

opening extract from

the scarecrows

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One

It was the night before the Fund-raising Effort that the devils came. So it seemed to Simon Wood ever after.

But they were formless then.

They came with the whispering. There was always whispering in the dorm after lights-out. But worse, the night before the parents came.

Chesworth was the night's first victim.

"Your father got *another* new car, Chesworth?"

Sniggers.

"Another *Vauxhall*, Chesworth?"

"Buys them in packs of ten, doesn't he, Chesworth?"

"Well, Vauxhalls are disposable, like bog-rolls. Use 'em once, flush 'em down the bog, *don't* you, Chesworth?"

"Get your arse rusty!"

Not a sound from Chesworth. Any sound would only make things worse. Besides, this was routine stuff. Friend Bowdon just sharpening his teeth; getting warmed up for the evening's fun. Chesworth was lucky.

Bored, Bowdon passed to another routine victim.

"What's your mother wearing tomorrow, Riley?"

Silence.

"She came dressed as an Eskimo tart last time."

Silence.

"Smeared herself with whale-blubber, an' all. What a pong."

Silence.

"Maybe she'll come as a Zulu virgin. Zulu virgins have rings through their. . . ."

Sniggers all down the rows of beds. Restrained, respectful sniggers. If you sniggered too loud, Bowdon might notice you. If you didn't snigger at all, he'd certainly notice.

Simon Wood didn't snigger.

Bowdon noticed. Simon felt him notice. Then felt him slither away again, into the dark. Bowdon was afraid of Simon.

Bowdon was remembering the last time the parents came. Last summer's Parents' Day.

Simon remembered too.

Summer Parents' Day. Started all right. Mum had done nothing to shame him. Red hair short and clean, her make-up slight, her skirt a decent length. Her Morris Minor Traveller was nearly ten years old, but clean and shining. She hadn't tried to kiss him, just smiled and said hallo. Not even asked him if he was O.K. Nothing for Bowdon to overhear. Nothing for Bowdon to get his rotten little teeth into.

It was Montgomery's father who spoiled it. Montgomery's father, who used to play tennis for Gloucestershire. Montgomery's father with his lanky legs and bounding stride and crinkly black hair. Montgomery's father had buttonholed Mum. Somebody had cried-off the parents' team who were playing tennis against the staff; would Mum step into the breach? Mum had fallen for it, like a sucker. Even though Simon begged her not to; with his eyes. Begged and *begged*. But Mum was always the willing sucker. . . .

Mum coming onto court, beside Mr Montgomery. In borrowed shorts. Showing her legs. Not that Mum's legs weren't all right. Not fat, with dimpled thighs and varicose veins like some mothers' legs. But when she bent over to pick up a ball, you could see her bottom.

Bowdon, and Bowdon's friend of the moment, and young Montgomery (who smashed anybody Bowdon wanted smashed), sitting on the grass by the umpire's chair. Looking at Mum's bottom as she picked up the balls. Muttering and laughing like they would make themselves sick, so that the Head, who was umpiring and doing his Wimbledon impersonation, turned round and glared at them three times. But they went on muttering and laughing.

Simon set his face like a rock – they were watching him too – and turned his mind off. There was a huge privet hedge round the court, because the school couldn't afford proper netting; it was full of the remains of crime. If you had something you wanted to hide, you held it inside your fist, plunged your fist

into the hedge, and let go. The hedge was full of the sodden rags of ancient stolen caps, bleached exercise books from the sixties and torn nuddy-mags. Among which spiders spun and birds built their nests. It was a good place to hide your mind while you kept your face still as a rock, and the Head droned on about forty-love.

But he could still tell from the Head's voice that someone was losing pretty badly. It had to be Mum, because the staff pair were Slogger Newall and the games-master, an Oxford blue. He raised his eyes in desperation above the hedge, to the tall willow trees. There was a hot gusty wind blowing up there, above the airless calm of the court. The trees leaned over, like people at a street accident. They looked as if they were going to fall, fall, as the savage gusts lifted their leaves, showing the pale undersides in waves, like skirts.

"Advantage, Mrs Wood," announced the Head. In spite of himself, Simon looked.

And there was Mum, up on her toes, spinning a crafty serve that sliced into the very corner. Slogger hit it thunderously into the net.

"Game to Mrs Wood."

People clapping, even the school, as if they really meant it. And Mum standing there, cheeks pink and eyes shining, hair pulled back with an elastic band, looking no older than the sixth-form girls from down the road.

Simon had to watch after that, heart in his mouth with every stroke. Slogger and the games-master and Mr Montgomery all hit the ball hard. But Mum kept sticking her racket out at cunning angles, and the ball would vanish in a puff of chalk. And the school was all on Mum's side, because the games-master was a cocky sod, and even Slogger was still a *teacher*. The waves of applause got bigger and bigger. . . .

"Game, set and match to Mrs Wood and Mr Montgomery!"

Mum was presented with a nickel-plated egg-cup thing. As she took it from the Head she bent one knee and bobbed her head, and just for a moment Simon remembered being very small and watching Mum win at somewhere called Queen's Club, and Dad arriving from the War House, for some reason

dressed in khaki and shining leather and moaning he was too late to see Mum win. Then the memory was gone, and Mum passed the egg-cup back to the Head, so it could live in the dusty showcase for another year. Then they all had tea, and then—

Lights out. Whispering.

"I think your mother took *service* rather well," said Bowdon, greasy as a year-old *Playboy*.

For once, nobody sniggered. They were remembering how well Mum had played; they *liked* her. Somebody even said, "Knock it off, Bowdon," in muttered embarrassment.

But Bowdon went on. "She certainly knows how to handle a pair of balls."

The silence was absolute.

"And it was interesting, the way she bent down. . . ."

That was when the devils came.

Simon got out of bed without willing it. Felt the floor cold under his feet, like in a dream. Walked steadily across to Bowdon's bed. He knew he was being insane. Bowdon was twice his size; Bowdon would kill him.

Calmly, he reached for Bowdon in the dark, got hold of his pyjama-coat.

"Hey, what's up wi' you?" said Bowdon querulously.

Simon hit with all his strength.

He could remember nothing after that, except Bowdon wrenching and heaving under his hands, and Bowdon's pyjamas tearing, and chairs falling and the iron pain of bed-legs and slithering on the smooth polished floor and then . . . nothing.

Until he was standing in the washroom, with the lights on. Something was dripping off his nose and splashing on the floor. He looked down. There was a track of blood all down his pyjamas, right to the crutch. And one of the toilet doors stood half-open with its lock smashed off. He gaped stupidly at the splintered star of bare wood in the blue door.

"Who did that?"

"You did, my lad," said a grim voice above his head: Slogger Newall's voice. Simon realised the strong hands holding him

were Slogger's too. And the pale faces of the rest of the dorm were staring open-mouthed from the washroom doorway.

A noise was coming from inside the toilet. A blubbering, punctuated by high-pitched hysterical intakes of breath. Craning sideways, he could see a pyjama-clad form lying on the wet floor, curled round behind the toilet-bowl, where the cleaner kept her lav-brush in its polythene holder.

"Who's that?"

Slogger's hands tightened round him. "You know bloody well who it is." Slogger's voice was a mixture of shock, severity and a tinge of grudging admiration.

"*Bowdon*?"

"Bowdon. Now go with Montgomery to the San."

In the San, Simon's nose went on bleeding till he never realised there was so much blood in the world. And it was Montgomery who made him lie back and did the stuff with wet hankies and keys at the back of the neck. Because Slogger and Matron had their hands full of Bowdon, beyond a closed door. Bowdon would not stop making that noise, until finally Matron gave him something.

"What *happened*?" croaked Simon. It was hard to make himself understood, because his throat kept filling with blood.

"Jeeze!" said Monty. "You were spraying snots of blood all over the place like a fire-breathing dragon. Bubbles. . . . An' he kept hitting you but you wouldn't stop. Can't you *remember* biting him? Then he ran into the toilet and started screaming an' Slogger came. . . . Don't you really remember anything?"

"No."

"You looked *potty*. Real bonkers. Like . . . like a Viking going . . . baresark in battle." Monty heaved a sigh at the effort this thought cost; he wasn't a very literary character. "Keep still or you'll start bleeding again."

Ever since then, Bowdon had been frightened of him. The whole dorm was; except Monty, who was frightened of nothing, and Tris la Chard, who was crazy anyway.

But nobody knew the worst thing: he was very frightened of himself.

Oh, they all still got at him, everyone but Monty and Tris.

But only about one thing: about being insane; and that had a kind of nervous admiration which took away the sting. Nobody ever mentioned Mum, and that was all that mattered.

Three days later, the Head had him up in his study, and then couldn't find anything to say. Hummed and haahed about adolescence and glands and hormones, and then bumbled into silence, staring at his fake-marble bust of Beethoven. Simon felt like blurting out, "Please sir, am I really insane?" But that wasn't the kind of thing you asked the Head.

Eight months had passed, and it hadn't happened again. And now it was Fund-raising Effort, Easter Term. And Bowdon was sheering away from him into the dark, to torment others. Simon could feel the devils in the air around him now, making his legs ache with rigid stiffness and the palms of his hands sweat so he had to rub them dry on the sheets.

"Is your mother *fulfilled* at the moment, Harris?" asked Bowdon, gently, concernedly. Mrs Harris was, in the outside world, a child-psychiatrist. Not English. Austrian. Volublc. Last summer, when the parents came, she'd talked to all the staff, on and on, about the need to give adolescent boys a sense of fulfilment. Bowdon overheard. Since that day, Harris had often wished he was dead.

"Harris? Harris? Speak to me when you're spoken to, boy! HARRIS! HAAARRISSSSS!" This was the big one; the real victim of the night. Simon felt his hands, his back-muscles tighten further, his scalp go prickly-wet.

Somebody should kill Bowdon. Simon tried to think of a good reason for not killing Bowdon. Bowdon's mother would cry? Simon doubted it. Mrs Bowdon didn't even bother to come to Parents' Day; nobody knew if she really existed. Bowdon was spawned out of a computer who'd been raped by a rattlesnake.

"HAAAAAAAARRRRIISSSSSSSS?" Bowdon's tone was almost affectionate.

Shall I? thought Simon. Shall I open my mind and let the devils in, and know nothing? Then it will all be over and Bowdon will be dead and we can all get some sleep. . . .

The dormitory door opened suddenly; a shaft of yellow light

cut along the parquet-floor between the two rows of beds.

Was it Slogger? On night-duty? Slogger could silence Bowdon; creeping silently up the stairs in his dark-blue tracksuit, pouncing on Bowdon's bed, pouring a handy glass of water into it, while Bowdon squawked.

"Your bed's wet, Bowdon? You *dirty* boy! You'll have to remake it then, won't you?" Then Slogger would pull Bowdon's bed to pieces, strewing pillows and blankets the length of the dorm, draping a sheet from the lampshade, while the rest of the room bit the blankets not to laugh out loud.

Or Slogger saying, "Do me a favour, will you, Bowdon? Downstairs a minute?" Then he'd make Bowdon clean every old pair of rugger-boots in the locker-room, having kicked them round all the puddles in the yard first, all the dorm hanging out of the windows while Slogger kicked boots all over the place, shouting "Goal!" and Bowdon followed, mewing pathetically.

Oh yes, Slogger could silence Bowdon.

But it wasn't Slogger standing in the lighted doorway. It was Protheroe, the art-master. So-called. Better known as the Old Goat. With his pathetic straggle of beard and his head sticking like a tortoise's out of the old blue duffle-coat he wore even in warm weather. And his set-piece appeal to reason that he bleated like a goat or preached like the Archbishop of Canterbury, what was the difference? It had never been a great speech, even new. Now, everyone knew it by heart, and impersonations were no longer funny.

"Tonight," bleated the Old Goat, "I want a victory for common-sense."

"Too late," muttered Monty. "They just lost ten-nil. To Brazil."

The Old Goat bleated on, straight through the snigger. "Tonight I want you to be reasonable. After all, you are the senior form in this . . . prep-school."

"*Reasonable*," they all mocked in chorus under their breath, even Simon. So that there was an audible murmur.

"This dormitory is simply not getting enough sleep. Staff are complaining. The Head has mentioned it."

"*Complaining*," breathed the boys dreamily. "*Mentioned*."

"The overwhelming decent majority of you, who want to get enough sleep, who want to work hard at your lessons, are being undermined by a small but malicious minority. It has got to stop, and I am going to stop it."

"*Stop it*," breathed the dorm. Then, with a homosexual twist, "Oh, *stop* it."

Prothie paused to swallow nervously, and kept staring at the ceiling. He never looked at anybody; least of all the small but malicious minority.

On the other hand, Bowdon sat bolt upright in bed, beaming at Prothie with his Cheshire-cat grin, just yearning to be looked at. Straw-coloured hair, rosy cheeks in a moon-face, blue eyes like innocent, brilliant saucers.

"Bear it in mind," added Prothie. "You'll see it makes sense."

"Sir?" said Bowdon, sticking up a striped arm enthusiastically.

Prothie flicked off the lights and fled.

There was a moment's silence. Only the dim red light above the fire-extinguisher remained. And the lights from the masters' wing gleaming through the uncurtained windows, where Prothie would be lighting up another fag with trembling fingers and counting desperately the hours and days to end-of-term, an unlooked-at *Life of Michelangelo* on his quivering knees. And the lights of passing cars, casting shadows of leafless trees that swept across the ceiling like jagged devil wings.

It was worse than before. While there'd been a chance that Slogger might burst in, there'd been a hope that things might not get too bad. But now they knew it was Prothie. . . . The whole dorm took a deep breath before changing gear. Again the devil wings from the headlights swept across the ceiling; the devils whispered in Simon's ears like the rush of blood. If he didn't know what he was doing, how could he be *blamed* for killing Bowdon? It was the fault of glands, hormones . . . blame the hormones. . . .

Blithely unaware of his doom, Bowdon continued down his primrose path.

"Haaarrissss!"

"HAAAAAAAAARRIS?"

"Harris's mother is a . . . um . . . lady of foreign extraction." The imitation of the Head's voice was perfect.

Snigger.

"Harris's mother is a lady of *German* extraction."

"A sodding Nazi?" offered Monty.

"Far from it, dear friends. She is . . . ah . . . erm . . . a lady of Hebrew descent. Her father was made into lampshades in the Sachsenhausen lampshade factory, well-known to all our readers."

"I say, I say, I say, would you buy a used lampshade from Harris's grandmother?"

"They made him into soap, actually. They only made lampshades in Belsen."

Simon let the devils in. He felt them slide softly, lovingly into his muscles. The tension was going. He felt yards above himself, far away, up near the dark ceiling. Unreal, lovely. He put one foot to the cold floor. It had always been inevitable, Bowdon and him. . . .

Then, from the far end of the dorm, came a giggle. Not a snigger. A genuine happy giggle, from the land of sanity, from the world outside. Everybody looked that way. In the corner, somebody's bedclothes were elevating like a dim mushroom cloud. Then the cloud collapsed in the middle, and moved down the bed, humping itself like a caterpillar.

Everyone was giggling now.

"What you doing, Tris, you mad sod?" shouted someone.

A muffled voice came from the humped bed. "Looking for me Smarties."

"What they doing down there, Tris?"

"Put them in me bedsocks to hatch." The bed leaped up and down. "Christ, they hatched. They're *biting*!"

"Biting where, Tris?"

"Never you bloody mind!" screamed Tris in a shrill falsetto. He gave an agonised shriek and came flailing down the room, wrapped tightly in his blankets.

"Oh, shut up, you stupid idiot," said Bowdon crossly, his game with Harris ruined. But nobody listened to Bowdon,

once Tris bust loose. Everybody was falling about; even Harris.

"Ay'm the Sheikh of Araby, and up your oil well I'll creep," yodelled Tris. Somehow the blankets had become a flowing burnous. Then he went into his Mad Monk routine, intoning Pythagoras Theorem with all the sanctity of High Mass. He had just reached "*Quod Erat Demonstrandum*" and the dorm replied "Amen", when Prothie burst in again. Once Prothie realised he only had Tris to deal with, and not Bowdon, Prothie really played the Big Hero. As a result of which, Tris would be up in front of the Head in the morning.

When Prothie went, Bowdon tried to start on Harris again. But the dorm had laughed too much, and they were angry about Tris being in trouble.

"Aah, shut your face, Bowdon," muttered a brave soul, far down the room.

"Who was that?" asked Bowdon nastily.

"Everybody," said everybody; and, yawning, slept.