his side. Through his slit eyelids, he can see Billy's disturbed yet excited face next to his; Billy shakes his head feebly.

"Now," Jacques says, softly, "touch each other!"

The two boys shake their heads but don't waken.

Alan suddenly feels Jacques take his hand and place it on Billy's jeans, near the crotch. He can feel Billy's penis pressing, as it tries to rise erect, against the denim. Alan tries to yank his hand back but it is held firmly in Jacques's grip. Billy's penis throbs gently against the fabric.

He looks down: an eel is writhing in his hand. Far from being horrified or disgusted, he is fascinated. Jacques's hand holds his own firmly, and his hand holds the eel, which turns and fights for escape futilely, angrily. It turns into a rope, then into a poker, then into a porcupine with bristling spines, then it turns into a sea anemone, its mouth sucking at the air, writhing in slow motion, phosphorescent in the darkness. The room is dark and watery, he is at the bottom of a pool, streams of dim sunlight pierce the turbid water. A shadow hovers over him, speaking softly in the dimness, the words bubble and swirl, he can't hear them well, he tries to reply but the water seals his mouth.

Suddenly the shadow rises, and he sees his aunt's face, her worried suspicious eyes, she is speaking and her words bubble

and fizz in the water and rise toward the surface. Then it turns into his mother, shaking her head with a look of disappointment, then the far-away look his father gave him when he was thinking of something else, something else, something else . . . then he sees Jacques, grinning and grasping for his hand. He slips his hand back and pulls away and begins kicking toward the surface, far above, and Jacques's face disappears in a cloud of sand, and the surface seems to withdraw ever farther away as he struggles to rise, pushing and pulling at the water like a frog. Farther away, farther away. Then a stab of brilliant sunlight shoots through the water, and he sees the shadow of someone standing in the air, looking straight down at him and leaning close to the surface, a shadow against the light from the sky, breaking and melting and running together like the flames in a fireplace.

Suddenly a current yanks him and pulls him swiftly away into the darkness of the deeper water, far out.

He opens his eyes. He's lying in the sun near the edge of the cliff. The rain has stopped, and he lies in a patch of wet sand near an outcrop not far from the pavilion. The sun is close to the horizon, and the long summer evening is throwing long shadows across land and ocean.

So he was under. What a fool he'd been to think he could pretend to be in a trance. He pulls himself up: Jacques is standing beside Billy, speaking softly in his ear as they walk together along the cliff edge.

He watches them closely. What happened at Billy's house after he blacked out? How had they gotten here? What had Jacques done with them? Had he made them sleep together? What had happened?

Will he ever know? Alan had thought he wasn't hypnotized; clearly he had been without realizing it. What if he still is?

Quietly he pulls himself up and sneaks toward Jacques and Billy. The two other boys stand close to the cliff edge, looking out to sea. Jacques is pointing something out to Billy, whose eyes are open, wide and glassy, facing the horizon.

Jacques points, then whispers in Billy's ear, points, then whispers.

What if he will always be under this spell, without his being able to know for certain whether he is or not? And what about Billy? Are the two boys now "in thrall" (the old-fashioned phrase booming like the closing of a prison cell) to the French boy? For how long? Forever?

Suddenly Alan slips in the wet salt grass and falls with a cry.

Jacques turns toward him.

Alan switches over on his side to see Billy drop over the

edge of the cliff and Jacques, prone on the ground, his leg at a strange angle, cocked near the cliff edge, and staring at the space Billy's form had just occupied.

Billy's long yell blends with the sound of the surf at the cliff's base, sharp for a long moment before dying in the noise of the water.

Alan crawls over, leans carefully over the cliff edge, staring down. But there's nothing to see except foaming turbulence and rocks. He scans the water and feels the wind blowing up the cliff face, combing through his hair, and thinks, irrelevantly, of the grotto he visited earlier; it must be full by now, under high tide, must be full by now, under high tide, be full now, under high tide, he thinks obsessively, even as his eyes probe the wash for any sign . .

.

"He's a good swimmer," he shouts in the wind rushing up the cliff wall, "maybe he's . .
."

Jacques says nothing.

He looks up. Jacques is staring at him with his prodding, needle-small eyes. Jacques's face is frozen in a mask ~ mocking, aghast; victorious, accusing; brutal, innocent ~ and he raises his hand toward Alan, warding him off and beckoning him on, denying him and appealing to him, warning him and judging him.

. . . like the booming of a
prison cell . . .

He gapes into Jacques's
face, huge as an autumn moon
slipping up from the horizon,
and hears, deep inside his ear,
the words, whispered, soothing,
calm: *Into my eyes . . . see.*

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