

## CHAPTER 7

...When I got to London my pocket was about empty, and I found that I must turn my hand to something for my living. Driving and riding are as natural to me as walking, so I applied at a cab-owner's office, and soon got employment....The hardest job was to learn my way about, for I reckon that of all the mazes that were ever contrived, this city is the most confusing. I had a map beside me, though, and when once I had spotted the principal hotels and stations, I got on pretty well.

. . .SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE  
A Study in Scarlet

The morning dawned bright and early, like around 3:30. I got up and closed the curtains and jumped back in bed. Four hours later I dragged the carcass out of bed and made it ready to face a long day. English breakfasts are famous. Maybe with reason, but you couldn't prove it by me. Mine were blah. But the marmalade was real and the coffee was strong and that went a long way towards making it up. I was out at the bus by 8:30 and it was a glorious morning with the promise of a blistering day. The kids started arriving and Bob and I were busy passing out the name tags. We had to fill out a bus seating chart that morning and the tags would help us keep the names straight. We knew the names cold and for each name we'd memorize addresses and other pertinent to useless information. The only problem was fastening the names to faces. At 9:00 all were aboard and name tagged except for David Abrams. He was sound asleep in his bed. All along the line of busses, guides were getting on and the busses were pulling out into the traffic. Our's was last in line, but long after the bus in front of us had gone, we were still sitting there waiting for our guide.

We were sitting there at 9:10. We were sitting there at 9:15. At 9:20 the heat took over the bus completely and we mostly straggled out to the sidewalk for some fresh air. At 9:25 Josephine arrived. Breathless. We climbed back on the bus and listened to her panting into the microphone. She was our native guide.

"I'm terribly sorry to be so late," she began in clear English tones, "but I wasn't called up until 8:30 and I live at some distance. Let me welcome you to London. We're late starting so we'll not be able to see Westminster Abbey this morning." Groans of disappointment from the bus. Pause. "Perhaps we'll be able to see it this afternoon." Cheers.

English tour busses are lovely. From armrests to roof they are nothing but plate glass. The view, of course, is amazing, but so is the greenhouse effect. Slowly the bus turns into an oven that roasts you alive. All you need is basting to provide you with your own lunch. By the time Josephine had arrived, the bus was perfect for tropical orchids. The tour just made it hotter.

Maybe it was London. Maybe it was just being in a big city. We turned left onto Malle Street where Josephine pointed out the Senate House of the University of London. It wasn't much to look at — just a huge grim building probably covered with pigeons — but all the kids took pictures. Click-click. We did a song and dance down Montague Place and on around Bedford Square and poked in and out of a dozen tiny alleys until Josephine invited us to break our necks looking up at the Post Office Tower. Click-click. She delighted our ears with some patter about the

number of antennas and the height of the building in feet and then everybody photographed Centre Point and a theater showing Hair. Click-click. Click-click. Centre Point looked like any steel and glass job back home, but the kids photographed it anyhow. And then we were on Oxford Street jostling traffic and moving faster than an ant — but not much faster.

I was delighted to know that we could buy jeans on Oxford Street. Josephine pointed out the shops with sales on, and the kids took pictures of them and wondered when they'd be able to get back and pick up some of those exotic pants. We passed a thousand stores on Oxford Street, from down-at-the-heels jewelry-pawnshops to department stores with plate glass windows filled with the very latest fall fashions. Josephine took the words right out of my mind: "This is just like your Fifth Avenue." Was that supposed to make us feel at home? Everybody took pictures.

"Look! A Bobby!" somebody shouted, and the bus listed as all the kids rushed to one side to click-click a bobby.

"Take a picture for me? Please!!" And one kid would hand her camera to someone on the window side who would press the button while holding the camera smack against the window. A bobby had all the excitement of a nude cannibal chomping on a leg.

Josephine's voice rose above the sound of cameras: "There you see a real rag-and-bones man. There are very few of these left in London," and all the kids would rush to the other side of the bus to click-click and use each other's cameras. God could have created another earth in the time it took us to reach Hyde Park. The heat created mirages in the distance as we turned onto The Ring. Hyde Park was as flat as a warm Coke. Or maybe it was sitting up so high in a bus. The Serpentine looked like a stagnant stream and I marked off Hyde Park as something I was dying to see. It made me think of my high school football field in the summer time. Josephine told us all about Rotten Row and all the kids photographed a street. Wow! Travel is so broadening.

"To your right in the distance is the Albert Memorial," but the rest of her remarks were lost in a fury of camera work. I wouldn't have photographed the Albert Memorial up close, and at this distance it was just a blot. Maybe the kids had something at that. Kids were frantically changing film. They might miss a car, or a person walking to work. We wouldn't want that. Click-click. Click-click. The narrow streets of Chelsea were lined with small exclusive shops and plastered with the sort of late-morning loungers that effect the drinking of espresso from china cups on the street among the tabby cats soaking up the sun. We had plenty of time to photograph them all since the bus advanced with the rapidity of a derailed train.

"Off to your right among the trees you see the Chelsea Royal Hospital," and the kids raised their cameras and shot the trees. We emerged onto the Chelsea Embankment and picked up speed along the river. Josephine pointed out the Battersea Power Station across the river and the kids shot that. Con Edison should take lessons from these English native guides. They can make four black chimneys something to see. We scouted past the Vauxhall Bridge and the Tate Gallery and wasted some more film and heard some more clicks and then we were crossing the Thames on Lambeth Bridge and London was suddenly huge and the river was very wide. We made a left on the South Bank and came to a stop behind a line of busses a mile long.

We even got out.

It was a ten minute stop to click-click the Houses of Parliament from across the Thames. For a while I'd forgotten we weren't the only tour in London, but this stop made it clear what a small part we were. There were hundreds of tour buses lined up to let people click-click to their hearts content, and the people were of all sizes and shapes and ages and nationalities and spoke a babel of languages. They were all pointing cameras across the seamless vastness of the gray river at a huge building of neo-Gothic grotesqueness, remarkable mostly because it was famous and famous mostly because it was heart of a once endless empire. I put a hand on my shoulder. Calm down, Wood, they're human, just like you. Okay, okay. I leaned on the parapet and looked at London. All I saw was a big dirty city. Maybe I'll come back and see it with Ingrid. Maybe...

Ten minutes up. On the bus. Count heads. Let's go. Once around Trafalgar. Under Admiralty Arch. Down the Mall. There it is. Buckingham Palace. Another famous building famous for being famous. All out. Come back at 11:30. Mustn't be late. Run, run, run. Guards march. Can't see. Huge crowd. On the bus. Count heads. Off we go. Another cafeteria. Eat, on bus, count heads. Let's go. Run, run, run.

We were on our way to the Tower of London. I was sitting next to David Abrams counting my money. For a really nothing reason or so, none of our kids had managed to change money on the previous day, like arriving late in London and rushing for lunch. They couldn't change any today either. No time. So while they all went and toured the Tower, I'd agreed to change it for them. I had three hundred dollars and was checking my records. I wanted to know who changed how much. It might be a clue to their character. David watched. After a while I put my things away and we talked. David was the skinniest boy I had ever

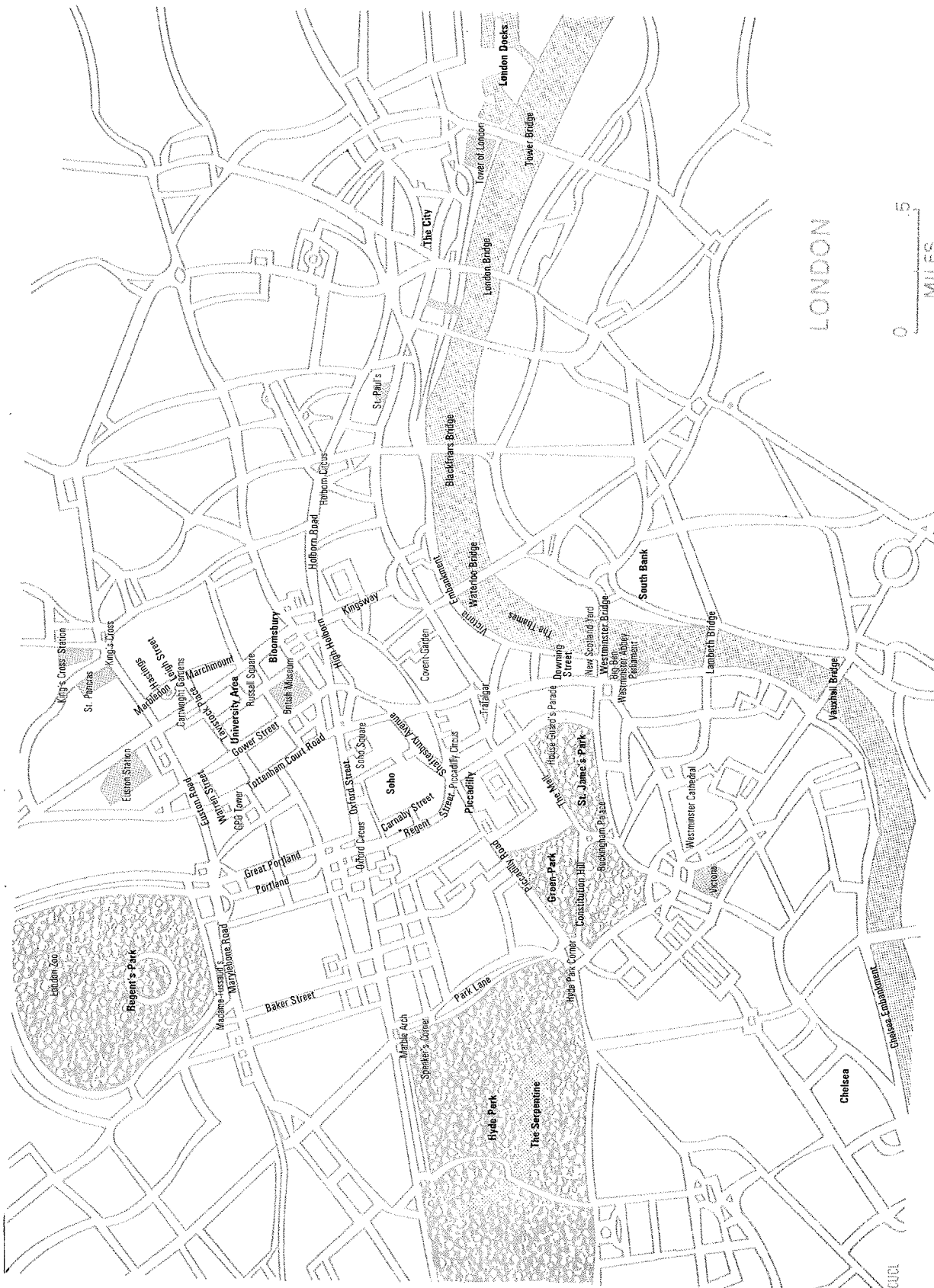


Figure 7.0

seen and he wore braces, bright shining sun-catching braces, on his teeth. His skin was a pale olive which he called dark. His predeparture maps were splendid and I had expected...-who knows what? I was put off by his appearance at first and sort of shied away when he opened his mouth, but what came out of it was pure gold. David was witty, quick, urbane, everything, in fact, you expect a precocious Jewish kid from a big city to be. I don't remember if he had a book with him on the way to the Tower, but I never saw him later without one. He felt he had established his travel rhythm: up late one night, sleep late the next morning, regular third day, but so tired on the fourth he'd stay in bed that morning, and so around and around. David looked at himself, and it wasn't just adolescence looking.

Suddenly we plunged into a vast parking garage. We had snuck up on the Tower "via a back route" as our native guide put it. "All out. Follow me please. I'll hold my umbrella up. Follow my umbrella." That was the cold breath of vast crowds to come breathing. As we approached the Tower, Josephine started telling us its history. Look, I love castles, but somehow this wasn't the way to see this one. Not only don't I like seeing things in herds, but the herd was more interesting than history.

With one eyeball on the umbrella, my other eyeball watched Watson and Jencks separate themselves from the rest. Maybe they felt like I did. Who could blame them? They had maybe ten feet between themselves and the group when a large mass hurtled forth in the shape of Porter Portman.

"Hey, dingbats," he shouted, "back to the group." He accompanied this imprecation with a rude digital gesture.

Jencks and Watson stood shock still. Slowly Jencks's right hand made a fist and the muscles along his arm tensed. Watson said something and they were caught in an eddy of the passing groups. I moved in.

"I'll murder him," Jencks was muttering. "I'll murder him. Did you hear what he called me?" He caught my eye and raised his voice. "Did you hear what he called me?"

"Yeah, I heard," I said. "Calm down. Look, he's probably trying to make friends."

"Friends? That's how you make friends?"

"Maybe that's the way they do it down South. Hey look, he's a big fat slob and probably doesn't make friends too easy. He's a puppy and you and Watson are big tough German shepards. He bowls you over, but at least he's making contact. That's something. Give him a chance."

Watson added some gossip about earlier Portmanisms, stupidities that I'd missed and something clicked in my head. Porter was important. Keep your eye on him, Wood. I went to change money.

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Trying to do Westminster Abbey after the Tower, St. Paul's, Fleet Street and the Strand was too much for our schedule. Our schedule would take all the strain of a tired jock strap. That piece of paper the dorm organizer had laughed at said mapping session at 5:30 on July 2nd. Well, it was July 2nd but there was no mapping session. By the time the bus had dropped us off it was 5:00 and I'd yet to change money. It was already dinner time after a long hot day. No way. As I changed money I asked each kid if he would voluntarily show up for a chat, at least to introduce the project, around 7:30. Some said no, some said maybe, a few said yes.

At 7:30 only two kids were there: Jencks and Watson. We chatted around waiting for some others. They were down on three people already. Top on their list was Porter Portman. That cry of "dingbat" still rang in their ears. Next came Miss Bloch. She was too strict with her girls and that would never do. Last was an innocent bystander on the bus with us that day by happenstance: Brother Arthur NcPonus. What got them about him was the way he liked everything too much. Leaving the Tower he'd looked back and sighed. "There's seven hundred years of history right in front of you," and almost passed out from sheer excitement.

"Where?" asked Leslie Casyk.

"Why the Tower of London, young lady."

"But where is the Tower of London?" Leslie insisted.

"Why it's right there in front of you."

"No, that's the White Tower and that's the Jewel Tower," said Leslie pointing, "and that's the Queen's Tower. I've got to get a picture of London Tower."

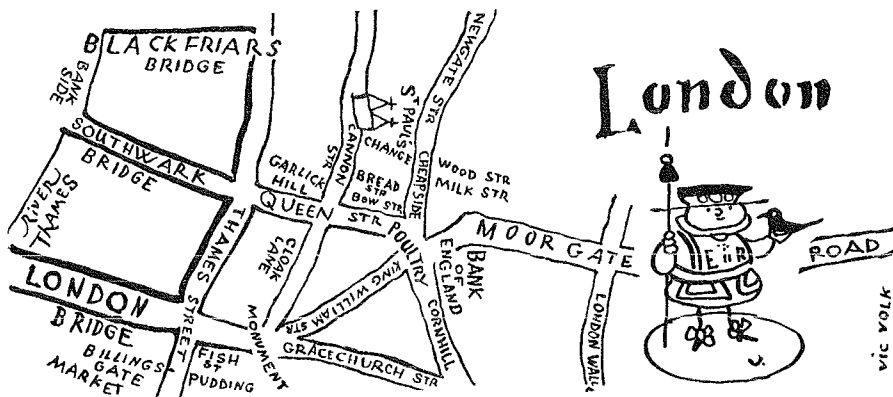
It was a funny story and we chuckled over it but it didn't stop time. Time went on and no one else showed up.

"I guess you're it. If you're the only ones coming, let's forget it."

About sixty seconds after they left Sven Heller appeared. I told him the same story. I was beginning to feel like something the dog dragged in all over again.

It was almost eight o'clock when the nine girls showed up with Miss Bloch. There's one thing about a disciplinarian. If she's on your side, you're in. We went upstairs to the common room and settled into chairs. We chatted about this and that to break the ice. They were a little formal at first, stiff, but they loosened up. They had some gripes and figured I was the person to bring them to. I listened. They were kind of shaken of by the day, its disorder, and failure to keep the schedule. They appreciated the fact that I'd changed the money, but failed to comprehend why my labor was necessary. The food in their dorm was scarcely fit to eat, and so far as I could tell, none of them had done more than push it around on the plate. Miss Bloch was shocked to find boys in their floor, and not four boys, but natives. One had even invaded the girl's john. The girls also sensed a certain hostility among the other H-T groups. They weren't making friends. They began to get angry as they let off steam and were taking it out on me.

I shuffled fast. "You've really got to understand one thing. Neither Bob nor I have anything, anything at all, to do with the running of this tour. Right now we're passengers, just like you." I wanted to make this clear so I said it seven different ways in a row.





After a while we got around to the project. I did a shu-ba-ba-do into the maps and we zeroed in on those. The girls broke into three camps: pro, con and uncommitted. Leslie Casyk, Vittoria Palazzo and Erica Cruz had the greatest reservations. Leslie was the oldest and the youngest on the tour. She was only fifteen but she'd already seen it all. She was made-up to the eyebrows and smoked and chewed gum like it was going out of style. She took more pictures on the tour of London than I've taken in a lifetime. She was small and had the longest finest hair I've seen on a fifteen year old. She never looked you in the eye when she spoke and made uselessly furtive gestures with her hands. I never knew what she'd do next. After thirty-five days with her, I still don't. And under her carefully manufactured exterior lurked a nice little girl, a little crazy sometimes, but still nice.

Erica Cruz was another story in another book. She was Puerto Rican and looked it and hated it and denied it. She was also a dish, of sorts. Her skin was pale, the color of cream and her hair was black as coal. Huge dark eyes looked at you behind rimless cheaters, and they belonged to that rare sort of person that often cries and laughs at the same time. She was earnest and eager and capable of easy excitement. Simple things pleased Erica, like daisies on her birthday. She was always ready to go anywhere, to do anything. She always would be.

Vittoria Palazzo was somehow a cross between Cruz and Casyk. She was plenty kooky, which put her in both places at once, but she had Erica's large eyes and Leslie's long hair. What struck me about Vittoria was her voice. It could cut Fort Knox in two with a single word, but from Vittoria a single word is as rare as the straight truth from a used car salesman. I didn't know it then, but Vittoria pumps gas in her free time and so back chat comes as naturally to her as melted ice cubes at a cocktail party. And back chat in that voice is a lethal weapon. What these three didn't see about the maps was the rationale and the hassle, which is putting it mildly. Leslie Casyk saw the mapping sessions like she saw the Tower of London — not at all. Vittoria just didn't see why they had to.

"Look," I said, blowing smoke out of the corner of my mouth, "you don't have to. Nobody's going to make you draw maps for us. I'm sitting here asking for your help. That's all. If you don't want to, don't. I'm not sure I would in your position. Here you're spending a lot of money to have a good time seeing Europe and this kook comes along and wants you to do some work. He's crazy. But if you do, I'll love you for it. That's all I can say."

"Mr. Wood, I don't think you're being fair—" Nybia Pagan began.

"My name's Denis."

"Well, Denis, I don't think you're being fair on yourself. I enjoyed the map exercises and the psychological questionnaire. I think we can learn a lot from them. We will be getting something out of it all besides helping you." Her eyes flashed around at the rest of the girls. Nybia Annette Pagan. Another Puerto Rican with pale, pale skin like ginger ale and coal black hair. Lots of it. She had smaller eyes than Erica but a fire danced in them that could be a come-on or sheer intelligence. She was wearing an elegant white nothing with a collar like a ribbon around her throat that emphasized the way she held her head — tall, proud, maybe a little defiant. She calls herself Spanish, anything to avoid being a Puerto Rican in New York. If she said the maps were fun, they were fun, no ifs, ands or buts about it.

But she wasn't even alone. Therese Montaigne agreed, cutting through the whines of Leslie Casyk, the way the Celtics take the ball down court. No fuss, no fight, just pro. Her skin was the color of fine old leather and her black hair was bunched up around her head like a nest cuddling fledgling birds. Her posture was erect but easy and graceful. She handled her body with maturity and spoke with a polished voice pitched lower than you expected. Therese Montaigne, a French name, on a woman of distinctive color. If you figured she was Haitian you were right. The funny thing about her support was that she hadn't filled out a single one of our predeparture forms. Maybe she was just coming to the aid of a cornered animal.

With vocal support for the project countering the negative feelings expressed earlier, a little free for all took place among the girls. Miss Bloch sat back in her chair and watched. So did I. Gradually a positive opinion began to assert itself. Lana Monroe and Marina Giaconda came out for the project. All Erica and Vittoria wanted was convincing and they got it. Pretty soon it was six to one in favor and Casyk gave up the ghost and threw in the towel. Mayo and Baker, silent and uncommitted, muttered vague positive assurances. They'd all draw maps and help in every way. We broke up and went out into the night.

Some of them wanted to go to the GPO Tower and I joined them. We headed in the right direction and started walking. It was pushing darkness but out from under the trees lots of light remained in the sky. The Tower was fun and an essay in orientation. None of them

could find Cartwright Gardens on their own, invariably settling on a minute circle of green at the Tower's foot. The day's tour was likewise impossible to plot. We stopped at a Wimpy's afterwards and I watched them make up for the dinner they hadn't eaten at the dorm. Some tough young punks threw wisecracks across the counter but the girls back chat was masterful. The guy behind the counter was a grad student at the London School of Economics. It was all fun and a little crazy and when we parted in front of my dorm we parted feeling good on both sides.

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You might ask me why I go into such detail about a single day on the tour.

Because for one thing the charged atmosphere made each detail stand out, the way things stand out in your mind when you learn someone close to you has died. Time seems to slow down and give you time to absorb and memorize each little thing, like what you were wearing and where you stood when you first heard the news, and the color of the sunlight on the drapes and the sounds of traffic on the street outside. This first complete day in London was like that. Maybe I was holding my own private wake for the project, watching non-cooperation compound inabilities to maintain schedules. Maybe I was mourning the death of my anticipations and expectations, cleaning out the old unfounded to make way for the day by day realities of seeing a big hunk of time and space in under a month. The kids were all on edge too, maybe for some of the same reasons. Maybe because they were looking each other over too carefully. Maybe because they were tired and overstimulated.

Another answer is that I didn't go into detail at all. I remember that tour block by block, sales pitch by sales pitch, bite by bite, crowd by crowd. I remember every bill I changed and each word of the native guide. I remember the liquidity of the sun and the color of the hairs on my arm as I stood waiting in the Tower for the group to reappear, watching the fat black ravens, looking at French nuns in their winged head gear, listening to the voices of the little children. I remember the softness of the air off the Thames and the sounds of jack hammers across the river and the feel of the grass beneath my feet. I remember the sweat, under my arms and in my crotch and between my toes, that hot sticky feeling of feet doing too much with too little air. I remember the soggy ham moving toward my mouth on a heavy fork with one bent tyne and the sound of the coffee pouring into the cup and the reflection of the ceiling lights in its sinful blackness. I remember the rough texture of the blankets as I got into bed and the tightness of the

muscles in my upper back and the tears on my cheeks as I thought of home and Ingrid and Homer and wondered what I was doing here a thousand miles from nowhere with a bunch of people who cared for me the way they cared for yesterday's newspaper.

Another answer is that I'm sick of science with no blood, no life, all dry words and dry ideas on dry paper.

Hi. I'm a scientist. I make hypotheses. I collect data. I come to conclusions.

I wear a shiny black tie and a short-sleeved white shirt and when I come to work in my sterile office I hang my baggy jacket on the back of the door and park my emotions in the waste basket with my chewing gum.

No thanks. Not for me.

Not for me the emptiness of "data." What a word that is. What a lot of sweat and anger and frustration hides there. Data. My data are thirty-one kids, all real, all flesh and blood and eyebrows and rich skin and varied voices and emotions and attitudes and vitality and energy. Taylor and Janine and Watson and Nybia and Karl and Joy and Desmond and Lana and all the rest of them. You look at my data and you see long months of hard preparation and one sweaty nightmare wonder of a whirlwind tour through Europe. You look at my data and see Bob and me, tired and strong, on top of the world and beaten, smiling and grim. You look at my data and you see sweat, salty and uncomfortable. You look at my data...

I will show you blood in a handful of data.

Read on, MacDuff.