

from *Black Swan Green*
by David Mitchell

“*OPEN UP! OPEN UP!*” holler door knockers. “*OR I’LL BLOW YOUR HOUSE DOWN!*” Bells’re shyer. Bells’re “*Hello? Anyone home?*” The vicarage had a knocker and a bell and I’d tried both, but still nobody answered. I waited. Perhaps the vicar was putting his quill in his inkpot, huffing, “Gracious, three o’clock *already?*” I pressed my ear to the door but the big old house gave nothing away. Sunshine flooded the thirsty lawn, flowers blazed, trees drowsed in the breeze. A dusty Volvo Estate sat in the garage needing a wash and wax. (Volvos’re the only famous Swedish thing ’cept for ABBA. Volvos’ve got roll bars so you don’t get Garibaldi-biscuited if a juggernaut slams you down a motorway embankment.)

I was half-hoping nobody’d answer. The vicarage’s a serious place, the opposite of where kids should be. But when I’d crept here under cover of darkness last week, an envelope’d been Sellotaped over the letter box. FOR THE ATTENTION OF ELIOT BOLIVAR, POET. Inside was a short letter written in lilac ink on slate-gray paper. It invited me to come to the vicarage to discuss my work at three o’clock on Sunday. “Work.” Nobody’s *ever* called Eliot Bolivar’s poems “work.”

I kicked a pebble down the drive.

A bolt slid like a rifle and an old man opened up. His skin was blotched as a dying banana. He wore a collarless shirt and braces. “Good afternoon?”

“—Hi, uh, hello.” (I meant to say “Good afternoon” but Hangman’s keen on *G*-words lately.) “Are you the vicar?”

The man glanced round the garden, as if I might be a decoy. “I am certainly not a vicar. Why?” A foreign accent, sourer than French. “Are you?”

I shook my head. (Hangman wouldn’t even let me say “No.”) “But the vicar invited me.” I showed him the envelope. “Only, he didn’t sign his”—I couldn’t even say “name”—“he didn’t sign it.”

“*Yah, aha.*” The nonvicar hasn’t been surprised by anything for years. “Come to the solarium. You may remove your shoes.”

Inside smelt of liver and soil. A velvet staircase sliced sunlight across the hall. A blue guitar rested on a sort of Turkish chair. A bare lady in a punt drifted on a lake of water lilies in a gold frame. The “solarium” sounded ace. A planetarium for the sun instead of stars? Maybe the vicar was an astronomer in his spare time.

The old man offered me a shoehorn. I’m not sure how to use them, so I said, “No thanks” and

prized my trainers off the usual way. “Are you a butler?”

“Butler. *Yah*, aha. A good description of my role in this house, I think. Follow me, please.”

I thought only archbishops and popes were posh enough for butlers, but vicars can obviously have them too. The worn floorboards ribbled the soles of my feet through my socks. The hallway wound past a boring lounge and a clean kitchen. The high ceilings had cobwebby chandeliers.

I nearly bumped into the butler’s back.

He’d stopped, and spoke around a narrow door. “A visitor.”

This solarium didn’t have any scientific apparatus in it, though its skylights were big enough for telescopes. The huge window framed a wild garden of foxgloves and red-hot pokers. Bookcases lined the walls. Midget trees stood in mossy pots round the unused fireplace. Cigarette smoke hazed everything like in a TV flashback.

On a cane throne sat an old toady lady.

Old but grand, like she’d stepped out of a portrait, with silver hair and a royal purple shawl. I guessed she was the vicar’s mother. Her jewels were big as Cola Cubes and sherbet lemons. Maybe she was sixty, maybe seventy. With old people and little kids you can’t be sure. I turned to look at the butler but the butler’d gone.

The old lady’s rivery eyeballs chased the words across the pages.

Should I cough? That’d be stupid. She knew I was there.

Smoke streamed upward from her cigarette.

I sat down on an armless sofa till she was ready to talk. Her book was called *Le Grand Meaulnes*. I wondered what *Meaulnes* means and wished I was as good at French as Avril Bredon.

The clock on the mantelpiece shaved minutes into seconds.

Her knuckles were as ridged as Toblerone. Every now and then her bony fingers swept ash off the page.

“My name is Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck.” If a peacock had a human voice, that’d be hers. “You may address me as Madame Crommelynck.” I guessed her accent was French without being sure. “My English friends, an endangered species in these days, they say to me, ‘Eva, in Great Britain your “Madame” is too onions-and-béret. Why not simply “Mrs.” Crommelynck?’ And I say, ‘Go to

the hell! What is wrong with onions-and-béret? I am Madame and my *e* is strongly attached!’ *Allons donc*. It is three o’clock, a little after, so you are Eliot Bolivar the poet, I presume?”

“Yes.” (“Poet!”) “Very pleased to meet you, Madame Crommylenk.”

“Crom-*mel*-ynck.”

“Crommelynck.”

“Bad, but better. You are younger than I estimated. Fourteen? Fifteen?”

It’s ace being mistaken for an older kid. “Thirteen.”

“*Ackkk*, a wonderful, miserable age. Not a boy, not a teenager. Impatience but timidity too. Emotional incontinence.”

“Is the vicar going to get here soon?”

“Pardon me?” She leaned forward. “Who”—it came out as “Oo”—“is this ‘vicar’?”

“This *is* the vicarage, right?” I showed her my invitation, uneasy now. “It says so on your gatepost. On the main road.”

“Ah.” Madame Crommelynck nodded. “Vicar, vicarage. You miscomprehend a thing. A vicar lived here once upon a time, doubtless; before him, two vicars, three vicars, many vicars”—her scrawny hand mimed a *poof* of smoke—“but no more. The Anglican church becomes bankrupter and bankrupter, year by year, like British Leyland Cars. My father said, Catholics know how to run the business of religion. Catholics and Mormons. Propagate customers, they tell their congregation, or is the Inferno for you! But your Church of England, no. Consequences is, these *enchantible* rectory houses are sold or rented, and vicars must move to little houses. Only the *name* ‘vicarage’ is remaining.”

“But.” I swallowed. “I’ve been posting my poems through your letter box since January. How come they’re printed in the parish magazine every month?”

“This”—Madame Crommelynck took such a mighty drag on her cigarette I could see it shrink—“should be no mystery to an agile brain. *I* deliver your poems to the real vicar in his real vicarage. An ugly bungalow near Hanley Castle. I do not charge you for this service. Is gratis. Is a fine exercise for my not-agile bones. But in payment, I read your poems first.”

“Oh. Does the real vicar know?”

“*I too* make my deliveries in darkness, anonymous, so I am not apprehended by the vicar’s *wife*—oh, she is an hundred times worst than he is. An harpy of tattle-tittle. She asked to use *my* garden for her Saint Gabriel’s Summer Fête! ‘It is tradition,’ says Mrs. Vicar. ‘We need space for the human

bridge. For the stalls.’ I tell her, ‘Go to the hell! I pay you rent do I not? Who has need of a divine creator who must sell inferior marmalade?’” Madame Crommelynck smacked her leathery lips. “But at least her husband publishes your poems in his funny magazine. Perhaps he is redeemable.” She gestured at a bottle of wine standing on a pearly table. “You will drink a little?”

A whole glass, said Unborn Twin.

I could hear Dad saying, *You drank* what? “No thanks.”

Madame Crommelynck shrugged: *Your loss*.

Inky blood filled her glass.

Satisfied, she rapped on a small pile of *Black Swan Green Parish Magazines* by her side. “To business.”

“A young man needs to learn when a woman wishes her cigarette to be lit.”

“Sorry.”

An emerald dragon wraps Madame Crommelynck’s lighter. I was worried the smell of cigarette smoke’d stick to my clothes and I’d have to make up a story for Mum and Dad about where I’d been. While she smoked, she murmured my poem “Rocks” from May’s magazine.

I felt giddy with importance that *my* words’d captured the attention of this exotic woman. Fear, too. If you show someone something you’ve written, you give them a sharpened stake, lie down in your coffin, and say, “When you’re ready.”

Madame Crommelynck did a tiny growl. “You imagine blank verse is a liberation, but no. Discard rhyme, you discard a parachute...Sentimentality you mistake for emotion...You love words, yes”—a pride bubble swelled up in me—“but your words are still the master of *you*, *you* are not yet master of *them*...” (The bubble popped.) She studied my reaction. “But, at least, your poem is robust enough to *be* criticized. Most so-called poems disintegrate at one touch. Your imagery is here, there, fresh, I am not ashamed to call it so. Now *I* wish to know a thing.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“The domesticity in this poem, these kitchens, gardens, ponds...is not a metaphor for the ludicrous war in the South Atlantic in this year?”

“The Falklands was on while I was writing the poem,” I answered. “The war just sort of seeped in.”

“So these demons who do war in the garden, they symbolize General Galtieri and Margaret

Thatcher. I am right?”

“Sort of, yes.”

“But they are *also* your father and your mother, however. I am right?”

Hesitations’re yeses or nos if the questioner already knows the answer. It’s one thing writing about your parents. Admitting it’s another matter.

Madame Crommelynck did a tobaccoey croon to show her delight. “You are a polite thirteen-year boy who is too timid to cut his umbilical cords! Except”—she gave the page a nasty poke—“*here*. *Here* in your poems you do what you do not dare to do”—she jabbed at the window—“*here*. In reality. To express what is *here*.” She jabbed my heart. It hurt.

X-rays make me queasy.

Once a poem’s left home it doesn’t care about you.

““Back Gardens.”” Madame Crommelynck held up the June edition.

I was sure she thought the title was a killer.

“But why is this title so atrocious?”

“Uh...it wasn’t my first choice.”

“So why you christen your creation with an inferior name?”

“I was going to call it ‘Spooks.’ But there’s this actual gang who’re called that. They go nightcreeping round the village. If I called the poem *that* they might suspect who’d written it and sort of...get me.”

Madame Crommelynck sniffed, underimpressed. Her mouth chanted my lines at quarter volume. I hoped at least she’d say something about the poem’s descriptions of dusk and moonlight and darkness.

“There are many beautiful words in here...”

“Thanks,” I agreed.

“Beautiful words ruin your poetry. A *touch* of beauty enhances a dish, but you throw a hill of it into the pot! No, the palate becomes nauseous. You belief a poem must be beautiful, or it can have no excellence. I am right?”

“Sort of.”

“Your ‘sort of’ is annoying. A yes, or a no, or a qualification, please. ‘Sort of’ is an idle *loubard*, an ignorant *vandale*. ‘Sort of’ says, ‘I am ashamed by clarity and precision.’ So we try again. You believe a poem must be beautiful, or it is not a poem. I am right?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. Idiots labor in this misconception. Beauty is *not* excellence. Beauty is distraction, beauty is cosmetics, beauty is ultimately fatigue. Here”—she read from the fifth verse—“‘Venus swung bright from the ear of the moon.’ The poem has a terminal deflation. *Fffffffffft!* Dead tire. Automobile accident. It says, ‘Am I not a pretty pretty?’ I answer, ‘Go to the hell!’ If you have a magnolia in a moonlight courtyard, do you paint its flowers? Affix the flashy-flashy Christmas lights? Attach plastic parrots? No. You do not.”

What she said sounded true, but.

“You think”—Madame Crommelynck snorted smoke—“‘This old witch is crazy! A magnolia tree exists already. Magnolias do not need poets to exist. In the case of a poem, a poem, *I* must create it.’”

I nodded. (I *would*’ve thought that if I’d’ve had a few minutes.)

“You *must* say what you think, or else spend your Saturday with your head in a bucket and not in conversation with me. You understand?”

“Okay,” I said, nervous that “okay” wasn’t okay.

“Good. I reply, verse is ‘made.’ But the word ‘make’ is insufficient for a true poem. ‘Create’ is insufficient. All words are insufficient. Because of this. *The poem exists before it is written.*”

That, I didn’t get. “Where?”

“T. S. Eliot expresses it *so*—the poem is a raid on the inarticulate. I, Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck, agree with him. Poems who are not written yet, or not written ever, exists here. The realm of the inarticulate. Art”—she put another cigarette in her mouth, and this time I was ready with her dragon lighter—“fabricated of the inarticulate *is* beauty. Even if its themes is ugly. Silver moons, thundering seas, clichés of cheese, poison beauty. The amateur thinks *his* words, *his* paints, *his* notes, makes the beauty. But the master knows his words is just the *vehicle* in who beauty sits. The master knows he does *not* know what beauty is. Test this. Attempt a definition now. What is beauty?”

Madame Crommelynck tapped cigarette ash into a blobby ruby ashtray.

“Beauty’s...”

She relished my stumpedness. I wanted to impress her with a clever definition, but I kept crashing into *Beauty’s something that’s beautiful*.

Problem was, all this is new. In English at school we study a grammar book by a man named Ronald Ridout, read *Cider with Rosie*, do debates on foxhunting, and memorize “I Must Go Down to the Sea Again,” by John Masefield. We don’t have to actually think about stuff.

I admitted, “It’s difficult.”

“Difficult?” (Her ashtray was in the shape of a curled girl, I saw.) “Impossible! Beauty is *immune* to definition. When beauty is present, you know. Winter sunrise in dirty Toronto, one’s new lover in an old café, sinister magpies on a roof. But is the beauty of these *made*? No. Beauty *is* here, that is all. Beauty *is*.”

“But...” I hesitated, wondering if I should say this.

“My one demand,” she said, “is you say what you think!”

“You just chose natural things. How about paintings, or music. We say, ‘The potter makes a beautiful vase.’ Don’t we?”

“We *say*, we *say*. Be careful of *say*. Words *say*, ‘You have labeled this abstract, this concept, therefore you have captured it.’ No. They lie. Or not lie, but are maladroit. *Clumsy*. Your potter has made the vase, yes, but has *not* made the *beauty*. Only an object where beauty *resides*. Until the vase is dropped and breaks. Who is the ultimate fate of every vase.”

“But—” I still wasn’t satisfied. “Surely *some* people, *somewhere* know what beauty is? At a university?”

“University?” She made a noise that might’ve been laughter. “Imponderables *are* ponderable, but answerable, no. Ask a philosopher, but be cautious. If you hear, ‘Eureka!’, if you think, ‘His answer has captured my question!’, then here is *proof* he is a counterfeit. If your philosopher has *truly* left Plato’s cave, if he has stared into that sun of the blind...” She counted the three possibilities on her fingers. “He is lunatic, or his answers are questions who is only masquerading as answers, or he is silent. Silent because you can *know* or you can *say*, but both, no. My glass is empty.”

The last drops were the thickest.

“Are you a poet?” (I’d *nearly* said “too.”)

“No. That title is hazardous. But I had intimacy with poets when I was young. Robert Graves wrote a poem of me. Not his best. William Carlos Williams asked me to abandon my husband and”—she uttered the word like a pantomime witch—“‘elope’! Very romantic, but I had a pragmatic head and he was destitute as...*épouvantail*, a—how you say the man in a field who frights birds?”

“Scarecrow?”

“Scarecrow. Exactly. So I tell him, ‘Go to the hell, Willy, our souls eat poetry, but one has seven deadly sins to feed!’ He consented my logic. Poets are listeners, if they are not intoxicated. But *novelists*”—Madame Crommelynck did a *yuck* face—“is schizoids, lunatics, liars. Henry Miller stayed in our colony in Taormina. A pig, a perspiring pig, and Hemingway, you know?”

I’d heard of him so I nodded.

“Lecherousest pig in the entire farm! Cinematographers? *Ffffffft. Petits Zeus* of their universes. The world is their own film set. Charles Chaplin also, he was my neighbor in Geneva, across the lake. A charming *petit Zeus*, but a *petit Zeus*. Painters? Squeeze their hearts dry to make the pigments. No heart remains for people. Look at that Andalusian goat, Picasso. His biographers come for my stories of him, beg, offer money, but I tell them, ‘Go to the hell, I am not an human *jukebox*.’ Composers? My father was one. Vyvyan Ayrs. His ears was burnt with his music. I, or my mother, he rarely listened. Formidable in his generation, but now he is fallen from the repertory. He exiled at Zedelgem, south of Brugge. My mother’s estate was there. My native tongue is Flemish. So you hear, English is not an adroit tongue for me, too many *-lesses* and *-lessnesses*. You think I am French?”

I nodded.

“Belgian. The destiny of discreet neighbors is to be confused with the noisy ones next door. See an animal! On the lawn. By the geraniums...”

One moment we were watching the twitch of a squirrel’s heart.

The next, it’d vanished.

Madame Crommelynck said, “Look at me.”

“I am doing.”

“No. You are not. Sit here.”

I sat on her footstool. (I wondered if Madame Crommelynck’s got a butler ’cause something’s wrong with her legs.) “Okay.”

“Do not hide in your ‘okay.’ Closer. I do not bite off the heads of boys. Not on a full stomach. Look.”

There’s a rule that says you don’t gaze too intently at a person’s face. Madame Crommelynck was ordering me to break it.

“Look closer.”

Those parma violets, I smelt, fabrics, an ambery perfume, and something rotting. Then something

weird happened. The old woman turned into an It. Sags ruckused its eye bags and eyelids. Its eyelashes'd been gummed into spikes. Deltas of tiny red veins snaked its stained whites. Its irises misty like long-buried marbles. Makeup dusted its mummified skin. Its gristly nose was subsiding into its skull hole.

“You see beauty here?” It spoke in the wrong voice.

Manners told me to say yes.

“Liar!” It pulled back and became Madame Crommelynck again. “Forty, thirty years ago, yes. My parents created me in the customary fashion. Like your potter making your vase. I grew to a girl. In mirrors, my beautiful lips told my beautiful eyes, ‘You are me.’ Men made stratagems and fights, worshipped and deceived, burnt money on extravagances, to ‘win’ this beauty. My age of gold.”

Hammering started up in a far-off room.

“But human beauty falls leaf by leaf. You miss the beginning. One tells one, *No, I am tired* or *The day is bad, that is all*. But later, one cannot contradict the mirror. Day by day by day it falls, until this *vieille sorcière* is all who remains, who uses cosmetician's potions to approximate her birth gift. Oh, people say, ‘The old are *still* beautiful!’ They patronize, they flatter, maybe they wish to comfort themselves. But no. Eating the roots of beauty is a—” Madame Crommelynck sank back into her creaky throne, tired out. “An, how you say, the snail who has no house?”

“A slug?”

“Insatiable, undestructible slug. Where in the hell are my cigarettes?”

The box'd slipped to her feet. I passed them to her.

“Leave now.” She looked away. “Return next Saturday, three o'clock, I tell you more reasons why your poems fail. Or do not return. An hundred other works are waiting.” Madame Crommelynck picked up *Le Grand Meaulnes*, found her place, and started reading. Her breathing'd got whistlier and I wondered if she was ill.

“Thanks, then...”

My legs'd got pins and needles.

As far as Madame Crommelynck was concerned, I'd already left the solarium.

* * *

Druggy pom-pom bees hovered in the lavender. The dusty Volvo was still in the drive, still needing its wash. I didn't tell Mum or Dad where I was going today, either. Telling them about Madame Crommelynck'd mean (a) admitting I was Eliot Bolivar; (b) twenty questions about who she is I can't

answer 'cause she's an unnumbered dot-to-dot; (c) being told not to pester her. Kids aren't s'posed to visit old ladies if they're not grandmothers or aunts.

I pressed the bell.

The vicarage took *ages* to swallow up the chime.

Nobody. Had she gone out for a walk?

The butler hadn't taken this long last week.

I banged the knocker, sure it was useless.

I'd pedaled like mad over here 'cause I was thirty minutes late. Madame Crommelynck'd have a field marshal's attitude to punctuality, I reckoned. All for nothing, it appeared. I'd got *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway from the school library, just 'cause Madame Crommelynck'd mentioned him. (The introduction said the book'd made Americans burst into tears when it was read on the radio. But it's just about an old guy catching a monster sardine. If Americans cry at that, they'll cry at anything.) I rubbed some lavender in my palms and snuffed. Lavender's my favorite smell, after Wite-Out and bacon rind. I sat down on the steps, not sure where to go next.

A July afternoon yawned.

Mirage puddles'd shimmered on the Welland road as I rode here.

I could've gone to sleep on the baked doorstep.

Little naked ants.

A bolt slid like a rifle and the old butler opened up. "You are back for more." Today he wore a golf jersey. "You may remove your shoes."

"Thanks." As I prized off my trainers I heard a piano, joined by a quiet violin. I hoped Madame Crommelynck didn't have a visitor. Once you have three people you may as well have a hundred. The stairway needed fixing. A knacked blue guitar'd been left on a broken stool. In the gaudy frame a shivery woman sprawled in a punt on a clogged pond. Once again, the butler led me to the solarium. (I looked "solarium" up. It just means "an airy room.") The sequence of doors we passed made me think of all the rooms of my past and future. The hospital ward I was born in, classrooms, tents, churches, offices, hotels, museums, nursing homes, the room I'll die in. (Has it been built yet?) Cars're rooms. So are woods. Skies're ceilings. Distances're walls. Wombs're rooms made of mothers. Graves're rooms made of soil.

That music was swelling.

A Jules Verne hi-fi, all silvery knobs and dials, occupied one corner of the solarium. Madame Crommelynck sat on her cane throne, eyes shut, listening. As if the music was a warm bath. (This time I knew she wouldn't be speaking for a while, so I just sat down on the armless sofa.) A classical L.P. was playing. Nothing like the *rumpty-tump-tump* stuff Mr. Kempsey plays in Music. Jealous *and* sweet, this music was, sobbing *and* gorgeous, muddy *and* crystal. But if the right words existed the music wouldn't need to.

The piano'd vanished. Now a flute'd joined the violin.

(I can still hear it, hours later.)

An unfinished letter going on for *pages* lay on Eva Crommelynck's desk. She'd put on this L.P. when she couldn't think of its next sentence.

A fat silver pen rested on the page she'd stopped writing. I batted off an urge to pick it up and read it.

The stylus clunked in its cradle. "The inconsolable," Madame Crommelynck said, "is so consoling." She didn't look very pleased to see me. "What is that advertisement you are wearing on your chest?"

"What advertisement?"

"*That* advertisement on your sweater!"

"This is my Liverpool F.C. top. I've supported them since I was five."

"What signifies 'Hitachi'?"

"The F.A.'ve changed the rules so football teams can wear sponsors' logos. Hitachi's an electronics firm. From Hong Kong, I think."

"So you *pay* an organization to be their advertisement? *Allons donc*. In clothes, in cuisine, the English have an irresistible urge to self-mutilation. But today you are late."

Explaining the ins and outs of the Mr. Blake Affair would've taken too long. I've lost count of how many times Mum and Dad and even Julia (when she's feeling vicious)'ve said *We'll say no more about it*, then dredge it up five minutes later. So I just told Madame Crommelynck I've got to do the washing up on my own for a month to pay for something I'd broken, and it'd been a late lunch 'cause Mum'd forgotten to defrost the leg of lamb.

Madame Crommelynck got bored before I finished. She gestured at the bottle of wine on her pearly table. "Today you drink?"

“I’m only allowed a thimbleful, on special occasions.”

“If an audience with me does not qualify as ‘special,’ pour my glass.”

(White wine smells of Granny Smiths, paint-stripper, and tiny flowers.)

“Always pour so the label is visible! If the wine is good, your drinker should know so. If the wine is bad, you deserve shame.”

I obeyed. A drop dribbled down the bottle’s neck.

“So. Do I learn today your true name, or do I still give hospitality to a stranger who hides behind a ridiculous pseudonym?”

Hangman was *even* stopping me from saying “Sorry.” I got so het up and desperate and angry I blurted out “Sorry!” anyway, but so loud it sounded really rude.

“Your elegant apology does not answer my question.”

I mumbled, “Jason Taylor” and wanted to cry.

“Jay *Who*? Pronounce it clearly! My ears are as old as me! I do not have microphones hidden to collect every little word!”

I *hated* my name. “Jason Taylor.” Flavorless as chewed receipts.

“If you are an ‘Adolf Coffin,’ or a ‘Pius Broomhead,’ I comprehend. But why hide ‘Jason Taylor’ under an inaccessible symbolist and a Latin American revolutionary?”

My *huh*? must’ve shown.

“Eliot! T. S.! Bolívar! Simón!”

“‘Eliot Bolivar’ just sounded more...poetic.”

“What is more *poetic* than ‘Jason,’ an Hellenic hero? Who foundationed European literature if not the ancient Greeks? Not Eliot’s coterie of thieves of graves, I assure you! And what is a poet if he is not a tailor of words? Poets and tailors join what nobody else can join. Poets and tailors conceal their craft *in* their craft. No, I do not accept your answer. I believe the truth is, you use your pseudonym because your poetry is a shameful secret. I am correct?”

“‘Shameful’ isn’t the exact word, exactly.”

“Oh, so *what* is the exact word, exactly?”

“Writing poetry’s”—I looked around the solarium, but Madame Crommelynck’s got a tractor beam—“sort of...gay.”

“‘Gay’? A merry activity?”

This was hopeless. “Writing poems is...what creeps and poofers do.”

“So you are one of these ‘creeps’?”

“No.”

“Then you are a ‘*poof*-ter,’ whatever one is?”

“No!”

“Then your logic is eluding me.”

“If you’re dad’s a famous composer and your mum’s an aristocrat, you can do things that you can’t do if your dad works at Greenland Supermarkets and if you go to a comprehensive school. Poetry’s one of those things.”

“*Aha!* Truth! You are afraid the hairy barbarians will not accept you in their tribe if you write poetry.”

“That’s more or less it, yeah...”

“More? Or less? Which is the exact word, exactly?”

(She’s a pain sometimes.) “That’s it. Exactly.”

“And you *wish* to become an hairy barbarian?”

“I’m a *kid*. I’m thirteen. *You* said it’s a miserable age, being thirteen, and you’re right. If you don’t fit in, they make your life a misery. Like Floyd Chaceley or Nicholas Briar.”

“*Now* you are talking like a real poet.”

“I don’t *understand* it when you say stuff like that!”

(Mum’d’ve gone, *Don’t talk to me in that tone of voice!*)

“I *mean*”—Madame Crommelynck almost looked pleased—“you are entirely of your words.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“You are being quintessentially truthful.”

“Anyone can be truthful.”

“About superficialities, Jason, yes, is easy. About pain, no, is not. So you want a double life. One Jason Taylor who seeks approval of hairy barbarians. Another Jason Taylor is Eliot Bolivar, who seeks approval of the literary world.”

“Is that so impossible?”

“If you wish to be a versifier,” she answered, whirlpooling her wine, “very possible. If you are a true artist”—she schwurked wine round her mouth—“absolutely *never*. If you are not truthful to the world about who and what you are, your art will stink of falsenesses.”

I had no answer for that.

“Nobody knows of your poems? A teacher? A confidant?”

“Only you, actually.”

Madame Crommelynck’s eyes’ve got this glint. It’s nothing to do with outside light. “You hide your poetry from your lover?”

“No,” I said. “I, uh, don’t.”

“Don’t hide your poetry or don’t have a lover?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Quick as a chess-clock thumper, she said, “You prefer boys?”

I still can’t believe she said that. (Yes I can.) “I’m normal!”

Her drumming fingers on the pile of parish magazines said, *Normal?*

“I do like this one girl, actually,” I blurted out, to prove it. “Dawn Madden. But she’s already got a boyfriend.”

“Oho? And the boyfriend of Dawn Madden, he is a poet or a barbarian?” (She *loved* how she’d tricked Dawn Madden’s name out of me.)

“Ross Wilcox’s a prat, not a poet. But if you’re going to suggest that I write a poem to Dawn Madden, no *way*. I’d be the village *laughingstock*.”

“Absolutely, if you compose derivative verses of cupids and cliché, Miss Madden will remain with her *‘prat’* and you will justly earn derision. But if a poem is beauty and *truth*, your Miss Madden will treasure your words more than money, more than certificates. Even when she is as old as I. *Especially* when she is as old as I.”

“But.” I ducked the subject. “Don’t heaps of artists use pseudonyms?”

“Who?”

“Um...” Only Cliff Richard and Sid Vicious came to mind.

A phone started ringing.

“True poetry *is* truth. Truth is not popular, so poetry also is not.”

“But...truth about what?”

“Oh, the life, the death, the heart, memory, time, cats, fear. Anything.” (The butler didn’t seem to be answering the phone either.) “Truth is everywhere, like seeds of trees; even deceits contain elements of truth. But the eye is clouded by the quotidian, by prejudice, by worryings, scandal, predation, passion, ennui, and, worst, television. Despicable machine. Television was here in my solarium. When I arrived. I threw it in the cellar. *It* was watching *me*. A poet throws all but truth in the cellar. Jason. There is a matter?”

“Er...your phone’s ringing.”

“I know a phone is ringing! It can go to the hell! I am talking to *you*!” (My parents’d run into a burning asbestos mine if they thought there was a phone in there ringing for them.) “One week before, we agreed ‘What is beauty?’ is a question unanswerable, yes? So today, a greater mystery. If an art is *true*, if an art is *free of falsenesses*, it is, a priori, beautiful.”

I tried to digest that.

(The phone finally gave up.)

“Your best poem in here”—she rifled through the parish magazines—“is your ‘Hangman.’ It has pieces of truth of your speech impediment, I am right?”

A familiar shame burnt from my neck, but I nodded.

Only in my poems, I realized, do I get to say *exactly* what I want.

“Of course I am right. If ‘Jason Taylor’ was the name here, and not ‘Eliot Bolivar Ph.D., O.B.E., R.I.P., B.B.C.’”—she biffed the page with “Hangman” on it—“the truth will make the greatest mortification with the hairy barbarians of Black Swan Green, yes?”

“I might as well hang myself.”

“*Pfff!* Eliot Bolivar, *he* can hang. You, *you* must *write*. If you still fear to publish in your name, is better not to publish. But poetry is more resilient than you think. For many years I assisted for Amnesty International.” (Julia’s often on about them.) “Poets survive in gulags, in detention blocks, in

torture chambers. Even in that misery hole there is poets working, *Merdegate*, no, where in the hell, on the Channel, I always am forgetting...” (She rapped her forehead to shake free the name.) “*Margate*. So believe me. Comprehensive schools are not so infernal.”

“That music, when I came in. Was that your dad’s? It was beautiful. I didn’t know there *was* music like that.”

“The sextet of Robert Frobisher. He was an amanuensis for my father, when my father was too old, too blind, too weak to hold a pen.”

“I looked up Vyvyan Ayrs in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at school.”

“Oh? And how does this authority venerate my father?”

The entry’d been short enough to memorize. ““British composer, born 1870 Yorkshire; died 1932 Neerbeke, Belgium. Noted works: *Matruschyka Doll Variations*, *Untergehen Violinkonzert*, and *Todonvogel*—”

“*Die TODtenvogel! TODtenvogel!*”

“Sorry. ‘Critically respected in Europe during his lifetime, Ayrs is now rarely referred to outside the footnotes of twentieth-century music.’”

“That is all?”

I’d expected her to be impressed.

“A majestic encomium.” She said it flat as a glass of Coke left out.

“But it must’ve been *ace* having a composer for a father.”

I held the dragon lighter steady as she lowered the tip into the flame. “He made great unhappinesses for my mother.” She inhaled, then blew out a quivery sapling of smoke. “Even today, to forgive is difficult. At your age, I went to school in Brugge and saw my father at weekends only. He had his illness, his music, and we did not communicate. After his funeral, I wished to ask him one thousand things. Too late. Old story. Next to your head is a photographic album. Yes, that one. Pass it.”

A girl Julia’s age sat on a pony under a big tree, before color was invented. A strand of hair curled against her cheek. Her thighs clamped the pony’s flanks.

“God,” I thought aloud, “she’s gorgeous.”

“Yes. Whatever beauty is, I had it, in those days. Or it had me.”

“You?” Startled, I compared Madame Crommelynck with the girl in the photo. “Sorry.”

“Your habit with that word diminishes your stature. Néfertiti was my finest pony. I entrusted her to the Dhondts—the Dhondts were family friends—when Grigoire and I escaped to Sweden seven, eight years after this photograph. The Dhondts were killed in 1942, during occupation by the Nazis. You imagine they are Resistance heroes? No, it was Morty Dhondt’s sports car. His brakes failed, *boom*. Néfertiti’s destiny, I do not know. Glue, sausages, stews for black-market men, for Gypsies, for SS officers, if I am realistic. This photograph was taken in Neerbeke in 1929, 1930...Behind that tree is Zedelgem Château. My ancestors’ home.”

“Do you still own it?”

“It no longer exists. The Germans built an airfield where you see, so the British, the Americans...” Her hand made a *boom* gesture. “Stones, craters, mud. Now is all little boxes for houses, a gasoline station, a supermarket. Our home who survived half a millennium exists now only in a few old heads. And a few old photographs. My wise friend Susan has written this. ‘By slicing out *this* moment and freezing it...’” Madame Crommelynck studied the girl she’d once been and tapped ash from her cigarette. ““...all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.””

A bored dog barked a garden or two away.

A bride and groom pose outside a flinty chapel. Bare twigs say it’s winter. The groom’s thin lips say, *Look what I’ve got*. A top hat, a cane, half fox. But the bride’s half lioness. Her smile’s the idea of a smile. She knows more about her new husband than he knows about her. Above the church door a stone lady gazes up at her stone knight. Flesh-and-blood people in photographs look at the camera, but stone people look through the camera straight at you.

“My producers,” announced Madame Crommelynck.

“Your parents? Were they nice?” That sounded stupid.

“My father died of syphilis. Your encyclopedia did not say that. Not a ‘nice’ death, I recommend you avoid. You see, the era”—“era” was a long sigh—“was different. Feelings were not expressed so incontinently. Not in our class of society, anyhow. My mother, oh, she was capable of great affection, but *tempestuous* anger! She exerted power over all who she chose. No, I think not ‘nice.’ She died of an aneurysm just two years later.”

I said, “I’m sorry,” like you’re s’posed to, for the first time in my life.

“It was a mercy she did not witness the destruction of Zedelgem.” Madame Crommelynck raised her glasses to peer closer at the wedding photo. “How young! Photographs make me forget if time is

forwards or backwards. No, photographs make me wonder if there *is* a forwards or backwards. My glass is empty, Jason.”

I poured her wine, with the label showing properly.

“I never comprehended their marriage. It’s alchemy. Do you?”

“Me? Do I understand my parents’ marriage?”

“That is my question.”

I thought hard. “I’ve”—Hangman gripped “never” and wouldn’t let it go—“I haven’t thought about it before. I mean...my parents’re just there. They argue quite a lot, I s’pose, but they do a lot of their talking when they’re arguing. They *can* be nice to each other. If it’s Mum’s birthday and Dad’s away he gets Interflora to bring flowers. But Dad’s working most weekends ’cause of the recession, and Mum’s opening this gallery in Cheltenham. There’s like this cold war over *that* at the moment.” (Talking with some people’s like moving up higher screens of a computer game.) “If I’d been more like an ideal son like a kid from *Little House on the Prairie*, if I’d been less sulky, then maybe Mum and Dad’s marriage might’ve been”—the true word was “sunnier,” but Hangman was active today—“friendlier. Julia, my”—Hangman teased me over the next word—“sister, she’s ace at poking fun at Dad. Which he loves. And she can cheer Mum up just by rabbiting on. But she’s off to university in the autumn. Then it’ll just be the three of us. I can never get the right words out, not like Julia.” Stammerers’re usually too stressed to feel sorry for themselves, but a few drops of self-pity fell on me. “I can never get *any* words out.”

Far off, the butler switched on his Hoover.

“*Ackkk*,” Madame Crommelynck said, “I am an inquisitive old witch.”

“No you’re not.”

The old Belgian lady gave me a pointy glare over her glasses.

“Not *all* the time.”

A young pianist sat on his piano stool, relaxed, smiling, smoking. His hair was quiffed waxy like hair on old-fashioned film stars, but he didn’t look toffish. He looked like Gary Drake. Nails in his eyes, wolf in his grin.

“Meet Robert Frobisher.”

“He’s the one,” I asked, checking, “who wrote that incredible music?”

“Yes, he is the one who wrote that incredible music. Robert revered my father. Like a disciple, a

son. They shared a musical empathy, who is an empathy more intimate than the sexual.” (She said “sexual” like it was any other word.) “It is thanks to Robert, my father could compose his final masterpiece, *Die Todtenvogel*. In Warsaw, in Paris, in Vienna, for a brief summer, the name of Vyvyan Ayrs was restored to glory. *Oh*, I was a jealous *demoiselle*!”

“Jealous? Why?”

“My father praised Robert without respite! So my behavior was disgraceful. But such reverences, such empathies that existed between them, they are very combustible. Friendship is a calmer thing. Robert left Zedelgem in winter.”

“Back to England?”

“Robert had no home. His parents had uninherited him. He accommodated in an hotel, in Brugge. My mother forbade me to meet him. Fifty years ago, reputations were important passports. Ladies of pedigree had a chaperone every minute. Anyhow, I did not wish to meet. Grigoire and I were engaged and Robert was sick in his head. Genius, sickness, flash-flash, storm, calm, like a lighthouse. An isolated lighthouse. He could have eclipsed Benjamin Britten, Olivier Messiaen, all of them. But after he completed his sextet he blew his brains out in his hotel bathroom.”

The young pianist was still smiling.

“Why did he do it?”

“Has suicide only one cause? His family’s rejection? Despondency? Too much he read my father’s Nietzsche? Robert was obsessed of recurrence eternal. Recurrence is the heart of his music. We live *exactly* the same life, Robert believed, and die *exactly* the same death again, again, again, to the *same* demisemiquaver. To eternity. Or else”—Madame Crommelynck relit her gone-out cigarette—“we can blame the girl.”

“What girl?”

“Robert loved a silly girl. She did not love him in return.”

“So he killed himself just because she wouldn’t love him?”

“A factor, perhaps. How big, how small, only Robert can tell us.”

“But *killing* himself. Just over a girl.”

“He was not the first one. He will not be the last one.”

“*God*. Did the girl, y’know, know about it?”

“Of course! Brugge is a city who is a village. She knew. And I assure you, fifty years later, the conscience of that girl *still* hurts. Like rheumatism. She would pay any price for Robert not to die. But

what can she do?"

"You've kept in touch with her?"

"It is difficult for us to avoid, yes." Madame Crommelynck kept her eyes on Robert Frobisher. "This girl wants my forgiveness, before she dies. She begs me, 'I was eighteen! Robert's devotions were just a...a...flattery game for me! How could I *know* a famished heart will eat its mind? Can *kill* its body?' Oh, I pity her. I *want* to forgive her. But here is the truth." (Now she looked at me.) "I *abhor* that girl! I abhorred her all my life and I do not know how to *stop* to abhor her."

When Julia's *really* got on my wick, I vow I'll *never* talk to her again. But by teatime, often as not, I've forgotten it. "Fifty years's a long time to stay angry with someone."

Madame Crommelynck nodded, glum. "I do not recommend it."

"Have you tried *pretending* to forgive her?"

"*Pretending*"—she looked at the garden—"is not the truth."

"But you said *two* true things, right? One, you *hate* this girl. Two, you *want* her to feel better. If you decided that the wanting truth's more important than the hating truth, just *tell* her you've forgiven her, even if you haven't. At least she'd feel better. Maybe that'd make you feel better too."

Madame Crommelynck studied her hands, moodily, both sides. "Sophistry," she pronounced.

I'm not sure what "sophistry" means so I kept schtum.

Far away the butler switched off the Hoover.

"Robert's sextet is now impossible to buy. You encounter his music only by serendipity in vicarages in July afternoons. This is your one chance in your life. You can work this gramophone?"

"Sure."

"Let us listen to the other side, Jason."

"Great." I turned the record over. Old L.P.s're as thick as plates.

A clarinet woke up and danced around the cello from side A.

Madame Crommelynck lit a new cigarette and shut her eyes.

I lay back on the armless sofa. I've never listened to music lying down. Listening's reading if you close your eyes.

Music's a wood you walk through.

A thrush warbled on a starry bush. The turntable gave a dying *ahhh* and the stylus clunked home. Madame Crommelynck's hand told me to stay where I was when I got up to light her cigarette. "Tell me. Who are your teachers?"

"We've got different teachers for different subjects."

"I mean, what are the writers you revere most greatly?"

"Oh." I mentally scanned my bookshelf for the really impressive names. "Isaac Asimov. Ursula Le Guin. John Wyndham."

"*Assy-smurf? Ursular Gun? Wind-'em?* These are modern poets?"

"No. Sci-fi, fantasy. Stephen King, too. He's horror."

"'Fantasy'? *Pffft!* Listen to Ronald Reagan's homilies! 'Horror'? What of Vietnam, Afghanistan, South Africa? Idi Amin, Mao Tse-Tung, Pol Pot? Is not enough horror? I *mean*, who are your *masters?* Chekhov?"

"Er...no."

"But you have read *Madame Bovary*?"

(I'd never heard of her books.) "No."

Each name climbed up the octave. "Hermann Hesse?"

"No." Unwisely, I tried to dampen Madame Crommelynck's disgust. "We don't really do Europeans at school—"

"'Europeans'? England is now drifted to the Caribbean? Are you African? Antartican? You *are* European, you illiterate monkey of puberty! Thomas Mann, Rilke, Gogol! Proust, Bulgakov, Victor Hugo! This is your culture, your inheritance, your *skeleton!* You are ignorant even of *Kafka*?"

I flinched. "I've heard of him."

"This?" She held up *Le Grand Meaulnes*.

"No, but you were reading it last week."

"Is one of my bibles. I read it every year. So!" She frisbeed the hardback book at me, hard. It hurt. "Alain-Fournier is your first true master. He is nostalgic and tragic and enchantible and he aches and you will ache too and best of everything, he is *true*."

As I opened it up a cloud of foreign words blew out. *Il arriva chez nous un dimanche de novembre 189...* “It’s in French.”

“Translations are incourteous between Europeans.” She detected the guilt in my silence. “Oho? English schoolboys in our enlightened 1980s cannot read a book in a foreign language?”

“We *do* do French at school...” Madame Crommelynck made me go on. “...But we’ve only got up to *Youpla boum! Book 2.*”

“*Pfffffffffffffft!* When *I* was thirteen I spoke French and Dutch fluently! I could converse in German, in English, in Italian! *Ackkk*, for your schoolmasters, for your minister of education, execution is too good! Is not even arrogance! It is a baby who is too *primitive* to know its nappy is stinking and bursting! You English, you *deserve* the government of Monster Thatcher! I curse you with *twenty years* of Thatchers! Maybe *then* you comprehend, speaking one language only is *prison*! You have a French dictionary and a grammar, anyhow?”

I nodded. Julia does.

“So. Translate the first chapter of Alain-Fournier from French to English, or do not return next Saturday. The author needs no parochial schoolchildren to disfigure his truth, but *I* need you to proof you do not waste my time. Go.”

Madame Crommelynck turned to her desk and picked up her pen.

Once again, I saw myself out of the vicarage. I stuffed *Le Grand Meaulnes* under my Liverpool F.C. top, in case I ran into any kids.

* * *

It thundered during Religious Education the day school broke up for the summer. By the time we got to Black Swan Green it was *pissing* it down. Getting off the bus, Ross Wilcox shoved me between my shoulder blades. I arse-flopped into this ankle-deep puddle where the gutter’d flooded. Ross Wilcox and Gary Drake and Wayne Nashend *shat* themselves laughing. Goosey-goosey girls turned and tittered under their brollies. (Mysterious how girls can always conjure up umbrellas.) Andrea Bozard saw, so of course she nudged Dawn Madden and pointed. Dawn Madden shrieked with laughter like girls do. (*Bitch*, I didn’t quite dare say. The rain’d gummed a loop of her beautiful hair to her smooth forehead. I’d’ve *died* if I could’ve taken that loop of hair in my mouth and sucked the rain out.) Even Norman Bates, the driver, barked one bark of amusement. But I was *soaked* and humiliated and *furios*. I wanted to tear random bones out of Ross Wilcox’s mutilated body, but Maggot reminded me he’s the hardest kid in the second year and he’d probably just twist both hands off my wrists and lob them over the Black Swan. “Oh *really* blinking funny Wilcox”—Maggot stopped me from saying “fucking funny” in case Wilcox demanded a scrap—“that’s pathetic—” But on “pathetic” my voice squeaked like my balls haven’t dropped. Everyone heard. A fresh bomb of laughter blew me into tiny bits.

I knocked a rhythm on the vicarage knocker and finished with the doorbell. Wormcasts pitted the bubbling lawn like squeezed blackheads and slugs were climbing up walls. The porch roof was dripping. My parka hood was dripping. Mum's gone to Cheltenham today to speak with builders, so I'd told Dad I'd probably go and play electronic battleships at Alastair Nurton's. ("Probably" is a word with an emergency ejector seat.) Dean Moran's considered a bad influence since the Mr. Blake Affair. I'd come on my bike 'cause if anyone'd been out I could've just said "All right?" and cycled on. If you're caught on foot you might face an interrogation. But today everyone was watching Jimmy Connors versus John McEnroe on TV. (It's wet here but it's sunny in Wimbledon.) *Le Grand Meaulnes* was wrapped inside two Marks & Spencer placky bags stuffed inside my shirt, with my translation. I spent *hours* on it. Every other word, I'd had to look up in the dictionary. Even Julia noticed. She said yesterday, "Things slackened off towards the end of term, I thought." I answered that I wanted to get my summer homework over and done with. The weird thing is, doing the translation didn't *feel* like hours, not once I got going. *Bags* more interesting than *Youpla boum! Le français pour tous (French Method) Book 2* about Manuel, Claudette, Marie-France, Monsieur *et* Madame Berri. I'd liked to've asked Miss Wyche, our French teacher, to check my translation. But getting creepstained as a model student in a subject as girly as French'd sink what's left of my middle-ranking status.

Translating's half poem and half crossword and no doddle. Loads of words aren't actual words you can look up, but screws of grammar that hold the sentence together. It takes *yonks* to find out what they mean, though once you know them you know them. *Le Grand Meaulnes* is about this kid Augustin Meaulnes. Augustin Meaulnes's got an aura, like Nick Yew, that just has an effect on people. He comes to live with a schoolmaster's son called François as a boarder. François tells the story. We hear Meaulnes's footsteps, in the room above, before we even see him. It's brilliant. I'd decided to ask Madame Crommelynck to teach me French. Proper French, not French at school. I'd even started daydreaming about going to France, after my O levels or A levels. French kissing's where you touch with your tongues.

The butler was taking *forever*. Even longer than last week.

Impatient for my new future to come, I pressed the doorbell again.

Immediately, a pinky man in black opened up. "*Hello.*"

"Hello."

The rain turned up a notch or two.

"*Hello.*"

"Are you the new butler?"

“Butler?” The pinky man laughed. “Gracious, no! That’s a first! I’m Francis Bendincks. Vicar of Saint Gabriel’s.” Only now did I see his dog collar. “And you are?”

“Oh. I’ve come to see Madame Crommelynck...”

“Francis!” Footsteps *cronk cronk cronk* ed down the wooden stairs. (Outdoor shoes, not slippers.) A woman’s voice snipped at high speed. “If that’s the television-license people, tell them I’ve looked *high* and *low* but I think they must’ve carted the thing off—” She saw me.

“This young chap’s come to visit Eva, apparently.”

“Well, this young chap had better step inside, hadn’t he? Till the rain lets up, at least.”

Today the hallway had a behind-a-waterfall gloominess. The guitar’s blue paint’d flaked off like a skin disease. In her yellow frame a dying woman in a boat trailed her fingers in the water.

“Thanks,” I managed to say. “Madame Crommelynck’s expecting me.”

“Why that would be, I wonder?” The vicar’s wife poked her questions rather than asked them. “Oh! Are you Marjorie Bishampton’s youngest, here for the sponsored spelling bee?”

“No,” I said, unwilling to tell her my name.

“So?” Her smile looked grafted on. “You *are*?”

“Er, Jason.”

“Jason...?”

“Taylor.”

“That rings a *bell*... Kingfisher Meadows! Helena Taylor’s youngest. Poor Mrs. Castle’s neighbors. Father a big cheese at Greenland Supermarkets, right? Sister off to Edinburgh this autumn. I met your mother at the Art Exhibition last year, in the village hall. She was taken with an oil painting of Eastnor Castle, though I’m sorry to say she never came back. Half the profits went to Christian Aid.”

She wasn’t getting a “Sorry” from *me*.

“Well, Jason,” said the vicar. “Mrs. Crommelynck has been called away. Rather unexpectedly.”

Oh. “Will she be back anytime—” (The wife brought on my stammer like an allergy. I was stuck on “soon.”)

“‘Soon’?” The wife gave me a *can’t pull the wool over* my eyes smile that mortified me. “Hardly! They’re gone as in *Gone*! It happened—”

“Gwendolin.” The vicar raised his hand like a shy kid in class. (I recognized the name Gwendolin Bendincks from the parish magazine. She writes half of it.) “I’m not sure if it’s appropriate to be—”

“Nonsense! It’ll be all round the village by teatime. Truth will out. We have some perfectly *dreadful* news, Jason.” Gwendolin Bendincks eyes’d lit up like fairy lights. “The Crommelyncks have been *extradited!*”

I wasn’t too sure what that meant. “Under arrest?”

“I’ll jolly well say so! Goose-stepped back to Bonn by the West German police! Their lawyer contacted us this morning. He refused to tell me *why* they’d been extradited, but, putting two and two together—the husband retired from the Bundesbank six months ago—it’s some sort of financial scam. Embezzlement. Bribery. *Lots* of that goes on in Germany.”

“Gwendolin.” The vicar had a wheezy smile. “Perhaps it’s premature to—”

“Mind you, *she* once mentioned a few years spent in Berlin. Suppose she was spying for the Warsaw Pact? I *told* you, Francis, I always *felt* they kept themselves to themselves more than was natural.”

“But perhaps they’re—” (Hangman choked the “not” of “not guilty.”)

““Not guilty’?” Gwendolin Bendincks’s lips twitched. “The home secretary wouldn’t let Interpol whisk them away if he wasn’t jolly well sure of his facts, would he? But it’s an ill wind, I always say. Now we can use the lawn for our fête, after all.”

“What,” I asked, “about their butler?”

For two whole seconds Gwendolin Bendincks was stopped in her tracks. “*Butler?* Francis! What’s this about a *butler?*”

“Grigoire and Eva,” said the vicar, “didn’t have a butler. I assure you.”

I saw it. What a dildo I am.

The butler was the *husband*.

“I made a mistake,” I said, sheepishly. “I’d better go now.”

“Not *yet!*” Gwendolin Bendincks hadn’t finished. “You’ll get soaked to your skin! So tell us, what *was* your connection with Eva Crommelynck?”

“She was sort of teaching me.”

“Is that a fact? And what might she have been teaching you about?”

“Er...” I couldn’t admit to poetry. “French.”

“How *cozy*! I remember *my* first summer in France. Nineteen, I would have been. Or twenty. My aunt took me to Avignon, you know, where there’s the song about dancing on the bridges. The English mademoiselle caused *quite* a stir amongst the local bees...”

The Crommelyncks will be in German police cells, right now. A stammering thirteen-year-old kid in deathliest England’ll be the last thing on Mrs. Crommelynck’s mind. The solarium’s gone. My poems are crap. How could they not be? I’m thirteen. What do *I* know about Beauty and Truth? Better bury Eliot Bolivar than let him carry on churning out shite. *Me? Learn French?* What was I *thinking*? God, Gwendolin Bendincks talks like fifty TVs all on at once. Her mass and density of words is bending space and time. A brick of loneliness is reaching terminal velocity inside me. I’d like a can of Tizer and a Toblerone, but Mr. Rhydds’s shop’s shut on Saturday afternoons.

Black Swan Green’s shut on Saturday afternoons.

All pissing England’s shut.