DREAMSPEAKER

CAM HUBERT


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For Alex
Erin
Pierre
Jo
with love, and with thanks.

And with special gratitude to the Nootka people, especially the people of the village of Ahousat, for sharing with me their stories, their lives, and their truths. James Adams, Mary Little, David Frank, Peter Webster, and John Jacobson have been particularly loving and supportive, and to them, their children, their grandchildren, and the children of Ahousat, this story, and much love.

1

A long segmented snake of traffic moved toward the city, the rush-hour fumes already tainting the face of a morning sun. A blue Pontiac segment, a red Toyota, an orange Datsun, piece by piece, section by section, the serpent twined toward the city and the tall concrete buildings with view windows looking out on other view windows across the canyon that was the street. And leaving the city, moving down the other half of the freeway past the segmented serpent, one or two at a time, a few suburbs-bound cars, one of them a conservative dark sedan with the door decal of the provincial government.

The boy Peter sat pressed tightly against the back of the front seat, his eyes only half focusing on the serpent sliding past on the other half of the freeway. On either side of him, the people: the driver, big, heavy, with cold gray eyes and hands built for grabbing and holding. Hands with fine, light-coloured hairs growing down the backs, down his fingers to the first joint, and his fingernails clipped short, like little shovels at the end of his long, thick fingers. And the woman, not big, not small, not young, not old, her dark hair brushed away from her face, here and there some gray hairs showing.

I could move fast, grab the handle with my left hand, shove it down and at the same time shove her with my right hand and she'd fly off the seat and out the door and maybe get run over by the car behind us . . . but that would leave him . . . the big hand would just reach out and grab. No chance of shoving him out the door. . . . He could feel the driver's eyes flick sideways, knew the gray ice eyes were registering his every breath. *Nothing to watch here, asshole, just me, sitting here as good as gold, watching the snake coming toward us. . . . Just Peter, out for a morning ride, that's all. . . .* He knew his face showed nothing. His hands were under control and wouldn't betray him.

The woman smiled down at the little boy. Light brown hair, almost blond, his skin so pale that the fine blue veins showed at the temples. A good face, undeniably Anglo-Saxon, the child all white middle-class parents hope will be theirs. Strong, even teeth, shoulders already widening, chest full and promising an adult strength and endurance.

She opened her purse, took out a package of Doublemint gum, pulled one stick partway out of the package and offered it to Pe-

ter. His green eyes took in the stick of gum, flicked to her face, then back to the gum. One hand reached out, took the gum; his lips moved to whisper "Thank you," and he stared at the gum. She held the package toward the driver who reached over with one hand, took a stick, nodded his thanks, and, one-handed, unwrapped the gum and put it in his mouth. His jaws moved strongly as he looked down at the boy, who was still staring at the stick of gum.

Peter began to unwrap his gum, pulling the silver foil wrapped stick from within the green envelope. He put the green paper carefully on his lap, unwrapped the silver paper and laid it beside the green. Precisely, slowly, he folded the stick of gum in half, then in half again, and then he lifted the gum to his lips, opened his mouth, slid the gum inside and began to chew, almost mechanically, his thin throat swallowing the minty saliva. His hands, of their own accord, carefully folded the silver foil as if the stick of gum were still inside, then just as carefully slid the silver foil back into the green envelope. Precisely, betraying his nervousness, the fingers folded the paper in two, then again, until finally he had a small squarish ball of paper which he dropped carefully into the ashtray.

Then he sat back, pressed against the back of the front seat, his eyes staring out the window, his jaws moving rhythmically, almost daintily, his eyes glazing over with the curiously blank stare he wore so often. Eyes unfocused, as if blotting out something he didn't want to see, couldn't be bothered to watch.

The car turned off the freeway, speeding down the exit ramp, turning along the secondary highway.

Anna watched Peter hiding behind his own eyes, remembered the first time she had seen him. Four years old then, his hair hanging shaggy and uncombed past his shoulders, his face thin and smudged with several days' dirt and tears, his clothes smelly and unwashed, too small for him, his overalls held up with pins where the snaps were gone on the shoulder straps. He was barefoot, and when they stripped him down to give him a bath they found a disgustingly filthy diaper ripped from what had once been an old crib sheet. His scrawny buttocks had been covered with diaper rash, deep-pitted pustules amid hot red chafed skin, and his penis swollen with ammonia burns, the head of the penis raw, the shaft pimpled and oozing. When they sat him in a bathtub he wept with pain.

His feet had been thick with callus, his legs flaky with dry skin she thought was eczema. The doctor said no, it was poor diet, dirt

and probably dehydration as well. They soaked him in the tub for five or ten minutes, then scrubbed him with strong green soap, ignoring his weeping, scrubbing the pustules even though they bled, and then they washed his hair to be rid of the lice they knew were crawling on his scalp.

When the rinse water cascaded over his face, Peter quit sobbing and looked amazed, even tried to grin.

An hour later, dressed in new clothes, his backside liberally smeared with an antibiotic cream, his hair hanging over his forehead and fluffing out from his face, he sat on a chair in her office and stuffed himself with a McDonald's hamburger, vanilla milkshake and a cookie.

Very little was known about Peter prior to that day. A birth certificate had been found in the mess that was the basement suite in which he had been living. There was no sign of an immunization record, so they had started him on all the shots immediately. His father had apparently abandoned the family at least a year earlier; the mother was vague as to when he had left and where he had gone. Shaking in withdrawal, she had managed to say The bastard took off, what more do you want to know, chrissakes, I'm sick.

Later, when she was over the withdrawal period and receiving medication in the women's section of the prison, she had told them more. At the time it was a new and shocking story to Anna, fresh out of university and new to the job, but in the years since she had heard this story or versions of it so often she no longer really listened.

A drab, fundamentalist childhood, poor school record, and, at fifteen, a runaway. Several casual liaisons with men whose names she didn't remember, two somewhat longer relationships, then, at nineteen, she moved in with the man she said was Peter's father. Alcohol and sex, then drugs and sex, and then both of them were addicted and she was working the streets, trying to feed both their habits while he worked the apartments and houses left vacant when the owners or renters went off to work. Between what he stole and she hooked, they had managed to get from fix to fix.

And then he left. She didn't know why, she didn't know where, and she didn't care.

Peter was alone in the apartment most of the time. She would leave the television going, sometimes remember to leave sandwiches and an open can of soup and a spoon, but often she didn't remember and he went hungry. Her life was a constant search for men, money and heroin. Men and money important only in that

they were her access to heroin. Peter didn't count except that having him she was eligible for welfare, because of him she was assured of some money, however little.

The government vehicle moved down the secondary highway, the traffic lessening, the city giving way to fields and brush. Peter sat, hands folded loosely in his lap, eyes still unfocused, putting in time until they got where they were going. She patted his knee gently, and a brief smile flicked across his face. The driver looked at her expressionlessly and she wondered if he knew anything of what she was feeling.

Peter had been placed temporarily with a foster family and in the few weeks with them he had gained weight, developed some colour in his cheeks and even begun to learn how to play with other children. It was a temporary placement, however, and after he had been officially apprehended for his own protection and placed in wardship, a more permanent arrangement was found for him with another family. A few months later the foster mother became ill and the children placed with her had to be transferred to other homes. Peter didn't fit in as well in his third foster home and it was necessary to place him in a home with fewer children, a home where the foster mother could spend more time with him, particularly trying to toilet train him.

By the time Peter was six he had been in nine foster homes, his toilet training was incomplete, he regularly wet the bed at night and he was subject to sudden, unexplained temper tantrums.

His mother had never visited him in the years since his apprehension and was presently serving a three-year sentence for prostitution and trafficking in narcotics.

The car slowed, turned to the left and rolled up to the high gates that opened to let the car through, then closed behind it again. The car moved up the driveway toward the cluster of buildings and pulled to a halt in front of the administration office.

Peter waited until the woman had opened her door and got out of the car. She stood by the still-open door, waiting. The driver got out, closed his door, then stood beside it looking with satisfaction around the facility. After a moment, Peter slid across the seat and climbed out of the car. For one brief moment he tensed to run; then he relaxed and turned, instead, to the stairs leading up to the aluminum and glass door. *No good running, you wouldn't get ten steps and that big bugger would have you....*

The woman put her hand on his shoulder, gently, and walked with him up the front steps and through the door to the long hall-

way. The driver came behind them, effectively blocking any chance of escape.

The man sitting behind the desk was middle-aged and the smile on his face was reflected in his eyes. The woman sat down and handed the man the thick file she had been carrying. The driver sat down near the door and waited for Peter to try to run away. Peter sat down in a chair next to the woman and waited.

The man behind the desk talked briefly to the woman. What they were saying didn't interest the boy and he let his eyes unfocus, hiding inside himself, his hands idle on his lap again, his face appearing empty. After some minutes the man looked briefly through the file and for a moment Peter's eyes registered the movement of paper, but that, too, had no interest for him and he retreated again to that place where nobody could bother him.

Sometimes he sat like that from one meal to another, and if anyone touched him or spoke to him, he would focus his eyes and come back from where he had been, but when they asked him what he'd been thinking, he couldn't answer. One of the mothers had told him it wasn't possible for a person to think about Nothing, that the brain was working all the time; even when you were asleep you had to be thinking about Something. He supposed this was just another of the ways he was different. Entire days of his life were spent not thinking about anything at all. Sometimes sitting, sometimes standing, all he had to do was unfocus his eyes and time passed by without touching him.

"Come along, Peter." The man came from behind his desk and touched Peter on the shoulder. The boy stood automatically. The driver got up off his chair and cursed softly when he saw the chewing gum stuck to his pants. Peter pretended he didn't know where the gum had come from and followed the man from the office to the hallway. The woman came over to him then and half knelt, her face inches from his, her eyes demanding that he listen.

"I want you to write me little notes, like you used to. Will you do that for me?"

He nodded because it was what she wanted him to do and he always tried to please her. She was one of the few constants in a changing world. Sooner or later, whatever else happened, he would see her, even if only for a few minutes, and she would talk to him just as if he was anybody else and not himself at all.

She pulled him close and gave him a strong cuddle, not one of those squeezey things some people give when they don't really want to touch you but feel they ought to. "You mustn't worry about things, Peter, everything is going to be fine." She smiled

and he wanted to smile back, but couldn't. "We'll keep in touch and in a little while I'll come down and we'll spend an afternoon together, okay?"

Her eyes were sad and he wished he could tell her not to worry. He wished he could touch her, just once, softly, but he couldn't. It wasn't always allowed, and it might be all right for adults to touch a kid, but kids couldn't do things like that to adults unless they knew it was wanted. So his arms hung at his sides and the woman stood up quickly and headed for the doors. She turned with her hand on the door, smiled at him and waved, and he made his arm come halfway up and made his fingers wiggle good-bye, but he still couldn't make his face smile.

At the cottage he was introduced to another man, John, a young man with a big grin, a white tee shirt, blue jeans, white socks and white leather running shoes with three blue stripes on the side. Black hair and almost black eyes, the whiskers on his face shaved off, but you could see the pattern of the beard under his skin. His beard was almost blue, like the tail of a rooster Peter had seen in the zoo.

"Hi, Peter," John said easily, "I'm John and I'm your counsellor. That's sort of like saying I'm the boss, I guess, but I'm not, really." Peter nodded. There wasn't anything to say and there wasn't anything else he could think of doing, so he waited. John talked for a while with the man from the office, and then the man left, probably to go back and sit behind his desk, and John led Peter to the room that was to be his.

A neutral room, white ceiling, cream-coloured walls, the floor covered with dark brown heavy-duty linoleum tile. A single bed, a dresser and a closet. The drapes and counterpane, patterned with hockey players chasing pucks at random, were meant to add a more comfortable, home-like touch, but, Peter noticed, there wasn't even a hint of a goal or a goaltender. He stared at the drapes. He would have liked to have shared the joke with John, but he wasn't sure John would understand. You had to be careful what you said or people would think you were odd. He'd learned that word from one of the mothers—he couldn't remember which mother. A good short word that said it all: odd.

They left his shopping bag of things on his bed and John laid his arm across Peter's shoulders, which is just another way of leading you around, but at least better than holding your hand as if you were a baby. Peter didn't really want to leave his shopping bag behind; what if someone went in the room and took something? He had an old ball glove in there and some comic books and

an empty tobacco can. Well, empty of tobacco, but the can was full of bits and pieces of crayon, stubs of pencil and even a small green sharpener. What if someone went in and stole it? If he said that, he knew, John would try to reassure him, like the guy at summer camp who stared with round blue eyes and said Oh, we don't steal from each other here, Peter, we're a family. Someone in the family had taken his bullwhip made from kelp, and his collection of shells, and even his spare running shoes and they had never found any of it, even though the runners had his name marked on them with laundry ink. Peter was pretty sure it was the kid with the blond hair hanging to his shoulders, the one with thick glasses with heavy black frames, but he couldn't prove anything.

The man at the supply room gave Peter two pair of gray denim pants, three denim shirts, also gray, and three sets of underwear—jockey shorts and singlet—mercifully not gray but plain white cotton. Six pair of black socks, a pair of ugly black shoes without laces. Not loafers, they were called romeos, and Peter knew they were worn by fishermen and tugboat workers. Black runners for sports and white gym shorts, a white tee shirt and a black bathing suit. Two pyjamas, light blue, a black denim jacket and a gray sweater. In return for which he took all of Peter's clothes and put them in a box, closed the box, wrote Peter's name and a number on it, then stored the box in a cupboard full of other boxes with other names. The two men waited while Peter got dressed in facility clothes, then they went back to his room, he and John, and John waited while Peter put his clothes away in the dresser and closet.

The boy took a long time putting away his clothes. Jeans Just So, the side seams carefully together, the jeans hung over a hanger as if they were dress pants fresh back from the cleaners. The shirts folded Just So and put in a drawer. The sweater in the same drawer as the shirts. Pyjamas in another drawer. Underwear and socks in the top drawer. Jacket hung in the closet, Just So. When everything was put away the boy gravely checked to be sure that things were, in fact, Just So, then he turned and faced the door, waiting. John was struck by the curiously machine-like attitude of the boy, a robot waiting for a button to be pushed so the printed circuits could mesh and move the arms and legs.

The doctor checked the boy thoroughly: heart, lungs, eyes, ears. He palpitated the boy's abdomen and thumped his back, tested his elbows and knees for reflexes, looked down his throat, even put on a rubber glove, lubricated the middle finger and ex-

plored the boy's anus. Through it all the boy gave every impression of being somewhere else, his eyes unfocused, his face carefully blank. The doctor took blood from the boy's inner elbow, more blood from the tip of his finger, then handed the boy a small bottle and pointed wordlessly to a doorway. Peter took the bottle and moved carefully across the room, opened the door and went into the bathroom.

Checking over the medical report, the doctor noted out loud that all these tests had been done a number of times before, the latest less than a week earlier when the boy had been apprehended by the police.

The boy came from the washroom with the small bottle half full of urine. Carefully he placed the bottle on the desk, then he stood, waiting patiently, eyes again unfocused.

The dining room was already crowded with boys when Peter and John arrived. John explained the routine, but Peter already knew what to do, it was the same as at summer camp. He got a tray and stood in line, speaking to nobody, ignoring the sly glances, the whispers. He took a knife, fork and spoon from the segmented metal utensil container and laid them on his tray. A bowl of soup, then move a few steps and wait until the man in the white pants, white shirt, white apron and funny little white box-cap finished pouring gravy on the potatoes. Take the plate, put it on the tray, move to the next place, get a small plate with a breadbun and a pat of butter. Move to the next place, take a dessert and a large glass of milk, then move to where the messhall supervisor stood and wait until he pointed to a seat at a table.

John leaned against the wall of the dining room, watching. Peter placed the heavy tray on the table, then stepped over the bench and sat down slowly, ignoring the other boys. Carefully he picked up his paper napkin, arranged it Just So on his lap, one corner carefully tucked under the waistband of his jeans. The milk glass in the upper righthand corner where there was no chance of it getting spilled. Move the plate of dinner to the upper lefthand corner of the tray, the bowl of soup to the front of the tray. The knife and spoon on the right, the fork on the left. Butter the bread carefully. Everything Just So. And only when it was Just So, only then and no sooner, Peter began the serious business of eating his lunch, holding the spoon properly, spooning away from him, as was polite, one hand, his left hand, resting on his lap, politely, his head bent, spooning the soup carefully and paying no attention to anybody else.

A big boy, thirteen or fourteen years old at least, leaned across the table, grinning. Saying nothing, grinning tauntingly. He picked up the salt shaker and held it teasingly over Peter's soup. Peter ignored the boy, ignored the salt shaker, continued to eat. The big boy, aware that everyone was watching him, slowly tipped the salt shaker and several small streams of salt fell from the holes in the lid, fell into Peter's soup. Peter sat back quietly, and when the salt shaker was finally empty he very carefully moved his half-full bowl of soup to the upper lefthand corner of his tray and brought his plate of food to the place in front of him where the soup had been. He took a sip of milk, carefully wiped his mouth with his napkin, then, fork in left hand, knife in right hand, he meticulously cut a slice of meatloaf and lifted it to his mouth, chewing slowly, counting to himself.

Chew each bite one hundred times and you'll never get a bellyache. Some people said twenty times, some said thirty times, and one mother told him he had the one hundred times mixed up with brushing your hair before you went to bed at night, but he was sure that was what the other mother had told him, chew each bite one hundred times and you'll never get a bellyache.

The bigger boy watched Peter, his grin disappearing, his blue eyes narrowing, a faint pink growing on his cheeks. He wasn't used to having new fish ignore him, especially little new fish who fritzed and frutzed with their trays before starting to eat. He reached for a second salt shaker and again very deliberately tipped it, pouring salt on Peter's lunch.

The messhall supervisor moved quickly toward the table, but was intercepted by John. The boys at the surrounding tables were craning their necks, half-standing to watch. Peter was unaware of all that; he was chewing carefully, watching the big boy pouring salt on his dinner. Peter looked down at his plate, moving his knife and fork with dainty precision, and cut another piece of meatloaf. The bigger boy's eyes watched every move, followed the fork and its tidy burden of meatloaf and salt from the plate to Peter's mouth. Peter stared back at the boy for a moment, then carefully focused his gaze on the piece of meat, knowing the older boy's gaze was riveted there also.

Then he dropped both fork and meat. The older boy involuntarily flicked his eyes downward, watching the fork fall, and in that moment Peter's left hand shot forward, grabbed the soup bowl and threw it in his face. As the boy yelled and clawed at his eyes, Peter was across the table, his face strangely devoid of emotion, the sugar dispenser in his hand, hitting, hitting, hitting, his

eyes slightly narrowed, hitting, knocking the bigger boy off the bench and pounding his head on the floor, pounding and hitting. It was what you had to do or they'd never leave you alone, you had to show them you could stand up for yourself, teach them a bloody good lesson and they'll leave you alone. One of the fathers had told him that, and it always worked. One of the big brothers had shown him the fork trick, only the big brother had used a cigarette and a paper penny match and had said you had to know before you started where you were going to hit. Don't try to punch him in the nose, he had said, you'll only make his nose bleed. Aim for the back of his head and punch right through his nose to get there and you'll drop him every time. . . .

John grabbed Peter and lifted him off the already bleeding older boy. As Peter's feet touched the floor he whirled, ready to meet a new threat. When he saw John his arms went limp and he stood quietly, waiting, only his quick breathing betraying any emotion, his eyes unfocused again.

"It's okay, Peter," John said calmly. "He started it. Okay, Ted," he said to the bigger boy. "Get yourself down to the infirmary and get fixed up, then report to Mister Jensen. You others clean up this mess. Maybe next time you'll remember you spent your lunch hour cleaning up and you'll do something to stop it before it goes this far."

"What about my lunch?" Ted snarled, wiping blood from his top lip.

"You couldn't have been very hungry or you'd have been eating instead of instigating. Move!" And in that last word John brought to bear all the authority and power of a counsellor, and Ted moved away quickly; angry, shamed, knowing he wouldn't do anything about it, knowing the new fish had only been doing what had to be done.

"Go get your lunch, Peter," John said quietly, and Peter moved, obedient, and went to get a new tray.

Then he sat down in the same place at the same table, eating his lunch with unemotional precision, sitting in some kind of lonely dignity while the other boys cleaned up the mess from the fight. He knew they were watching him, but he also knew nobody else would bother him. For a while. They would wait, try to see if his defiance of Ted's bullying was real or something brought on by the tension of a new place, a new situation. He wasn't worried. He'd been through all this before. He knew you made your stand and laid out your ground and then you stuck to it and stuck up for yourself and made them learn to just leave you alone.

The locker room resounded with noise. The boys hurried out of their clothes, cavorting in undershorts, throwing shirts, wrestling for possession of towels, chasing each other around the room, leaping over benches, struggling against the lockers, laughing and shouting.

Peter took off his shoes and socks, tucked the socks inside the shoes and placed the shoes carefully in his assigned locker. He took off his jeans, folding them carefully, seams in line, and placed them on the shelf in the locker, then hung his shirt neatly on a hook. John watched carefully from his position near the far door. The undershirt folded on top of the jeans, Just So, the undershorts placed on top of the undershirt. Peter stepped into his bathing trunks, pulling the waist-string tight, tying it carefully.

He closed the locker door, snapping the combination lock shut and repeating to himself for the umpteenth time *six-left-four-right-all-the-way-around-to-five-to-open.* He went to stand by the doorway, watching the other boys wrestling and shouting, cramming their things into lockers, some of them not even bothering to lock their things away safely. When the Pool Warden came to the door and blew his whistle, the boys pushed past Peter to the high-ceilinged pool room and raced for the edge to dive into the water.

Peter walked carefully, obeying the No Running On Pool Deck sign, watching carefully so as not to slip on the wet polished tile. He moved to the diving board, climbed the steps, moved along the board and waited a moment for a group of splashing jokers to swim to one side of the pool, then dove neatly from the board and began to swim back and forth, back and forth, moving in the easy rhythm the instructor at camp had shown them, his head barely moving, his legs kicking strongly from the hip, back and forth from end to end, swimming, as he had been told to do.

Swimming until he was white-faced and breathing jerkily.

"Peter!" John called suddenly, and the boy moved obediently to the side of the pool. John reached down, grasped Peter's arm and pulled him from the water to sit at the edge of the pool, chest heaving, trembling with fatigue, eyes unfocused, face closed.

Moonlight pale through the bedroom window, the carefully neutral anonymity of the room made even more so by the cool, silvery rays. The boy lay curled on his side, his face younger than his eleven years, relaxed and unguarded in sleep.

The door to the room opened briefly and the night-duty attendant looked in, checked the boy briefly, then left again, closing the door with a slight click.

Peter's eyes opened. He wasn't sure what had wakened him. He lay quietly, hoping to go back to sleep right away. He looked at his hand, decided his fingers looked like petals curling from the centre of a flower. The window was partially open, the breeze coming through the heavy screen making the curtains seem to move, the hockey players endlessly chasing the puck, playing hockey with neither goal nor goalie. *Break away! he heads toward the crease, he winds up, he shoots—he can't score, there's no goal!*

A lightning bug. Only a lightning bug. Peter knew about lightning bugs, had read about them. They were small, some people called them fireflies, and they had them Back East. But how would a firefly or a lightning bug get through the wire mesh? Designed to keep boys in, it would certainly keep shiny bugs out.

Little dots, dancing, bobbing, and a sound like a cricket chirping or a grasshopper rubbing his legs together, or fingernails on a blackboard. Increasingly unpleasant, increasingly insistent, and the bright dots becoming a myriad, forming into a cone, inverting, changing shape, pulsating. . . . it was them again . . . and in the corners of the room the shadows gathering, gaining strength from each other, gathering and beginning to move from the corners.

Peter sat up in bed, staring, fright growing in his stomach. Every time the lights and the chirping started, something bad happened. Every time. He pressed against the headboard of the bed watching

ant-small Peter in the middle of the room, surrounded by gigantic forms stretching to the ceiling. A woman, face gaunt, eyes shadowed, screaming from an enormous mouth, her voice shrill and hysterical, screaming Why do you do things like this? . . . Can't you see what you're doing to me? . . . You know I'm not feeling well . . . and a huge man, his face twisted with rage, grabbing ant-Peter by the shoulder, shaking him, roaring Nothing but trouble since the day you were born, Christ, boy, but you're stupid. Policemen with big hands for grabbing and the woman with a file in her hands, mothers tsk-tsking and fathers shaking their heads, exchanging pitying glances with all the big brothers

and something coming from beneath the bed, something long and snake-like, leaving a wet trail on the floor, raising its horned heads, searching, looking both in front and behind, seeing where it was coming from and where it was going, looking hungrily

In the morning, of course, the bed was wet, the telltale stain on

the bottom sheet betraying Peter wordlessly, the wet pyjama bottoms further proof of his shame.

"Don't worry," John said easily, "we'll get fresh bedding and pyjamas and nobody but us will know about it. Tonight you'll have a rubber sheet. Now come on, breakfast is waiting."

2

Life in the facility moved from day to day, week to week. New boys arrived and a few boys left, two of the bigger boys ran away and spent several fun-filled days in town before being brought back by the police. They said they had got some girls to go with them to a place they knew, and their whispered stories of what had happened then made the other big boys grin and the smaller boys try hard not to appear puzzled. One boy cut his hand open in carpentry class and the doctor had to stitch him together again, and the psychiatrist came out to the facility to test some of the newer boys.

Peter was one of the boys to be tested. He had walked down the hallway with John, not knowing where he was going or why, and not caring. As soon as he saw the psychiatrist, though, he knew what was going to happen: it had all been done before. So he sat down in the indicated chair, took a couple of deep breaths, and went away for a while. John watched it happen. One moment the boy was his usual poker-faced self, green eyes betraying nothing, the next moment the green eyes were unfocused, blank, the face looked like that of a corpse, and the boy was staring past the desk, past the psychiatrist, past all reality.

Peter stayed like that for fifteen minutes while the psychiatrist tried to find a way through the curtain the boy had pulled.

"Come on, Peter," John finally said quietly, touching the boy's shoulder. Peter blinked, climbed off the chair and moved toward the door.

The rake moved out carefully, touched the ground, rustling the fallen arbutus leaves. Peter drew it toward him slowly, then lifted it and moved it away from him carefully. The teeth of the rake left little marks on the soft ground, marks like rivers or roads, moving from one edge of the neat plot to the other, from under the neatly trimmed shrubs and red-peeling arbutus trunks to the edge of the sidewalk. Soon the crocus and snowdrops, daffodils and tulips would poke up out of the dirt and it was very important to get all the little sticks and bits of grass and rock off the soft earth, very important to have this plot of dirt Just So because when the flowers came up you wouldn't be able to just go raking around, you might hurt them, maybe even break off a flower and kill it.

A sudden crash of window glass and Peter froze. He could feel eyes burning into his back, feel fingers pointing at him.

"New kid's fault."

"Yeah, he done it, crazy Pete done it," and a crowcaw chorus of Yeah Yeah Yeah.

He turned stiffly, facing his tormentors, trying hard not to slump, putting his face Just So, refusing to react to anything. John was watching him curiously, waiting for him to say something. Peter wanted to say I didn't do it, but he couldn't speak. He waited. The laughing and giggling continued and then John was talking, still staring at Peter and Peter made his ears listen to what was being said.

"Bullshit." John's voice was soft. "He was raking. It was Rocky and Fred did it."

The two boys began to protest, faces innocent.

"Oh, come off it," John said impatiently. "I'm not blind, I saw it all," and they fell silent, their faces betraying them. "Okay, over to the office, I'm sure they've got all the glass and putty you need to fix it up. And say good-bye to dessert for a week to pay for it." They headed for the office, each one angry with the other for talking him into it.

"Peter." John moved closer, and Peter turned to begin raking again. John stared down at the boy's back. "Peter, you didn't even try to defend yourself . . . " and Peter wanted to turn around, look in John's eyes and explain why he had said nothing, but he couldn't make himself turn around. Finally John got tired of staring down at Peter's back, and he moved away, hurt and puzzled.

The rake moved out carefully, touched the ground softly. Peter drew it toward him slowly, then lifted it and moved it away again, carefully reaching under one of the shrubs.

There was a face hidden in the leaves, the eye clearly defined in the curve of a twig. A face. Staring at him. The firefly-lightning bug lights began to dance around his head and the cricket-grasshopper twittering began ringing in his ears and skull as the fog-like body began to come out of the camouflage of careful tidy lines. Pulling itself together, coming toward him, sliding up the rake handle, slithering along his arms. . . .

His feet began to try to back away from it, but his legs didn't want to move. He could hear small sounds coming from his throat, could feel his arms jerking in protest, and part of his mind was aware of John, staring at him, horrified. From the head, the closest head, a dark fog moving toward him, wrapping around his throat and face, smothering him, his hands trying to pry the stinking slime. . . .

"Get the doctor," John yelled, and the boys all ran for the office, terrified.

Peter was sprawled on the sidewalk, his fingers clawing his throat, his entire body convulsing. Spittle formed at the corners of his tightly-clenched mouth and dribbled over his cheeks and chin. John knelt beside him, whipping his belt from his pants, feeling with his thumbs for the pressure points under the jaws, forcing the jaws open and pushing the belt between Peter's teeth. He rolled the boy on his left side, not trying to stop the threshing limbs, merely trying to make the boy as comfortable as possible while the seizure lasted.

When he realized the seizure wasn't passing, that the boy was not having a standard convulsion but was choking to death, John grabbed Peter in his arms and ran for the infirmary.

The nurse handed the doctor a shining curved instrument, and then a gurgling sound, like a plugged sink being cleared. An airway inserted, nostrils cleared and something that looked like swimmers' nose plugs aiming oxygen up the nose, a long needle directly through the chest, the doctor talking softly all the time, soothing the boy with the sound of his voice, and then a long gasping sigh and Peter relaxed, exhausted, his face pale, his fair hair damp with sweat, eyes dark rimmed, lips swollen and bruised.

Peter opened his eyes, looked into the soft smile of the evening nurse. She was wiping his forehead, smoothing his hair, and there was a perfume clinging to her skin that brought dim memories of one of the mothers—he couldn't remember which one. One day he wanted to see all those mothers again, to tell them what he hadn't been able to tell them before, what he couldn't tell John, or the evening nurse, or even Anna.

The nurse tucked the blankets around his shoulders, patted his cheek softly, smiled at him again and left, and he closed his eyes, wanting to go back to sleep. His eyes wouldn't stay closed, the lids jerked open again. He could see the furniture: one or two other beds, some sidetables, a chair with his clothes folded neatly on the seat. He could hear a radio playing softly somewhere down the hallway.

He remembered the thing coming out of the leaves and leaping for his throat. Remembered the stale, swampy odour, the jellymass clogging his nostrils and both John and the doctor saying It's all right, son, it's all right

but it wasn't

already it was in the hospital. It had escaped the machine that had sucked it off him, it was in the walls, slithering from room to room, following the electric wires, going from place to place. Looking. Looking for him.

The facility was half lit for the night, the rooms in darkness, the corridors still bright. Night dew on the bushes and grass, a faint breeze playing tag with the leaves, and high above, long gray clouds scudding across the face of the moon.

Peter dodged easily from shrub to shrub, keeping low, moving only in short bursts, threading his way surely toward the high fence around the perimeter of the facility. Just like hide and seek at night with the foster brothers and the kids down the road, and the rules the same: stay off the gravel, don't run on your heels, flatten yourself if you hear Anything. . . .

He waited by the big tree and looked back at the facility. Nobody was watching from any of the windows, nobody was out on the lawn, but he knew it wouldn't be long before the nurse went back into the room and saw the empty bed and the missing clothes.

He ran down the slightly sloping lawn, heading for the fence, and the firefly-lightning bugs began to form at the outer periphery of his vision. What sounded like the faint song of frogs, wasn't. Peter knew what it was, and he was afraid to look behind in case he saw the thing coming across the dew-damp grass, both heads aiming for him.

The wire mesh bit into his fingers, the heavy facility-issue shoes didn't fit the diamond-shaped openings in the crusader fence, his shoulders ached with pulling himself upward, and halfway up the fence his shoe touched a slender wire carefully woven through the fence links and behind him the sound of an alarm bell cut the night.

He shot a look over his shoulder. Lights going on in the facility, and in the corner of the building where the infirmary was located, some people moving quickly past the windows. And closer to him, coming out of the shadow darkness beneath the big tree, the long slender shape of the thing.

It was the thing that gave him the strength to climb the fence, the thing that gave him the push he needed up over the top, the thing that sent him falling, off-balance, into the damp grass.

He was up and running across the field, away from the facility, away from the flashlights already cutting across the lawn toward the gate, running the way he never ran in gym period, his

legs pumping, arms driving, running through the slight tangle of bush and then climbing over a creaking barbed-wire fence. Across a roadway, up an embankment and toward the haunting one-eyed light of the approaching train.

He knew someone was helping him. He knew it wasn't possible that he had managed, in pitch blackness, to come to the one place where the train had to slow down almost to a crawl. And he knew how you were supposed to do it; one of the mothers had worked at a place where you went in once or twice a week to talk to old people, and one of the old men had told him how he'd done it, how he'd gone back and forth across the country on a train without ever buying a ticket, and it was as if Peter himself had done it a hundred times.

He ran alongside the tracks and when the ladder-thing came toward him he just did it without thinking, just jumped and grabbed it, feeling the numbing jolt up both arms to the shoulder, just like the old man had said, and he did just what he'd been told, he hung on and kept his feet out of the way until the first jolt was gone, then he scrabbled up until his feet, too, were on the ladder. Press tight against the train car and move up to the roof without ever looking down or you'll get so dizzy you'll fall, and if you fall, that's it, sonny, you're minced. Don't ever ride on the roof in winter or when you're heading over the Rockies. But Peter didn't plan on heading over the Rockies and winter was gone for this year.

On top of the train car was a square ventilation box, the lid half open, and he held on to it tightly, one corner of his mind wondering what was in the car below: cows or pigs or things in boxes? He tried to look down inside, but it was dark, and when he raised himself the slightest bit he got dizzy and frightened, so he just lay flat on the roof, his hands hooked tightly to the ventilation box, his hair blowing in the wind, his nostrils burning with the fumes coming back from the diesel engine.

The little lights were still hovering around his head, but he couldn't hear the rasping noises for the takin'-off takin'-off of the wheels, the clicketyclackety gonna-go, gonna-go of the joints in the rails hitting against the big metal wheels. The lonesome moan of the diesel cut the night and he raised his head. Far down the tracks he saw lights. The old man had warned him about yard bulls and switch-house cops, so when the train started to slow, he did what the old man had told him to do, he moved carefully to the ladder and, face pressed against the still moving car, he made his way back down and waited until the train slowed enough that

he could jump off and run behind a parked engine, flattening himself on the ground, peering through the jigsaw puzzle of wheels and undercarriages, looking for approaching legs and feet.

He was almost disappointed when he didn't see any. Still, it was a good game, better than ante-aigh-over or flag football, and he played it out exactly as the old man had told him. Move from car to car quickly, watching for the inspectors and bullyboys, then, when the coast is clear, run like hell away from the switchyards. Never mind where you're going, you can figure that out when you're away from the shuntyard and the CPR cops who are the toughest in the whole country. Tougher even than Mounties, the old man had said disapprovingly.

The town was asleep. It was just like any other night when you can't sleep so you shinny out the window and prowl around wondering what kind of people live behind those windows, what kind of kids have bikes they leave outside where anybody could swipe them. Who owns all the dogs that come stiff-legged to the fences?

Lights coming around the corner ahead, and he ducked quickly into an alleyway, heart racing. He stood stockstill until the cruising police car had passed the alley and gone off down the street, and when the sound of its engine had faded away he raced down the alley, trying to ignore the dancing lights and the unmistakable buzzing sound.

He stopped at the gas station diner at the corner, raised himself on tiptoe and peered through the steamy window. A truck driver was having coffee and a piece of pie, talking and laughing with the waitress, and Peter was tempted to stay and lipread the conversation, but the dancing lights were growing in number and the insistent buzzing was becoming annoying, and he was afraid someone else might see the fireflies or hear the cricket-noise.

It was a chippertruck, the kind he had often seen going out to the pulp mill with loads of chips to be turned into paper. Somehow. He didn't know how. Just when his class was supposed to go out to the mill on a field trip, he'd been reassigned to a different foster home and had to change schools, so he missed out on learning how they took a zillion tons of wood chips and turned out paper for drawing and writing and fingerpainting and putting on the wall in the bedroom.

There was a ladder up the back so the driver could spread his load and then arrange a canvas tarp over the top so the chips wouldn't blow all over the road. It wasn't easy going up the ladder. Like the one on the side of the train it went up straight so

you had to almost lean backwards and take a lot of your weight on your arms. He wondered if that was how a fly felt going up a wall, straight up and down, and your leg muscles getting sore in a hurry.

The tarp wasn't pulled down tight: they never were, they would billow up with the wind as the truck rolled down the road, puffing up like bedsheets on a line. He squirmed and wriggled and managed to get himself under the tarp and safely into the aromatic chips inside. Only one or two of the firefly-lights got in with him and he hoped the others didn't hang around outside and make the trucker wonder whatinhell was going on up there. What if he came to check? What if he decided to tie his tarp down really tight and Peter couldn't get out and wound up made into paper himself?

He would have liked to have whistled, that was a good thing to do when you were scared, but he didn't want the trucker coming up to see why a load of chips was whistling, so he just sang songs to himself inside his head

hey ho my little horse
hey ho again sir
how many miles to Babylon
four score and ten sir
hey ho my little horse
hey ho again sir
can I get there by candlelight
you can and back again sir

that was a good one, and the mother who didn't have any more small boys, just big ones who were almost men, had sung it to him lots of times, sitting on a chair, holding him on her lap and jiggling her knees so it was like riding the little horse. Sometimes she held his hand and they skipped around the living room until they collapsed, laughing, on the carpet, and then she'd tickle him or blow on his neck until he yelled "uncle." He didn't know why he hadn't been able to stay there. She didn't get sick. He hadn't been bad. And she'd grabbed onto him when he left, grabbed onto him and squeezed him tight and kissed him. She'd said "It was nice having you with us, Peter. You're a good boy and I love you very much," and he'd wanted to ask why he had to leave, if that was true, but he didn't ask. Nobody ever told you anything anyway. And maybe there was a good reason, one he didn't know. Everybody always said Mind Your Own Business. Maybe it wasn't any of his business why he'd had to leave. Sometimes, at night, he sang the song inside his head and tried to remember what it was like to be jiggled and cuddled.

The big boys who were almost men would call him "short legs" and were always teasing him. They'd scoop him up and toss him over their shoulders and say "Hey, short legs, we'll never get there like that, hitch a ride," and they'd walk funny, deliberately bouncing up and down so he jiggled on their shoulders, lying bellydown, his laughter sounding funny as the jiggling made his breathing irregular.

They bought him ice cream cones and doubled him on their bikes. They didn't even mind if he tagged along and sat watching them at soccer practice, and if anybody asked who he was they'd shrug easily and say "He's the small sib," and he knew sib meant brother or sister.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when the truck roared to life. That was what was wrong with letting yourself remember things. He hadn't even heard the driver come out and get into the truck, hadn't even heard the door close. There were some bumps and some shakings, rumbles and roars and strange feelings as the gears changed several times and then they were rolling down the road, the smell of hemlock and fir strong in the air, the orange-tan tarp above like the sail of an old ship taking them to the places with weird names like the ones you sometimes heard in the late night movies on television, names like Baghdad and Cathay and Orinoco and

and at first he had hoped they would find out where he was living and show up on their big two-wheelers and say "Hey, small sib, want to go for a ride?" but they never showed up and when he got big enough to go looking for them, they were gone. He'd taken the bus into town, transferred to the other bus and got off at the right corner, and the house was there, but it wasn't the same, and he waited until he saw one of the people living in the house and when he didn't recognize that person at all he had just turned and headed back to the bus stop, wondering sadly where all the people went when they left his life.

When the truck went around a corner his body leaned into the chips, and when they went uphill he felt a gentle pressure against the rear of the box. He wanted very much to go to sleep, but he didn't dare in case he woke up being dumped into some kind of big pot in the place where they made all the paper. He wondered if it would hurt very much being boiled up into a soup of paperstuff. And would he be able to see what was going on in the room when he was part of the wallpaper on the wall? What if the chips beneath him opened up and he fell through to the bottom of the truck and then the chips closed over him and he smothered or was

crushed? Would they find him? Would they know who he was or how he got there? Would they care?

He squirmed his way out from under the tarp, almost lost his balance in the sudden blast of wind rolling along the top of the canvas, grabbed at the ladder and began to inch his way down the steep metal rungs. Clinging to the bottom section of the ladder he watched the road slide away beneath the truck like a mottled gray and black ribbon or the back of some huge sinuous water-dwelling serpent. Wanting to let go, not daring to let go, feeling his terror return as the small dancing lights began to form a halo around his head, their twittering filling his ears with panic, he felt the truck slowing down to turn a corner, took a deep breath, hoped he wouldn't get broken and smashed, and flung himself sideways and away from the road toward the grass and bushes.

He hit the shoulder of the road with a thump, rolled, and slammed into a small bush that knocked the wind out of him in a great gasping whoosh. The truck disappeared down the road and Peter pulled himself to a sitting position, feeling his shoulder and arm where he had landed, feeling the rip in his shirt, knowing he had a big bruise starting on his hip.

He began to cry, great racking sobs coming up from his stomach, tightening his throat. Holding his injured arm, rocking with pain because the old man hadn't mentioned this part of it at all. Sobbing because he hadn't known about being alone in the darkness, being cold, with rips in your clothes, your skin itching with hemlock juice and a lump on your head where you hit a rock. He cried without knowing exactly why he cried. He cried because he was eleven years old and on his own in the black of night, knowing that somewhere behind him a thing was following his scent along the railroad tracks, two ugly heads searching, sniffing for a trace of Peter.

He crouched in the huckleberry thicket across the road from the milkstop and watched as the farmer and his shaggy dog headed back to the house, the dog jumping high and barking happily. He had crouched here for more than half an hour watching the farmer stack the shiny milk cans in a small cross between a rack and a shed, carefully stacking them in rows, talking to the dog as if he expected an answer. Once the dog had started across the road to investigate the smell of boy coming from the thicket, but the farmer had whistled softly and the dog had whirled and returned.

They went up the steps and across the porch and entered the

house, the door closing behind them. Peter knew they would probably have breakfast now; he imagined huge hunks of ham and two or three eggs, maybe even some pancakes and toast with big gobs of strawberry jam. His mouth watered and his belly rumbled.

He crept out of the thicket carrying a battered and rusty tin can in his hand. It wasn't easy, but he managed to pry off the lid on one of the big milk cans. He scooped up a canful of milk and drank it in great eager gulps. A few flecks of rust from the old can floated on top of the thick white milk and he reached in with a grimy finger, flicking the rust specks into the ditch. Another can of milk and the pain in his belly went away and the shaky feeling left his legs. He drank until he couldn't hold any more, then refilled the rusty can, put the lid on the milk can, and headed across the road to the ditch. He had no more than settled himself to sip the rest of the milk slowly, than he heard the sound of an approaching truck.

He crouched in the thicket, watching through the viny tangle as the driver, whistling softly to himself, swung full cans up on the truck and left empty ones in their place. Peter grinned and wondered if the man noticed that one of the cans was lighter than the others and the lid not down as solidly. He sipped the stolen milk and waited until the driver got in his truck and drove away, and when the sound of the engine had faded and died, Peter walked along the ditch, occasionally sipping milk, until the can was empty and he threw it away in a thicket of blossoming blackberry vines.

It was too early for berries, and even if he had known how to set a snare to catch a rabbit he didn't know if there were wild rabbits to be caught. Or what to do with it if he did catch one. He wasn't sure he could use a rock to kill it. Or anything else to kill it. And if he did kill it, he knew he couldn't eat it raw, and he had no way of lighting a fire.

His arm was sore and after he'd walked a bit his hip started aching and he limped until his good leg was tired and sore too. He didn't dare ask anybody for anything; as soon as they saw a lone boy, dirty, limping and hungry, they would call the police.

He slept that night under a tree, shivering and weeping, and almost wishing he was back at the facility. The ground beneath him was cold as the night damp rose and seeped through his clothes to his skin. His sore hip throbbed and stiffened, the bark of the tree against which he was leaning bit into his skin and his fingers were so cold it didn't even do any good to tuck his hands in his armpits and cuddle himself.

The following day he had nothing but water, and he didn't sleep at all that night; his belly was aching and it was too cold to even cry. He tried curling up in a ball, but it wasn't warm and finally he started walking again, not because there was any place he wanted to go, but because he just couldn't stand to stay there, shaking and shivering and crying. He walked through the dark bush, wondering what was making the noises in the underbrush, walking and crying, not caring where he was going as long as it was away, far away.

Afternoon, and the sun was warm. It shone through the branches and the budding overhead and though the ground was damp, it wasn't cold. He lay down in the sun, glad the hunger pains were gone from his stomach, wondering where they had gone, and why. The breeze barely ruffled his uncombed hair, and within moments he was asleep, the warm afternoon sun easing the ache in his muscles.

It was the cricket-sound that woke him up again. At first he thought it was the chitter of birds in the trees, but then he knew it was this other, the thing he couldn't name. He sat up, looking around wildly, and the grove was full of dancing lights. The firefly-lightning bug things had found him again and there were more of them than there ever had been.

He crouched, ready to run down the path, but then they all moved in that direction and he hesitated, wondering if they were going to follow him or attack him. Then, coming down the very path he had been going to take, slithering along relentlessly, the thing with two heads. Every time he saw it, it seemed a different size. Right now it was very small, and if you didn't know better you'd think it was just an ordinary snake, but it was travelling with incredible speed.

He whirled and ran away from it, away from the dancing lights and cricket noises, running blindly, ignoring the branches that slapped his face, stumbling over roots and vines, running, hoping the lights wouldn't be able to keep up with him. Every time the lights found him the snake-thing found him.

He broke out of the bushland and stopped suddenly. Ahead of him a beach, some rocks and pebbles, a clutter of bleached logs and some sticks and kelp, and then miles and miles and miles of sea shining in the sunlight. He wished he could run on top of the water, jumping from one wavetip to another until he got someplace that wouldn't allow lights, or noises, or snakes, or anything. If the snake-thing came there was no place to go: he couldn't go

back—the thing waited down the path; he couldn't go forward because he couldn't run on top of the water. On either side the beach stretched invitingly for a distance, but then the rocks and sand seemed to disappear into the water, as if this curved half-oval of beach were the last place in the world, with nothing else beyond it except water, and behind him the unnamed threat that had chased him for what seemed all of his life.

He was out of breath and dizzy, his legs shaking, so he sat down quickly on a barnacled rock, but his back began to ache so he moved to sit on the sand and lean against a giant weather-whitened log, hiding from the lights, hiding from the snake, playing with some shells and pebbles, letting his fingers feel the ridges and whorls. He stared down at the dry white half-shell and something stirred in his memory. He rose and began to look for shells that weren't empty, the ones with the edible animal still living inside.

He collected several oysters and tried desperately to hammer one of them open with a large rock. He could chip the fluted edges easily enough, but when he tried to bash through the thick end, the end where the muscle was, the muscle just tightened up even more and the shell stayed firmly shut. He was panting, almost weeping in his frustration.

"By the time you get her open, boy, she won't be fit to eat." The voice came from nowhere, and Peter jumped up, terrified.

3

Peter stared, frozen. An old man was watching him from the top of the bank, a man so incredibly old you couldn't even begin to guess when he'd been young. His face was lined and seamed, his eyes nearly hidden in wrinkles. His hair was long and thin and blew every whichway at the whim of the breeze. Several of the dancing lights were near his head but there was no suggestion of the nerve-racking noises.

Peter dropped the oyster, whirled, and ran slapbang into a very large, sober-featured man with burning eyes. He tried to dodge, but the man just reached out, grabbed him without hurting him, and as if Peter were a parcel, tucked him under his arm and walked back to where the old man stood behind the forgotten pile of unshucked oysters.

The old man reached into his pocket and brought out a clasp knife. He did it so fast and so well Peter wasn't even able to see what he did. The oyster lay open on his gnarled brown hand, held out invitingly.

"Me, I like'em better with fixin's," he remarked to nobody in particular, handing the oyster to Peter. "Take'em and dip'em in beatup egg, then roll'em in bread crumbs or cracker crumbs or a bit'a cornmeal if you got it. Fry'em in melted margarine with some onion and squirt'em with a bit'a vinegar . . . half a dozen like that and a bit'a potata maybe, and I wouldn't call the Queen'a England my cousin. But if she come to lunch, she'd eat'em too, I betcha!"

What the old man was describing sounded a lot better than what Peter was tasting, and swallowing the oyster was beginning to feel a lot like trying to be sick. Finally it went down, and as he got the aftertaste of salt and seaweed, he shuddered, swallowing again quickly.

"That's what I thought," the old man said, satisfied. "A raw oyster is somethin' you gotta swalla two or three times to get where it's goin'. Fella told me once that there's rich people pay good money to eat raw oysters. Me, I don't see any sense in it. Raw oysters is for gulls and ravens and things as don't have stoves. Us, we got a fire, and fryin' pans and vinegar, and taters and lotsa coffee, don't make sense to go back to livin' like a gull."

He talked strangely, as if his top and bottom teeth never left each other, his bottom jaw barely moving at all. All the "p"

sounds flew out of his mouth like little birds, but the "s" sounds seemed reluctant to leave his mouth at all. "G" sounded almost like "c" or maybe "k." Vinegar sounded more like finniker and gull sounded almost like kull.

"Tell ya what, boy, if you help him gather up some we'll take'em home and cook'em up right for you." The old man made a head gesture in the direction of the silent man.

Peter stared for a moment; the silent man just waited, neither smiling nor frowning, just waiting.

"Oh, don't have ta worry," the old man chattered easily, "we won't keep ya do ya decide ya wants to leave." His chuckle rolled up from his belly, his face fell into folds and wrinkles like an accordion. "And we're more used ta eatin' oysters than ta eatin' boys; boys're too tough anyway, I bet."

Peter felt silly then. Standing dithering, obviously hungry but unwilling to make a move toward helping gather some lunch. If they'd been going to kill him they'd have done it when the old man whipped open the knife. The silent man could have smashed his head in with a rock or snapped his neck. Peter moved to a large rock where the oysters were hanging ready to be pried off, but the silent man touched his arm, shook his head and pointed to another rock, still in water even though the tide was out. They took off their shoes and waded into the water, moving to the half-submerged rock, and began to pry off the tightly clinging shells. Peter would have taken them all, but the silent man shook his head no, made a gesture with his hands, and started walking back to the beach. With nothing else to do, Peter followed.

"Some folks take'em home shell and all," the old man chattered away, and Peter wondered where the story had got started that Indians were hard to talk to. "Us, we always had the villages close to the sea, so it didn't much matter, I suppose, but even then we shucked'em where we got'em. You see, every oyster shell, she's got seeds on her for oh, maybe six, maybe seven other oysters. Take'em home and you've killed a half a dozen and only got one to eat. But shuck'em and chuck'em and there'll always be oysters to eat." He threw a handful of shells back into the sea, the inner shell glittering in the sunlight. "This way, we put back the shell and the seeds and the seeds grow into oysters. That's howcum you see'em growing in bunches, a big one and a whole buncha smaller ones. Three, four years from now won't be no way at all to know we grabbed us a big feast here."

Peter lobbed his shell; it arced from his hand, caught a gust of wind and rode like a frisbee, spinning down yards from shore.

"That's a good one," the old man remarked, approvingly. "Oysters like deep water. I didn't think a city fella like you would know that, but I guess you showed me somethin'." He put the last oyster in the plastic cottage cheese container, handed it to the silent man, then got slowly to his feet. "Always wash off oyster-slime in the sea," he muttered. "Some say ya do it to say thank-you, but I think it's because the salt cuts the slime better'n fresh water will."

"You kill slugs with salt," Peter blurted suddenly, surprising himself. "Slugs are sort of . . . slushy . . . like oysters . . . and if you put salt down they sort of crawl over it and then they just . . . melt."

"Why'd you want to do that? Kill slugs? You don't eat'em do you?"

"No, but they eat the garden," Peter explained, feeling his face go all red the way it always did if someone asked him a direct question. He could feel the stutter starting, too, the one that made everyone so sure he was telling lies. "They g-g-get on the l-l-leaves, and they l-l-leave holes a-and. . . ." He came to a jerky halt, hoping the old man wouldn't think he was making it all up to get attention.

"So that's what does it," the old man laughed, "and here's me all this time blamin' the ladybugs. Slugs." He looked at the silent man, and there was an instant communication with their eyes as if other things were being said besides the things the old man was saying to Peter. "Well, now, we'll just pick us up some salt when we go into town and we'll keep them buggers offa the lettuce this year. Slugs, huh? Well, they've et the last cabbage they're gonna get. Salt'em."

They walked along the beach, then angled off through the woodland. Peter was frightened, darting glances constantly, watching to see if the snake-thing was following.

The old man watched the boy's eyes constantly darting, searching the underbrush, looking for danger. He looked up, knew He Who Would Sing had seen the same signs of fear. He Who Would Sing spoke with his hands and the old man nodded quietly.

He felt sad watching the boy. Such a little boy, even younger than He Who Would Sing had been when he arrived so many years ago, his face bruised, his front tooth chipped, his body marked and sore. How many children did this make? How many children had come to him in his lifetime?

He had been a child himself when the first one found him.

Charlie Jack, who lived with his uncle and a woman not the wife of the uncle. Charlie Jack had had marks on his back from a leather belt and a bruise on his face from a heavy fist and he was hungry. So he had taken him home and his father had fed them both, then had gone to see the uncle of Charlie Jack and after that Charlie Jack had lived with him and had been his brother. But Charlie Jack was dead now, and so was the wife of Charlie Jack and both of their children. Dead of a sickness they said had come from the millions of dead bodies left behind when the white man fought his big war. A long time ago, and the memory of Charlie Jack was as fresh as it had been at the time he was lifted into the burial tree, but the pain of the memory was gone now.

And after Charlie Jack there was the baby whose mother had got her from a slanty-eyed fisherman who had come to catch herring and who went away never knowing he had left a baby inside the woman who had laughed with him. The mother didn't want the baby because the new man said there was no place for a baby on his boat, not a slanty-eyed baby that wasn't his. And so he had asked if he could have the baby. The mother had laughed and said What do you want with a baby, what do you expect to do with a baby? I will give her to my mother, he had said, and that is what he had done, and the baby had been his sister. They gave her a name that meant Dearly Loved and she had grown tall and learned to dance and laugh and had married a young man from Nootka and had ten children. She and her husband were buried at Nootka now, and the children had children and grandchildren. Others had come into his life until it was said in the village that he could find a child where others couldn't find a fish.

And now this one, who was not of the people but who had need.

He Who Would Sing touched the boy on the shoulder, then pointed upwards, but the boy didn't know where to look.

"On the tree," the old man said softly. "See him walkin' up the tree . . . big woodpecker . . . he walks around the tree in an upgoin' spiral, and he sees every inch of that tree, every bug, every hole that might hide a bug. See him?"

"Why doesn't he fly away?" the boy asked.

"Why should he? I'm not gonna hurt him. You're not gonna hurt him. *He* ain't gonna hurt him. Why would the pecker fly away from those who aren't gonna hurt him?"

"How does he know we aren't going to hurt him?"

"Oh, he knows."

They walked on through the woods and down the meadow to

where the cabin waited in the sunlight. Whatever it was the boy was afraid of, it seemed it might come from the underbrush or it might fall from a tree, it might come out from behind a bush or it might even fly at him, because he searched all levels from ground to sky, his eyes darting constantly, his fingers clenching and unclenching nervously.

Peter hesitated at the door of the cabin, letting the two who lived here enter first. The old man smiled, made an inviting gesture with his hand, and Peter walked in, keeping close to the door, unsure of himself and suddenly very shy.

One long room, and at the back a curtain hanging over what was probably a doorway to a second room. The end of the big room nearest the door was dominated by a large black woodstove. On the end wall to his right, several cupboards and a sink and counter with no real tap but rather a small hand pump securely screwed to the counter above the sink. A large table, four wooden chairs, an enormous woodbox three-quarters full of split wood and, to his left, a fabulous clutter and collection of strange forms and shapes.

Carved masks, totem poles, statues, wall plaques, strange faces—not quite animal, not quite human—and, arranged over the back of a sagging sofa, a blanket. But what a blanket. Almost as big as a bunkbed blanket, deep blue with a red border seven or eight inches wide and in the middle, bright against the deep blue, a bird with a sort of horn on his head, a bird with sequin feathers, a sequin beak, his sequin eye staring, glittering in the sunlight coming through the window. Peter's feet moved him across the room to touch the bird. His hands itched to touch the bird, itched so much he jammed both hands in his pockets; he mustn't touch, it wasn't his, you didn't touch anything that wasn't yours. And still the bird beckoned.

The silent man was getting everything ready for the meal and the old man was helping, watching Peter's reactions closely. He smiled as the boy was drawn toward the blanket and when Peter shoved his hands roughly in his pockets the old man exchanged a long glance with the silent man, then put aside the dishes he was placing on the table and moved toward the boy.

"That's my dance cape," he offered gently. Peter stared from the blanket to the old man, then back to the blanket.

"You never seen a dance cape before?" the old man continued. Peter shook his head, his eyes glued to the sequined bird. The old man reached out, took the blanket and draped it over his shoul-

ders, the bird wings outstretched across his back, the bird eye glittering happily, expectantly. "Watch his face. He loves to dance, this bugger," and the old man began to move, stiffly, slowly, his legs shuffling, his body making formal centuries-old calculated half-turns and dips. The bird seemed to soar the heavens, his glittering eye watching the world below, soaring and swooping, his sequin feathers shivering in the breeze. Peter felt dizzy, as if he too was flying high above the mountains and streams.

"You like that." The old man was pleased and Peter nodded, wishing he could say something. "When I was your age there was a man from Hesquiath could dance until you could see the blackfish jumpin' out of the waves and shakin' water offa his back in the sunlight." He placed the dance cape back on the sofa, smoothing its folds gently. "Me, I used to dance and dance. Me and Eagle Flies High here, we'd dance all night and never get tired. Sometimes the parties'd go on for three or four days and we'd still be dancin' strong at the end. Not no more, though." He slapped his drytwig bandy legs with the flat of his hand. "These fellers got just about all they can do to walk me from place to place, never you mind dancin'."

A low whistle from the mute man at the stove, and the old man turned. The silent man's face was suddenly cut by a wide, happy grin, his fingers danced and the old man laughed.

"He's bein' dirty again," he chuckled happily. "He says there's other things I used to do that I can't do no more. Don't pay much attention to him when he gets like that, he likes to be silly. Thinks he's a joker, he does."

The fingers flashed again, the old man chuckled and the silent man went back to peeling potatoes and beating eggs.

"He's gotta have the last word," the old man announced, moving to sit on the sofa with Peter. He gestured to the blanket and the glittering bird. "That fella there, Eagle Flies High, there's a story about him. From the Before times. The Storm Wind had a daughter, called Storm Daughter, and she was just about the most beautiful woman around these parts at that time. Dark, she was, with fierce storm-eyes and wild storm-hair and teeth as white as the froth on the waves. Well, she saw Eagle Flies High way up in the sky, floating on the breeze and falling through the air to catch fish in his claws. She thought he was just about the most perfect thing she'd ever seen and she loved him. She was the daughter of the Storm Wind and he figured whatever she wanted she could have, so he huffed him up the most almighty storm we ever had on this coast and he blew Eagle Flies High far and wide

until he landed him on the beach where Storm Daughter was waiting. She did magic on him and he just stared at her and was happy to stay right where Storm Wind blew him to. They lived together and as things always have a way of seeming to happen, Storm Daughter, she got herself a baby from him. It was a boy, half human and half bird, and for a long time she carried him in a pack on her back because he hadn't learned neither to walk nor to fly. But the Wanton Wind, she got a bit jealous of the happiness going down on that stretch of beach and she started blowing in Eagle Flies High's ear, telling him of the tall cliffs and the free spaces, telling him of the waves and the blackfish, the clouds and the sky. Well, Storm Wind, he got angry about all this interferin' and he started to jaw it up with Wanton Wind and they got themselves into the usual kind of stupidity all folks get into when they're mad and unreasonable and between the two of 'em, didn't they blow up a wind that picked Eagle Flies High offa the beach and blew him right back where he come from, only further. Storm Daughter, she cried and she give the sharp side'a her tongue to botha them; Storm Wind and Wanton Wind got the news, you can be sure'a that. Storm Daughter, she turned into Wild Woman of the Forest, and she started singin' a sad song that you can sometimes hear in the trees at night. A song about strong wings, the race of strong wings, the challenge of strong wings and the wind that can always defeat the wings. And she's still lookin' for a song to sing for her son, because he's not bird nor man and he's not wind nor storm, he's a star now, and he'll stay one until his mother can find him a name and a song. And that on my cape, that's Eagle Flies High; the only thing that can keep him from going where he wants to go is the wind. It's maybe one of the most powerful things going and nobody ever seen it. Somethin' to think about, ain't it? Rocks are strong and thunder is powerful, but the wind can wear a rock away to a pebble and the wind can blow the thunder right off over the hill. But ya can't see it." He smiled, looked around, slapped his hand on his bandy leg. "By golly, he's got'er all done in the time we been jawin', if we don't hurry us up he'll turf'er outside for the ravens!"

They sat at the table, Peter's hands and face freshly scrubbed, his hair wet and palmed flat to his head. A platter of golden fried oysters, another platter of hash brown potatoes, some sliced tomatoes and the nose-tingling scent of fresh coffee. Peter folded his hands on his lap and waited, his throat moving often, swallowing the saliva that gathered in his mouth. He felt shaky again and close to tears. The old man began to hand the platter to the boy

and Peter hesitated, afraid he'd do something dumb like he usually did, maybe drop it or spill it. Something in the boy's face spoke to the old man and he filled the waiting plate, then passed the platter to the silent man. Peter was glad the old man hadn't handed him the platter. It was always like that, a person would hand him something and he'd be sure he had a good grip on it and then all of a sudden there it was, all over the floor and everyone mad at him again.

He waited until everyone had their serving, waited until the older men had started to eat, then he carefully spread his paper napkin on his lap and, with trembling hands, picked up his knife and fork. What he wanted to do was just eat, just grab it and stuff it into his mouth, it looked and smelled so good, but it isn't proper to do things that way.

The silent man watched from the corner of his eye and the old man watched frankly as Peter very carefully moved his coffee cup to where there was no chance of it getting spilled. With careful and precise movements he arranged things Just So, and when it was all to his satisfaction he began to eat his meal, carefully cutting the oysters into small pieces, his hands actually shaking with repressed hunger. He hoped nobody would notice he wasn't chewing each piece as often as he should. He couldn't. He didn't care if he did get a bellyache, the best his tongue and throat would let him do was thirteen or fourteen chews each piece and then they forced him to swallow.

"You got good table manners, boy," the old man said quietly, smiling gently. "Someone spent a lot of time teaching you good manners like that."

Peter carefully put his knife and fork in the proper place on his plate, chewed and swallowed carefully before speaking. "I lived in a place once where they said if you couldn't eat properly, you wouldn't eat at all. They said if you insisted on eating like an animal you could sit in the dark closet and go without your meal until you knew better." When nobody replied to his explanation, he again picked up his knife and fork and mechanically went back to eating his meal.

The mute stared at Peter, then rose suddenly and stood in the doorway for a few moments, his hands clenched and angry and his back stiff. Then he went to the cupboard and brought out a loaf of homemade bread, cut some thick slices and placed them invitingly close to Peter's plate. He went to the stove and got the coffee pot, filled the old man's cup again, then returned the pot to the stove and refilled Peter's plate.

When they had all eaten as much as they could and the old man was sitting over his third cup of coffee, Peter managed a small smile and a hesitant nod. "That was very good," he said carefully. "Thank you very much."

"We thank you," the old man replied. "It isn't every day we get a chance to have company, nor every day we get a chance to meet someone new. Mostly we just have to put up with each other. We get along good, but He Who Would Sing, he doesn't talk much."

The silent man grinned, began to clear the table, and the old man noticed how quickly the boy moved to help. He carefully stacked the dishes on the counter near the unfinished sink, then looked around puzzled, wondering how anybody could use a sink that had no drainpipe. He Who Would Sing reached under the counter, brought out a chipped enamel basin, put in a handful of powdered soap, then added water from the steaming kettle on the old black stove. He added a dipper of cold water from the bucket near the pump, tested it with his hand, added another dipper of cold water, tested again, and nodded.

"I'll do them," the boy said quietly, and He Who Would Sing flashed his broad grin, bowing from the waist and gesturing with his hand that the sink and the dishes were the boy's own domain.

Peter first washed, rinsed and dried all the cutlery, putting things away in the places from which he had seen them taken. Then the cups, then the plates, then the platters and finally the heavy black frying pans. He wiped the table and countertop, folded the dishtowel and hung it in place with the others behind the stove, then wrung out the dishcloth and hung it to dry, too. Then he stared, puzzled, at the basin of water and the sink that had no drainpipe.

"We just chuck it outside," the old man said softly. "That's how come we use powdered soap insteada detergent." The silent man grinned, took the basin as far as the door and tossed the water in a briefly rainbowing arc into the yard.

"Doesn't he talk at all?" Peter asked hesitantly.

"Can't talk, boy," the old man answered evenly.

Peter flashed a quick look at He Who Would Sing and the big man placed his fingers on his throat, then shook his head and made gestures with his hands.

"He can't talk," the old man repeated. "He never has and he never will. Doctor says there's something missing in his throat. Born that way, I guess. We went to a whole buncha doctors about it. For a while about all we did with ourselves was go to doctors, but they all said the same thing so we kinda figured we might's

well just give'er up as a bad job. One of them said that inside'a your throat there's a sort of a box thing, and he said as how when you talk you're actually playin' on this box like playin' on a musical instrument. Only he hasn't got all the things in his throat that he needs and his voice box never got finished getting made."

"Not any sounds at all?" Peter gasped.

"Oh, he can make a funny sort of noise when he's laughin', but it isn't really a Sound, it's the air coming out in a sort of a huff huff. And he can kinda cough if he's got a cold, but it wouldn't wake nobody up at night. He talks with his fingers. And there's times," the old man added drily, "that his hands don't shut up from dawn to dark."

"I'm sorry your son can't talk," Peter said, hoping nobody would think him impertinent.

"Oh, he ain't my son. I'm his throat and he's my strength. We get along pretty good him and me. When he first come I wasn't old and puny like I am now, see, so I could teach him all the things I knew and now that I'm too old to do'em, he does'em for me."

"I thought he was your son. Most old men have got sons."

"Oh, he's my son now, right enough." The old man had already learned not to address himself directly to the boy. Peter quickly became uneasy if both words and gaze were directed at him, so the old man looked at the stove and talked to the boy. "He showed up here a long time ago; he was maybe sixteen or seventeen but already built as big as most men. Been in some kinda trouble in town, somethin' to do with booze and a woman and punchin' in some feller's face; usual sorta story. Showed up here in the middle of the night all beat up and he just stayed with me. We learned to talk with fingersigns and we adopted each other Indian-style and here we be."

"Did the police come after him?"

"No, they never did." The old man settled himself more comfortably on his chair. "Never saw hide nor hair nor stripe nor gun of them and when we go into town nobody bothers us. I don't think he's Indian himself," the old man mused, as if the thought had entered his head for the first time. "He didn't know nothin' about it when he got here, but he's kinda darkish. I guess he is now, though, living here with me like he does."

"What's his name?"

"Well, there's some folks call him Loony, they figure if he don't speak he's a few bricks short of a load and not all at home upstairs. But the name he got when he became a dancer, that's his spirit name. Comes from your biggest dream or your biggest gift. And he got the name He Who Would Sing."

"What's your special name?"

"Me? Oh, I got me a whole raft of names, boy. I had me one name when I was just a baby and then I got me another one when I started walkin' around bein' bad like boys are. When I got a few whiskers on my chin I got another name and then I traded some stuff for a name and . . . I got me lotsa names. What's yours?"

"Peter. My name is Peter. Peter Baxter."

"Well, Peter, we kinda figured we'd maybe just spend the day doin' nothin'. Thought we'd maybe pretend we were rich and lazy."

A quick whistle, the flashing of the fingers and the gleaming smile.

"He says," the old man translated as the mute made a snapping gesture with his hands, then let his head loll comically, "he says insteada bein' broke and lazy like we really are. Think you'd like to join us in doin' that?"

"Yes, sir, I'd like that," Peter nodded.

"Did you know that the name Peter means a rock? Didn't know that, huh? Well it does. Don't know where it comes from, but that's what it means. Not just a rock you hold in your hand, the big kind you build with. Ever seen people build with rock? Them eyetalians is good at it, they can bust a big rock with a sledge and by golly if it don't fit just right where it's supposed to. Now if you two'll just give me a hand outta this chair we'll take us out in the sunshine a bit. Get us a good tan." And he laughed softly to himself about something.

They sat on the steps in the warming sun and listened to the breeze in the evergreens. The boy eyed the carving area, the figures standing against the wall of the cabin, the bench that used to be a log, the seat that used to be a stump.

"Wood's nice," the old man said to nobody in particular. "Not just for lookin' at but for feelin' and smellin', for touchin' and listenin' to. Some people think there's a trick to carvin', they think you've got to *make* something that wasn't there before, but that's just startin' at the arsend and working forward, what you do is start with what's already there. Everything you could ever imagine is in every piece'a wood and all you got to do is take away what ya don't need and what you were lookin' for is there. No big secret to it at all. 'Course," he added with a grin, "it takes some practice."

Peter moved to the carving bench, sat down and stared at the tools. Then he picked up a piece of wood and felt it, tapped it, even smelled it. But it didn't seem that the wood was talking to

him, and after a few minutes he put it down and laid his head on the workbench. The sun warmed his face, his hair blew in the wind and almost immediately, he was asleep.

The silent one flashed his fingers, the old man nodded, staring off at the memories he never fully shared with anyone. "Yeah," he answered with a nod, "he's in trouble sure enough. Poor little bugger, he's been runnin' a long time." He watched the moving fingers. "'Course he's half crazy. Who ain't? If I wasn't half crazy I'd never be bothered with you and if you weren't half crazy you'd never be bothered with me. As it is we're both so crazy we can even talk to each other and think we understand what we're talkin' about."

The mute rose from the steps and walked away slowly, hands thrust deep into his pockets. He remembered very little of his life before he had come here. He had never tried to remember, as if he preferred not to have existed before this place. He knew he had always been able to hear, but he couldn't remember a time when he had been able to speak. He had the feeling that even as a baby his crying had been silent. The old man told him often that his throat made sounds but the sounds could only be heard in that other reality, that other plane of life so few people knew existed. He wasn't sure he liked the idea of his voice being heard in the spirit world; if he felt lonely in this world without his voice, his voice probably felt lonely in the spirit world with no body.

People had tried to be nice to him. He could remember, if he tried. He could remember his parents trying hard to hide the puzzlement in their eyes, trying hard not to let him know how much his handicap hurt them, how they were reminded each time someone else's child laughed that their child's laughter would never be heard. He had always known they loved him, but he had always known a feeling of failure, as if somehow it was his fault that he had been born imperfect.

The old man said this was a sign of Specialness. All the Special feel alienated. All souls live in that other plane, and sometimes when a soul leaves the spirit world to live in this world, the trip is incomplete. Perhaps the soul is in too big a hurry to get here, or perhaps there was a reason for coming incomplete.

The old man had explained carefully that some people were still in touch with the spirits. You could tell a lot about people by watching how they treated the Different Ones. In the old days if a child came with a hare-shorn lip or a club-twisted foot, it wasn't a terrible thing or a hurtful thing; it meant the child's soul was still in touch with the spirit world. If someone talked to himself he

wasn't "crazy," he wasn't even talking to himself, he was talking to the spirits and it wasn't his fault if the rest of the people couldn't see and hear the spirits, it wasn't his fault if the rest of the people were incapable.

He'd gone to school and learned to read, but he couldn't read out loud like the other children, so he was never really sure if he was reading what was written on the page or what he thought was written on the page. He could write; for a long time he had written messages on slips of paper, trying to communicate, but

but that was a long time ago. That was before someone had laughingly given him a few drinks from a brown bottle, before the woman with the red lips and soft skin had laughed and asked him if he could dance, before

before things started getting confused and everyone was pulling at him, and he tried to write an explanation but the men didn't want to read any notes, one of them slapped the pencil and notepaper away and called him Dummy and then he was hitting out, only it wasn't the man who had called him Dummy who got it, it was a police, and people were running away from him, frightened, and two more police were coming. The woman was crying and saying Stop it, please, he didn't *do* anything, but nobody was listening to her. He knew his face was bleeding and he knew nobody would give him a chance to write notes to explain he hadn't meant to hit the police

and so he ran. He ran and they chased him until he lost them in the dark bush. He had fallen several times, and he was sure sounds had come from his throat, pain sounds and fear sounds, he was sure that if they had only stopped making noise themselves they'd have heard him screaming Leave me alone, I haven't done anything wrong, but even though he Knew what his voice would sound like, even though he Knew....

He tried to tell the old man he had heard his own voice that night. The old man nodded and said Yes, probably you did. If part of you is in the spirit world then you'll be in touch with the spirit world so you'll be able to hear your voice. He wanted to ask if the old man could hear his voice; the old man was in touch with the spirit world. But he was afraid to ask, afraid the old man would say No, he couldn't hear the spirit voice. If the old man couldn't hear it, maybe it wasn't in the spirit world. Maybe he had no voice at all.

It wasn't true that he had found this place. The old man had found him. He had crashed through the thick undergrowth and fallen, and it was just too hard to get up again, his head was spinning, his face was bleeding, he hurt....

And then this wrinkled face was inches from his own, strong brown hands were raising him from the damp moss and leaves, and the old man half carried him to the cabin.

When he woke up he was lying on an old couch, the dried blood washed from his hands and face. The bruises on his body were sore, but the hurt that had always been inside him was gone.

Now there was a boy sleeping with his head resting on his arms, his arms resting on the carving block. A young boy with an unruly shock of brown-blond hair, a boy who was so frightened He Who Would Sing could see fear vibrations coming from him, could smell the fear rising from him.

He Who Would Sing had never had a son. He had no idea what to do, no idea how a parent would treat a frightened child, no idea what to say even if he could speak. He looked back at the small cabin, at the ancient man watching over the sleeping boy, and he knew the only thing he could do was treat the boy as he himself had once been treated. In that moment he also knew the old man, alone, would never be able to help the boy. The old man needed help to look after himself, now. He Who Would Sing was needed.

He walked back toward the small cabin, lay on the grass and stared up at the springtime sky. Waiting.

Supper was thick stew served over mashed potatoes, homemade bread with margarine, and coffee, and for dessert there were berries from the previous summer, preserved in a quart glass bottle. Peter moved quietly to the table, waited until the others were seated, then sat himself on the old wooden chair. He checked to be sure his knife, fork, and spoon were correctly positioned, moved his coffee cup to where it wouldn't get accidentally bumped by his elbow, and again remembered the mother who had shown him that if you put things where Nothing Can Go Wrong, nothing will go wrong, there won't be accidents with the milk and everyone angry, there won't be forks falling to the floor or bread falling butter-side-down and a mess to be wiped clean.

When the old man and the silent one were eating, the boy picked up his knife and fork. He began to eat slowly and carefully, chewing rhythmically.

"You don't talk much, do you boy," the old man said suddenly.

Peter finished his mouthful of food, swallowed, put down his knife and fork. "No sir. Children are supposed to be seen and not heard. One of the fathers told me you don't speak unless you're spoken to."

He Who Would Sing scraped his chair back angrily and moved to glare out the door. Peter blinked, stared down at his plate.

"What's the matter, boy?"

"Is he mad at me?"

"Him? You don't know him very well yet, that's all." The old man reached for a piece of bread and calmly spread margarine on it. "If ever he gets mad at you he'll do a lot more than go to the door like that."

The mute moved back to the table, shrugged, and sat down to continue to eat. "You ever seen anybody shout with his hands?" the old man asked, eating and talking easily. "One time he was so mad he thumped his fist down on the table and all the cups jumped like they was scared. Another time he stomped his foot. We had an orange-coloured cat living with us that time and when he stomped that cat lit out like his tail was on fire. Stayed gone two days. Does he ever get mad at you, maybe that's what he'll do. Sometimes he claps them big hands'a his together and it sounds like a board bein' broke. When he first come here, when he was younger, I had a helluva time with his feet. He'd kick things with'em, and he's got big feet. So one day he hauled off and he kicked at the wall, and me I just whirled around and I yelled right in his face."

The gigantic mute nodded, grinning with the memory; then he opened his mouth and for a moment Peter was sure he could hear laughter, deep, full-throated from-the-belly laughter. Then the large brown fingers flashed and Peter looked inquiringly at the old man.

"Oh, him," the old man snorted sarcastically. "He's tellin' you I yap a lot." He drank his coffee thoughtfully. "Well, maybe I do. 'Course you gotta take into consideration, I gotta talk for two. You ever try arguin' both sides of a question at the same time? You should try it sometimes. But then, I forgot, you don't talk much."

"I do when I have something to say," Peter blurted.

"Just as well. Nobody listens anyway. He don't. Don't pay attention to a thing I say."

The silent one whistled sharply, made a gesture with both hands as if rubbing a huge belly, then put his tongue between his lips and blew sharply. Peter's eyes widened at the power of the rude sound.

"He says I'm fulla hot air," the old man interpreted. The mute shook his head, repeated the rude sound.

Peter put down his knife and fork, swallowed carefully. "I don't think he means hot air," he said shyly, and the mute laughed happily, his face glowing, his soundless throat swelling.

"You're right," the old man said gravely, "but I didn't want to use bad language in front of a gentleman with good manners."

When supper was finished, Peter cleared and wiped the table and put away the margarine, salt, pepper, sugar and bread. Then, carefully stacking everything in its proper order, he did the dishes. There was a certain way to do them, the father had said sternly, and you might as well learn the right way from the beginning. The cleanest things first, the dirtiest and greasiest things last, and if the water gets too greasy, empty it and start with fresh. But do it properly or you'll just wind up doing it again.

The two friends got out a deck of cards and a cribbage board and started to play. Peter had seen people playing cards before, and one place he'd stayed he'd played Snap and Old Maid with the foster brothers, so he watched out of the corner of his eye while he did the dishes.

"Fifteen two, fifteen four and a pair makes eight," the old man intoned, moving his peg. A sharp whistle and the mute held up six fingers, his head shaking. "Oh well," the old man muttered, caught, moving his peg back two holes, "she worked once."

Peter wanted to ask the old man why he was cheating. But then he saw the mute deliberately sneak his peg ahead three holes.

"Here, you bugger, I saw that," the old man snapped, his eyes twinkling, belying the tone of his voice. "Think I don't know? That's how come you always win. Always doing that." And his mumbling continued long after the mute had shrugged and replaced his peg.

When the dishes were finished, the water emptied, the towel carefully hung away, everything done properly, the boy moved to the battered old couch, watching the crib game and the cheating that was part of the game. The old man pegged out, clasped his hands over his head in a victory salute and laughed his gap-toothed laugh. "There, smarty, you didn't even see what I did! And I'm not gonna tell you, either! I won and I beat ya and I got one over on ya." The mute's silent laughter illuminated his face and once again Peter thought he could hear a faint echo of laughter, but before he could be sure, the old man rose and moved to switch on a battery-operated radio and the sound of music filled Peter's ears. He leaned back, and the sounds from the radio combined with the slow teasing progress of the second crib game lulled him to sleep. He didn't even open his eyes when the mute got up, moved to the couch, pulled Peter's legs onto the seat, took off the ugly black shoes and spread an old gray woollen blanket over the sleeping boy.

Small Peter was asking over and over again Why, why, why, but nobody could hear him . . . he could see the bed that had been his for more than three months, and on it his clothes, neatly folded . . . someone whose hands he thought he could recognize was lifting his clothes and putting them in a shopping bag, packing his life in a bag again, and then two bunks in a room, four boys, three besides himself, and he had to sleep in a bottom bunk knowing that just above his head was another bedspring, another mattress, another boy, a bigger boy who seemed okay but you never knew with bigger boys, and all of them fosters, not a real brother in the whole room, just fosters

He Who Would Sing looked over at the couch where the boy lay, his arms and legs moving feebly, his head twisting slowly from side to side. The mute rose suddenly, went to the couch, grabbed Peter roughly and moved him to the front door. So quickly that even the old man wasn't sure what was happening, He Who Would Sing had the door open and the boy's zipper down. Then he began to whistle softly.

Peter jerked awake. He wasn't in a room full of snakes and smoke, he was standing in the doorway and he could hear the sound of something dribbling in the yard. Standing beside Peter, grinning and urinating, was He Who Would Sing. Then Peter realized that he, too, was urinating.

"Well, now!" The old man sounded pleased. "Don't you learn something new all the time! I never knew until he told me just now that when he was a tad he used to pee the bed. Guess that's how he knew what was botherin' you."

It didn't make Peter feel any better to know someone else used to have a problem. That's not much help when you've still got yours. But he was glad he hadn't peed the sofa; he wasn't sure what he'd have done if he'd wakened up and the couch had had a big wet stain on it.

He didn't know what he was supposed to do now, either. Sit on the chair or go back to the couch or what? Did they expect him to stay? He didn't want to do the wrong thing.

"If you need another blanket, boy, just say so." The old man reached for the cards, beginning to shuffle them. "You don't have to freeze. Me, I like to sleep real warm, but him, the big bugger, he sleeps with nothin' on him but a sheet. I don't think that's natural. You watch a dog, now, he goes to sleep he puts his tail over his nose. A chicken, she tucks her head under her wing. A cat curls herself up in a ball and tucks her nose out of sight; only stands to reason if all the animals in nature try to cover their-

selves up good and warm, it's natural to bundle up; but no talking to him sometimes, he's got a head like a rock when he wants. Strips hisself down, washes all over with cold water, dries hisself off and gets into bed in his bare pelt with nothin' on him but a sheet. Weird as hell, that guy."

Peter moved back to the couch, lay down and pulled the blanket over his shoulders. The old man's voice blended with the music from the radio, point and counterpoint, and Peter began to drift off, trying to listen.

"Before we got that pump in the house he'd go outside and stand under the stars scrubbin'. Could be snow fallin', he hadda have his night wash. Me, I wash in the morning. If animals hide their noses from night air, why take your whole body out in it?"

But Peter heard no more; he was sound asleep.