

CHAPTER 6

When the White Rabbit in Alice asked where he should begin to read the verses at the Knave's trial the King replied: "Begin at the beginning; go on till you come to the end; then stop."

This would seem to be the last word on the subject of narration in general. For the novelist no dictum more entirely complete and satisfactory can be imagined—in theory. But in practice it is hard to live up to.

Where is the beginning of a story? Where is the beginning of anything? No one knows.

When I set myself to consider the actual beginning of Maxwell Cheyne's adventure, I saw at once I should have to go back to Noah. Indeed I was not at all sure whether the thing could be adequately explained unless I carried back the narrative to Adam, or even further. For Cheyne's adventure hinged not only on his own character and environment, brought about by goodness knows how many thousands of generations of ancestors, but also upon the contemporaneous history of the world, crystallized in the happening of the Great War and all that appertained thereto.

So then, in default of the true beginning, let us commence with the character and environment...

. . . FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS
The Cheyne Mystery

The dining room was sweltering and the bright glare from the bulbs in the ceiling didn't make it seem any cooler. In the doorway to the kitchen stood a gray metal fan trying its darndest to move the air around. It was just a symbol of something, like man's triumph over nature. Its presence was reassuring, but it was still hot. In the middle of the room was a large wooden table and the three of us were sitting around it sweating, Bob Beck, Ingrid and me. We were making name tags. I was neatly cutting names from a sheet of paper, Bob was putting them into plastic folders with stick pins, and Ingrid was stringing them onto a long skein of bright orange yarn.

It was the 29th of June and the next day Bob and I were going to Europe.

"Now tell me again how we're going to work this?" I asked.

"Well, we get to the airport, we find Group L, we pass out the name tags..." Bob snapped a tag together.

"Jake says there are an awful lot of people in that terminal."

Ingrid looked up. "Maybe you need a flag, you know, something that you could wave around that everybody could see."

"That's an idea. We'll have a flag. The Group L Flag. And Group L will rally around and we'll pass out the name tags. And we'll stand around and get to know each other. We'll be a group before we even get on the plane!" When I was excited, I spoke fast. But then I had a vision of myself waving a flag around an international airport. "Uh...who's going to carry this flag?"

"What's wrong with you?" Bob asked.

"I just don't see myself waving the flag, that's all." I cut out the last name. "What about tags for ourselves?"

"I think you should have special name tags," Ingrid put in.

"Maybe Bob should, but not me. I'm the straight typewriter type." I wandered over to the typewriter to make a tag. "Ingrid, don't we have something cool to drink? This heat is killing me. Boy, if it's like this in Europe!"

For a few minutes we were all busy. The fan hummed and

the hot air eddied around my feet and little green insects flirted with suicide around the bare bulbs in the ceiling. My shirt was nailed to my back with sweat. Out in the softness of the night, kids' voices curled around the street corner and their voices were lazy. For them tomorrow would be like today. For me tomorrow would be...

"Let's go over our strategy again and make sure we know just what the ---- we're going to do tomorrow." Down in the pit of my stomach something moved around just thinking about it.

"O.K. It's simple. We arrive at the airport and size the place up. We'll be there early enough to have time for all this. We pick a good spot and set up headquarters. One of us has the flag."

"I'll carry the flag," I said resignedly.

Bob didn't notice the interruption. "One of us has the flag and the other has the string of tags around his neck. As the kids come in, they'll see the flag, come over, get their tag and probably hang around talking. Maybe we'll even get to meet some parents. They'll all stay because they want to meet the others and this is obviously the place to do it. It'll be fun."

I grunted. It sounded okay but a small light flashed in the back of my mind. But it was too small a light to matter. "Okay, then let's talk about the bags." For half an hour we worried about the bags. We were each taking two bags, one filled with stuff and the other with project materials. Bob was taking a leather portfolio and I would carry a sisel-fiber book bag. For immediate needs. Paperbacks. Magazines. Dozens of felt-tip pens in bright colors. We shifted things from one bag to another, making sure we'd be carrying equal weight. It was a little thing. But at that point on a hot summer evening, nothing was too little if it meant sweat.

"You're sure you've got enough Checklists? Stereotypes?"

"Well, I don't know if we've got enough, but we've got all there are," I said. I sat on a suitcase to get it closed. When I'd slipped the latch, I stood up. I said:

"We've done all we can. Let's call it a night. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

"The longest day," Bob added. "Okay, if that's it. We'll pick you up at noon tomorrow. Be ready."

He turned to Ingrid and grinned. "I'll take care of Denis for you. He won't get in trouble."

Ingrid snorted. I said, "Pooh-bah. I'll take care of you!"

"Well, bye-bye. See you in August." He walked out the door and started down the steps. I walked out and leaned on the railing watching him. There was a song on the radio then, tailored for summer sadness. "It's Too Late" was the title. And the refrain. Carole King sang it and made it something special, quiet and slow and still pulsing. As Bob walked down the steps, I hummed the refrain.

He looked back up at me over his shoulder.

"Yeah," he grinned. "It sure is."

There are hot nights...and there are hot nights. This was one of those. We went to bed with the fan and slept with the fan and woke up with the fan. We parted in air stirred up by the fan and until Bob came at noon to pick me up, I sat with the fan. The air was heavy that Wednesday, steamy and thick. The fan was some sort of joke, just a thing to help me believe I had a hand in my own peculiar fate. St. Louis in August had nothing on Worcester in June.

If it was hot in the house, carrying the bags out to the car was something else. It was no day for a tie and jacket so I took mine off and hung them over the back of the seat.

"Ready to go," Bob asked.

"Yep," I said. It was too hot for anything more. Hot air whipped in the window of the moving car, drying my sweat to a gritty mask. It felt marvelous. As we mounted the high hill to the airport, the temperature dropped half a degree and it was Nirvana. Carole King came on the radio and sang our dirge and our only strength. "It's too late, baby, now, it's too late."

At the airport we hid ourselves in the air-conditioned restaurant to wait for our plane and pushed meaningless words across the table at each other. We were just killing time now, and it was dying hard. Our plane arrived and we boarded and shortly after takeoff we landed in New York. It's one of those flights. The air-conditioning never really has time to get going before it has to stop. Leaving the terminal at Kennedy we entered a taxi-cab and the oven of Long Island and in the same time it had taken us to fly from Worcester found

ourselves in the outskirts of Kennedy—at the North Passenger Terminal, home of charter flights.

As a rule, I don't get excited by the size of airport buildings anymore. From the outside, this was no exception. But the inside was another story. Big things, like planes, could get lost in here. It was the size of the Sahara, and just as hot and just as empty. We looked around. This was when we were going to scout out a spot and plant our flag, but in this barn what difference could it make? One spot was like another and both were barren. Even the coke stand was closed.

"Well, Bob?"

"I guess no one's arrived yet."

"Hey, good thinking. How'd you figure that out." I was filled with admiration and covered with sweat. "Look, let's park our bags in a locker and go back to Kennedy. We can find an air-conditioned terminal and hang around watching people weigh in."

"Why don't we stay here?"

"Bob, it's too hot and it's too empty and it's too dead. We'll go and come back in a few hours. There'll be people here and the coke stand'll be open and we'll have lots of time." So we spent the next three hours wilting in the Pan Am building chatting with a Welshman waiting to go back home. At six we took a cab back to North Passenger. As we crawled through the traffic we watched radiators boil over and gazed at the mirages of planes shimmering on the field through the hot air. Nothing was real this Wednesday but the heat.

Almost nothing. We found something else real as we rounded the corner to the front of North Passenger. Things had changed. All along the eternal front of the building were kids, kids alone, kids in groups, kids with parents, kids without, kids dressed up and kids dressed down. Most of them were trying to cool off in the shade waiting out the minutes until departure in a languid desperation. Butts and chewing gum wrappers littered the grass in a carpet already ankle deep and there were hours to go. We paid off our cabby and entered the terminal. The Sahara had become the Pacific. Adolescent heads bobbed and swayed like numberless waves. The coke stand was open. Kids surrounded it like flies on a dead dog. Group L was thirty-one kids in a unit of two hundred and fifty. One unit would fill one plane. There were enough kids to fill a hundred planes in this building.

"Look for red bags. Our tour gives out red flight bags," Bob said.

I looked. There were thousands of red bags. Every kid had one. I looked more closely. They had different names on them. Some help. As we wandered aimlessly through the throng, I noticed a "K" on white paper fastened to a bag. Then an "M" and a "J." These were our kids, but different groups.

"Let's go outside and think about this," I suggested. It was a little cooler outside. We lay down on the grass and caught our breath. There was really nothing to say, so I said:

"Let's go back to Kennedy and catch the last flight to Worcester. Who needs this? I'll do a library dissertation. At least they're air-conditioned." Bob demurred, but he was shaken. Nothing said, but I could tell. Nothing in our most troubled dreams had ever looked like this. Flag? Name tags? I started to laugh.

Bob laughed too. "We've simply got to go back in there and find Group L. It's in there somewhere."

"You've got to change your clothes," I said. Bob had worn a crazy T-shirt. Very sensible with the heat, but definitely not Doctor Beck. The plan we worked out was to see if we could find Group L. If we could, Bob would change clothes and we'd get to work. If not, well, enough time to worry about that later. We re-entered the building. It was seething and bubbling like Blue Devil in a dirty toilet bowl. We stumbled over some M's.

I put on my best smile. "Hi, your're an M. Have you seen any L's?"

"Yeah, about a half hour ago...Let's see, where were they?"

"Over there," another put in pointing. "I think."

We moved in that direction. Gradually a group of four L's came into focus. They were three boys and a girl. They stood and sat in a jumble of baggage. The boys were well dressed awkwardly in the dernier cri of teen fashion: wide ties, flared pants, boot shoes, Edwardian jackets. One of them looked positively nineteenth century with a high collar pushing his chin out into space away from his body. The girl was simply garbed in a plain unadorned dress. They all had hassle written on their faces, hassle with the crowds, the baggage, the

heat, the clothes and in this human whirl, with the aloneness. They might have been immigrants except no immigrant ever dressed so chic.

As Bob hung back I wandered over and opened up with some light witty patter. They livened up, their muscles relaxed and they identified themselves. They were the Indiana contingent: Taylor Nash, Desmond Jencks, Robert Watson and Vanessa Garrison. This information was food for thought, for none of them was high on my list of predeparture mailing returns. Jencks and Garrison had sent a few things back, half-heartedly; Watson had written a letter saying that he was working full-time on something more important; Nash had returned, nothing. Nash was the terror of the four. He wore that look of studied boredom that just barely recognized me as a human being.

"You'll be coming to Europe with us?" Vanessa was asking. I yanked my mind back to the North Passenger Terminal.

"I hope so," I said. "I'm Denis Wood." There was a pause. One of those pauses that swallows everything up. In the sudden silence I could hear my watch ticking. Their faces lost their animation. Rigor mortis was setting in. Nash was opening his mouth and it took forever:

"You're the one who's been sending us those things." It wasn't a question. It was a blow to the jaw. Bile seeped into my mouth and tasted bitter. I took a long draw on my cigarette, one of those futile face-saving gestures. The smoke was acrid in my lungs.

"Yea...well...Dr. Beck...Me...We..." I muttered something and noticed my shoelace was undone. There was nothing to say. For these kids I was just another hassle. I excused myself and departed rapidly in several directions. Bob followed.

Out on the grass it was very cool now, for me. I was almost shivering. My throat was dry and I wanted a coke. I settled for a piece of Bob's gum, and told him the story. We lay around and watched kids. There was nothing to say so I said:

"Let's go back to Kennedy and catch the last flight to Worcester. We've lost. We blew it. It's over. Kaput." He didn't even answer. After a while we got up and wandered around to the sunny side of the building. The sun was huge and flat and poised just above the horizon. Shadows of planes stretched from the field to our feet. The atmosphere was pervaded by the languor that always accompanies a bright day's ending. We hitched ourselves up on a ventilator cover and kicked our

heels against the green metal as the sun lowered itself into another world. I thought of other suns and other days. I thought of last night's innocence, the eagerness, the Flag, and the name tags. They were thoughts of another person, another age, still and sad, suspended, crystalized in amber.

Time passed and we came down from our ventilator cover and went back into the terminal. We got our bags from the locker and I guarded them while Bob went to change. I was standing there watching the herd when Bob reappeared and stopped at a magazine counter. I watched him strike up a conversation with two girls. The three of them turned in my direction and Bob beckoned. People are funny. Knock them down, and they just stand up for more. I walked over.

"Denis," Bob said, "this is Marina and this is Lana."

"Hi! Wakefield, Mass.?" We shook hands.

Marina tilted her head back. "So you're Mr. Wood." She looked at Bob. "And you're Dr. Beck...talk about stereotypes. You're really Dr. Beck? Why I thought you'd be at least fifty, and, well, you know, a doctor and all." Janet was a big girl, buxom, long dark hair, flashing vivacious eyes, very Italian, very animated. Lana was short, bright eyes, quick, easy smile, comfortable looking, at ease.

"Yeah," she said. "I thought so too. You're both so young!" They had the last installment with them and dug them out. The familiar brown envelopes made their own sunshine at that moment. It was spring then and butterflies and lemonade. We talked about the questionnaires and the maps and the stereotypes. They knew the materials cold and talked about them with ease and familiarity, Marina as if to a favorite pair of teachers, Lana as if to a couple of casual acquaintances. When they at last left us to go check in, they left me with funny hearing. The noise of the terminal, the talking, the shouts of all the kids, the loudspeakers. I heard none of it. All I heard was beautiful music.

In the next couple of hours we didn't meet another Group L kid. After checking in we sat and watched the kids go by, trying to guess which were L's and which weren't. Sometimes we tried to fit names to faces.

"That must be David Abrams. David Abrams's got to look like that--Oh no! That couldn't be Janine Eber. Could it? But she does look studious. O, Bob, please, she can't be in our group...Wow!

Could that be Daisy Perez? How do you see Daisy? Coy or svelt?... Hey, I'll bet they're our Travel-Counselors...Well, they've got our bags...No, they're M's, whew!"

That's how we strangled the remaining hours. They didn't die too hard, but they went on and on. At eleven our tour was called and we lined up at the door screamed to us over the loudspeakers, or what pass for loudspeakers in any airport in the world, those things that turn English into Turkish and Turkish into Swahili. Two hundred and fifty people pressed against the doors and one by one the pressure ejected us outside. I don't know why I was surprised. I mean, I'd walked all around the terminal and had never seen a plane, and yet when I saw a bus in front of me, I was still surprised. North Passenger isn't really an air terminal at all, but the world's largest bus depot. The buses took us out onto the field and after driving around plane after plane came to a stop. Before us was a plane.

It wasn't too long, maybe the length of the Mississippi and it had fewer windows than Rockefeller Center. The wingtip which passed over the bus roof probably lapped the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The other was lost in the Long Island Sound. The tail was plain out of sight. After sitting around while a team of mechanics did things to the plane, they let us out of the buses and we walked up the steps into the interior. Perspective lines created by banks of seats took the eyeballs and led them forever down the plane, and when you couldn't see any farther, the plane went on. We grabbed two seats beside an emergency exit. Bob let me have the window seat. He'd already crossed the Atlantic. There was nothing to see outside so we watched kids file by heading for the distant reaches in the rear. There are circumstances when two hundred and fifty kids is not a large number, but this was not one of them. They came in an unceasing flood, like mosquitoes in the tropics. They hadn't stopped coming when one of the tour leaders materialized at our seat, wearing that permanently frayed air of utter consequence they all effect. As usual he was young, immaculately attired, and wise beyond his years with summer tour experience.

He had a problem. They had oversold the flight and would either of us, but preferably Dr. Beck, consider crossing on the first available commercial flight instead of this one? He spoke carefully as if each word was teetering precariously on a wooden stilt. "So you see Dr. Beck, there will be no real delay." I wasn't impressed. His manner would have looked cheap on a eunich in a tough harem. Here it was even less. Bob responded by fluffing out his pinfeathers and looking professional.

"But this is insufferable! I am a scientist studying a tour group on this plane. This flight is an important part of the process under investigation. It is absolutely inconceivable that we should even be approached under the circumstances." The character leaned in closer as if to muffle Bob's voice and not reveal to the passing kids the slightest ruffle in the tour organization.

"But Dr. Beck, let me assure you—"

"Let me assure you," Bob broke in, "that you can more readily take the next flight than I." After a few reconciliatory phrases from his undoubtedly ample stock, the leader left us. Two things were clear. Our attitude had not impressed him, and his had impressed us. It was as certain as the plane was huge that we were seen as some expendable luxury. It's always that way with these guys. When an idea looks good months away from the fact it's promises, promises, but when you're on the job you're just in the way. It was a nice thought to taxi down the runway with. Was it really too late to get off and catch the last flight to Worcester?

A cracked adolescent voice sounded in a momentary silence on the plane. It was singing "And it's too late baby, now, it's too late." Whoever it was was right. It was just a little too late. I looked toward Bob just in time to see a strange figure lurch down the aisle. He was large and dressed for Arctic Warfare. A tan belted trenchcoat with up-turned collar reached to his ankles. His face was hidden by diaphranous dark glasses. He moved like a drunk too gone to stand and as he collapsed into the seat behind Bob, he grabbed the back of Bob's seat to ease his fall. My seat shook as if seized by a personal avalanche. The plane lifted from the ground. The trip had begun.

* * *

Eight hours later England appeared outside my window. I would have known it anywhere. There it was, the cutest little toy landscape you could dream of and all in that green that only happens in England. There are greens and there are greens. There's the soft suggestion of green that tickles the edges of trees before spring breaks loose. There's the green all gold of a cow-cropped hill in the late summer sun. There's the hot stolid green of the rain-forest heavy with steam and dangerous snakes. There's the dark somber green of pine among the silver birch in a New England fall. The green of England has nothing to do with those greens. It's an English green that's gentle without being told and tough without bluster. It's a green that's been there and seen it all, and that's going to see lots more and is still green

in spite of it all. Or maybe because of it. It's a green that makes poets foam at the mouth and tough guys go weak in the knees. You can't touch it. No one has. I almost fell out of the plane looking at it.

We had started losing altitude before we saw England and kept at it. I was waiting for the green to give up and turn the landscape over to the city that must surround the airport, but it never happened. Our landing gear rattled out and we were only yards from the runway and still no city: only cute farmsteads on green. Bang! Thump! We hit the runway and that roar happened and we came to a stop and through the windows we saw the terminal, a small, empty neat little building in the countryside. It was all as if we were being smuggled quietly into the country so that no one would know we'd arrived. We filed off the plane and stood in line for immigration. Our's was the only plane on the field. The air was clear, and cool, and felt the way you always knew that green was supposed to feel.

Immigration was a snap. So was customs. We filed out of the building into the same marvelous air and headed for our buses. Everything was calm, cool and collected. Our Unit Director shook his bottom self-importantly down the line and headed straight for me. He shouted:

"Denis! How was your trip?" He grabbed my hand and did things with it. I began to worry. He was too friendly. He wanted something. He chatted about how nice the airport was and isn't customs a snap and:

"We're short a courier, some little mix-up, nothing really." It never is anything really with these people, just always some little new way to break your back. "How'd you like to take your bus into London to the dorms for us?"

"Well, you know I wasn't supposed to take on the bus until Venice. I've never been here before. What's involved." Nice Wood, always glad to help out. And completely out-manuvered.

"Of course I assume you can read a map. Now here's your route shown in black," as he unfolded a map and plunged into one-way streets and tricky turns and complex roundabouts. I let him talk.

"How about Bob?" I interrupted. "He's been here before."

"Well," cough, cough, shuffle, tap, "Bob is talking to the Director now and I sort of hoped to have him on my bus. I've got to talk to you guys sometime and get some idea of what you're planning—"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "You know as well as anyone what we're going to do. You want me to take the bus in, Okay, but cut the crap for God's sake." I grabbed the maps and papers and boarded the bus. "And no patter," I added, "That's out."

"Okay," he shouted, "but you've got to read what's in your hands about the bags, lunch, checking-in, out and all that." He waved at me. Everything was wonderful. He had his courier for the day. I turned to size up my bus driver. She was formidable. "Know where we're going?" I asked in my brightest charming-little-boy manner.

"Nope," she replied.

"Know how to get to King's Cross?" I tried.

"Nope."

"How 'bout London?"

"Never heard of it."

"Ah, gwann," I said and turned my attention to the microphone. Our driver turned it on and I turned to address the group.

I just barely had the mike to my mouth when from the back of the bus came an exaggerated groan followed by: "Ugh! Not him!" It was a witticism intended for bus consumption and the bus knew it. A lovely wave of titters swept from the back to be smothered only a couple of rows away from me. Yeah, the trip had begun and it was too late, baby.

The trip into London was my first experience with a tour bus. You've got to try one for a deep understanding of our idea of civilization. In the very front of the bus, suspended like an isolation booth in front of the rows of four across, is what the trade sharpies call "the hot seat." The courier sits in this in total control. Right beside him is the driver and directly in front is the microphone, radio, and PA controls. Also the windows and the road and an overflowing ashtray. Your professional courier mounts the bus, counts his charges, settles into his seat and lets the driver start. He uses his left hand to direct the driver, turning him this way or that with a wave of his hand. With his right hand on the mike he delivers an unending flow of vital information about the country or city you're in. His eyes are on the road alert to signs and traffic lights and traffic conditions. He knows his patter like he knows the road, to its tiniest turn, and both are delivered in the same

flat, bored, tired manner. His back is to his audience which reads him loud and clear over the scratchy PA system and knows him only as a voice endlessly saying things like "thus in 1102 King Thurian passed the law establishing the use of straw for mattress stuffing" or "this region is the world's eleventh largest packer of baby cucumber pickles in addition to its leading role in the manufacture of rose hips." He's a professional in that he never misses a turn or forgets a fact. He's also an absolute dictator, a bore, and necessarily a man of less than passing interest. The seat I was in was his seat. It was comfortable.

All this I knew from reading the courier manual. I also knew that this was the time for the introduction-to-England talk. Only three things kept me from picking up the microphone and playing courier. I didn't know where I was. I wouldn't have known anything about it even if I did know. I was scared. That microphone scared me. It sat there on its hook looking at me out of its many faceted insect-eye saying, "Pick me up. Talk to me. Hold me." I took a peak at the kids on the bus. Were they waiting for a spiel? Most of them were asleep. It would have been cruel to wake them. I let them sleep.

Outside the window England was whipping by. We were driving on the left along a narrow road. At home it would have been a lane, but here it was carrying heavy traffic. We'd pass through a tree tunnel of leafy green and then tall narrow row houses lined the road with skinny yards that ran right down to the passing traffic and all alive with roses. England, my England. It was not a disappointment. This was the England of Holmes, the England of French, and Cuff and Thorndyke, the England of Elizabeth and Darcy and Emma, even the England of Wart and Lance and Toad and Mole. A group of school children flashed by. It was all true. They did wear ties and sweaters and those funny jackets and roses did bloom on their faces on either side of smiling mouths. The books hadn't lied.

I wondered about those school children. What were they doing on the street? They must be either going or coming from school. That meant it was either morning or noon. It was bad enough to be lost in space. I asked our driver for the time. It was noon. I figured back. One hour on the road so far, eight on the plane, eleven or twelve at Kennedy, four from getting up. Let's see, gee, that's almost twenty-five hours so far. Great. You can add, Wood. No wonder I can't tell a rose on a face from a rose on the bush. I dug out a cigarette and shoved it at my face. No good. I put it back and fell asleep.

The driver woke me up. She looked like she'd been through this six thousand times. "Well, this is King's Cross. Where from here?"

I snapped awake and sat up stunned. We were in some urban nightmare. I fumbled for my map. Blankety-blank driver. I figured she knew, was just putting me on. I found King's Cross. There we are, Okay, look for street names. Names? Where do these blankety-blank English put the blankety names. Don't panic, Wood. If you get lost all they can do is laugh. Ah, street names. On the corners of buildings. Okay.

"You want to turn left at the next intersection and then right after two blocks." Wasn't I the cool one. The bus just made it around a tight corner and pulled out into Cartwright Gardens, a crescent of buildings around a half-moon, railed-in green with tennis courts. Facing the crescent was a row of tall, dark buildings with all the character of a city jail. These were our dorms. The assistant dorm organizer boarded and told the driver where to go.

"Well, you're all late," he began turning to me. "We'll dump your kids, pass out meal tickets and get them over to the College of Pharmacy. They've got to move if they want to eat. Keep a couple of boys and the male TC's and we'll get the luggage truck unloaded. It should be here any minute." He picked up the microphone and made the appropriate announcements.

Off the bus. Everybody off to the College of Pharmacy. Hold it, there. How'd you like to help unload the luggage? You wouldn't? Good. Let's do it. Nash, Watson, Jencks and three TC's: Jaeckel, Aiken, and Lenz. We threw luggage out of the bus. Then the truck. Off the sidewalk. Into the dorm. "Get your boys off to lunch or they won't eat. We'll finish." A thousand bags for all the boys on the plane. Commonwealth Hall was nifty, dark, painted in institutional vomit. "Okay, Denis, thanks. You too Bob. Nice to have you aboard." Good boys. That's what we were. We grabbed a bite to eat and I went up to bed and passed out. Pow.

* * *

At six p.m. the alarm went off. I threw my feet to the floor and dug a Camel out of a very tired pack. I smoked it leisurely in the half-light of the curtained room. The bed was a pip. It wasn't long enough for a full-grown midget and came with four gray Army blankets. There was a night stand with a swivel neck lamp and a ten watt bulb, the sort that throw around just enough light to cause serious eyestrain if you try to use it. There was a desk with drawers and a chair and another chair to lounge in if you were a lizard or had guests. Fat chance of that. I put my shoes on and shuffled down the corridors to the john.

Royal Doulton toilets. At home I have a pair of Royal Doulton salt and peppers. Here I get Royal Doulton toilets. In another room are two showers and a tub and four sinks with spring handles. Waste not, want not. I strip and shower. The shower head's a pip too. Shave. Try to get the body up for a long night of pep talks. Downstairs in the cafeteria they've set aside two tables for the tour. At other tables students of the university eat. I try to remember that I'm in the University of London. All the cafeteria help is Portuguese, short smiling girls. One of them has a big smile for me and I smile back. I sit down and stuff my face with the assistant dorm organizer. He tells me how much better the food is in this dorm than the others. If only I could see it. More splurging with the ten watt bulbs. Some Group L boys are at another table trying food and pushing it away half-eaten. Nash, Watson, Jencks and Jaeckel their T-C. Two other Group L boys, a young dainty one and a huge flat-faced fat one, eat alone. At least there's milk and good coffee. I have a cup and relax with a cigarette. How am I going to get to know these kids, I wonder. How about eating with them, Wood? There's a start. Good thinking. I walk upstairs and breathe in the clean wonderful air of Cartwright Gardens. The sky is yellow and rose and in the trees around the gardens birds are putting on a big show. It's nice and quiet and makes me think of bed and Ingrid at home in Worcester.

The assistant dorm organizer joined me and we strolled through broad somnolent streets and passed hushed introverted green squares to the travel -counselor briefing. The room was big and well-lighted and tall casement windows opened onto the street. The smokers were clustered near the windows and I joined them. There was quite a crowd. We all introduced ourselves and I listened hard to catch the names and make sure I knew who my T-C's were. Then the tour staff took over. They were all young and all immaculately attired and their faces were shining with an eagerness that didn't quite hide their boredom and their inflated sense of self-consequence. They wanted to tell us how wonderful the next thirty-three days would be if we all worked as a team. They reminded me of balding tires and I closed my ears and let my eyes study the Group L T-C's.

Miss Germaine Bloch was a large lady somewhere in her late thirties or early forties. She had a jaw that was a jaw and when she was being determined it was more jaw than any one person needs. Formidable, I'd have called her, but instead I called her "Miss Bloch." She was the leader of the New York contingent, some of whom had been in her Girl Scout troop in pas times. She also had attached to her group two Independent Registrants (I-R's, remember?) from Wakefield, namely Marina Giocanda and Lana Monroe, the girls from the

airport. In terms of returns on our predeparture materials, it was our best home town group (H-T's, if you recall). Miss Bloch looked a stern disciplinarian. I had absolutely no doubt that she was, or that she knew it. She had a role, and she would play it. My gaze wandered.

It lit on Mrs. Needham, a sparrow of a woman, thin, bright, perky. She smoked incessantly and through her smoke I could catch gleams of intelligence in her eyes. She had about her an air of impatience; perhaps it was just with this meeting. She wanted to get out and walk around and soak up London. In her gestures there was disdain. She knew the score, she was an adult, let's stop the twaddle and get on with it. She led the Milwaukee contingent. This consisted of two boys and them alone: Heller and Prinz.

Physically, Omar Lenz bore some resemblance to Mrs. Needham. Both were thin. But Omar Lenz also had as much Adam's apple as Miss Bloch had chin. He had a strange growth on his body that I subsequently identified as a camera. It was a part of him, perhaps the most important part of him. He had an electric smile that could light up a room. He looked pleasant, but dull like most people consumed by cameras. He led the Connecticut group, which consisted of two girls, Cummings and Johnson, but to beef up his group he'd been given three I-R's: Montaigne, Abrams and Portman.

Cliff Jaeckel was a compact solid friendly looking person whose features were also stamped with impatience. Maybe he had reason since this was his third summer tour. He wore an air of languid competence as if he didn't have a worry in the world. His chin, too, was remarkable and whenever he said something serious it stuck out like a piece of granite and his eyes flashed daring someone to contradict him. But when he smiled it receded and his eyes twinkled and you noticed that he had dusty blond hair. Cliff led the Indiana group, the group that struck terror in my heart at the airport, the group that razzed me on the bus, the group that grumbled as they unloaded luggage. He also had been given three I-R's, all girls: Eber, Lincoln and Noyes.

At last my eyes rested on the Aiken twins. They had taken seats in the very back of the crowd and looked comfortable and very dull. Mr. Aiken was a big man, big-boned and big-mouthed and big fisted. His voice was also big, and when he spoke he boomed. But this evening he didn't speak. Around his mouth was that hint of a smile that made him one of those hot shot practical jokers. His twin was a very small woman and a very silent one. It was days before I heard her speak. She seemed to shrink away into the space that surrounded

her brother like a wall. For her it was enough. It would have to be. They led the biggest H-T group, mostly upstate New Yorkers, with three I-R's, girls, two of them from Iowa. Of the nine kids in this group only two had bothered with our predeparture things. I looked at the Aikens and listened to a buzzer ring deep in the corridors of my mind. I said, "Watch out. Shoal water ahead."

The meeting terminated with some desultory questions and answers. The T-C's filed out heading for a big night at Piccadilly or Trafalgar. I wandered back with the staff to their rats nest to iron out a schedule. They shed their jackets and their ties and the layers of honey worked up for the T-C's. They were young, tough, cynical and in control. They jumped on the telephones and called Belgium. Some courier had left his luggage behind. Hi, how was the crossing? You check. We'll check. Unit this. Group that. Someone else started putting pins in flashy colors on a map of Europe. It was a game for them and they'd seen too many movies to play any way but real low key.

"Hey, I hate to break in like this, but I need some help." Heads turned my way. "I've got a map session tomorrow and I need a room with some tables."

"Look, Wood, we'll be glad to help in every way, but we don't know anything about this." Sincerity dripped from every pore.

"Well," I said, "According to this memo, attention all Dorm Organizers, blah, blah, blah, we're scheduled for four sure, maybe five sessions in London. What does this mean 'Dorm Organizers are requested to make rooms available for this special project. All staff members are requested to help Denis and Robert to make their task a success?'"

"Well, Denis, I'll tell you how it is with us. Those are words, Let's be realistic. I don't think any of us in this room - except maybe yourself - have much faith in your research. We're not sure that this summer - if ever - is the time for it. You're on your own here. I mean a summer tour's tough enough—"

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, tell me this. When does someone with authority greater than your's show up?" I was too tired to run their gauntlet.

"Ah, Denis," the Dorm Organizer gently said as if to an errant but otherwise nice child, "I don't think you quite understand. I am the top authority for the tour, of course, in London. We're saying—"

"You said it. When does the European Director get here?"

"He'll be here in one week — look, Denis, don't make trouble. You could get me mad—"

"I wouldn't want to do that," I said standing up. "What do you do when you get mad? Snarl at a tame T-C?" I was past caring. Some fun this trip would be. All we were was additional hassle nobody needed. We hassled the kids, we hassled the T-C's, we hassled the tour, we hassled each other, we hassled ourselves. Was anything worth it? It was a nice thought to steam up about on my way to bed. Any other day it would have kept me awake for hours, tossing and turning. Not that night. I hit the pillow and was out.