

Tinsel and Dust

'Dieter!'

'Morry!'

The last thirty yards I quicken my step, and even run towards Dieter as he waits smiling in his sunny way with his snow-white teeth showing and his dimples cutting deep, at the Jenkins Street corner, two blocks from school

'I was afraid I might be late,' I say, panting under the crammed satchel on my back; to which he answers, gaily, with a devil-take-all wave of the hand. 'Then we should have been late together.'

Dieter and I drift together. It is only natural. The only migrants, we are seated side by side by Mr. Chandler, a gryphon of a teacher who, when addressing either of us, never calls us by name but points at whoever he wants and hurls an abrupt truncated 'You' down the knobbed bony shaft of his clawed unwaveringly rigid finger. To be foreign *and* smart runs against his finer grain but even our gryphon cannot but acknowledge that Dieter and I are, in our separate ways, the most precocious in the class. Nor can he deny – how he must boil – that insofar as twelve-year-olds can be creative, we are the most imaginatively so as well. Dieter who has the eye of a diamond, so sharp and so acute, draws magnificent landscapes and faces in single-coloured pastels, while I who love the sounds and rhythms of words write verses that Dieter without the faintest tinge of guile calls 'clever'. We bask, Dieter and I,

in the sunshine of mutual admiration. Together we wrestle, fish for tadpoles, scale the scaffolding thrown up around rising houses and, with tongue licking lips, remove each other's splinters garnered in our antics. And together we play chequers and monopoly and chess and roam about the quietly-suburban streets of Northcote, passing the days while our parents are at work, his dealing in leather goods a mile away in High Street, mine pumping for a few shillings a day the treadles of the sewing machines in Flinders Lane.

Tinsel against dust, we are known nonetheless as 'the twins', a name bridging the chasm between rollicking amusement to outright scorn where not barbed with the acid venom of sarcasm. For Dieter is tall and blue-eyed and blond while I am chubby and dark. And he is agile, the muscles of his calves rippling when he runs like rhythmically rolling cables under his pale flesh, his movements gazelle-like as he leads the field in whatever sport he enters while I, panting, straining, sweating and awkward invariably bring up the rear. And where I am the more deliberate, the model for Rodin's 'Thinker', he is the more quick-witted and the readier to laugh – however bad the joke – and the more inclined to pass flash judgement, however mistaken, upon classmates or teachers or books or upon the third-rate westerns we sometimes see together at the matinees at the Regal.

To deny envy is to lie, but there are moments, unforgettable, delectable, heart-quickenning moments – would time then stand still – which compensate manifold for my physical shortcomings.

His voice rises from his throat, the 'r's vibrating on metal rails. 'There is a big brain in that little body of yours,' he says whenever – and it is always – I beat him in chess or outplay him in monopoly. And he claps me on the back with genuine bonhomie, even with pride whenever my arithmetic or algebra result is perfect even when he himself, as so often, is well down the list. Words and numbers are not his forte; just as neither sport nor art are mine. Identical twins we are not; rather do we complement one another, like lock and key, the

fact clear to our classmates who impose upon us nicknames without number, names like 'Tentacles' and 'Oyster', 'Brawn' and 'Brains', and 'Picasso' and 'Einstein' which adhere to us like cement long after Dieter and I – eternity is illusory – fall out.

We are different, Dieter and I, but no less than from the Australian boys who revolve in our galaxy. But differences are both seal and razor. Difference unites Dieter and myself; difference cuts us off from the class. We are its butt, the foil of hooligans like 'Knuckles' Bill and 'Bullneck' Kevin who mimic our accents, dare us to call our mothers by bawdy names we don't yet understand or merely mock with ice-cutting fingers and the laughter of the devil the physical juxtaposition of so disparate a pair as Tentacles and Oyster. Dieter who is all wire and strength, they leave alone, content to leaven their burden of spite in mere words, adding 'Fritz' and 'Kraut' to his other names. With me, constraint on their part is not so vital a practice. How enormously it delights 'Bullneck' Kevin to call me 'Yid' and trip me up on the stairs or to clap me on the back with the full force of his concrete bulk or to nudge me into Mr. Chandler who, passing by, turns, seizes me by the collar so that my whole shirt rises under my pullover and in his severe hard-edged way lectures me – pours forth – on proper conduct, terminating his menacing torrent with a remark that bites with teeth far sharper than the most physical of hurts: 'You migrants have much to learn in this country.' In one bad week, I collect souvenirs – a grazed knee, a cut hand, a bruised eye. But that bruised eye is the last injury I know. For Dieter, whose eyes are diamonds, sees 'Knuckles' Bill strike me outside the schoolyard with a clenched fist. He leaps towards us, glides almost in swift long strides, hustles through the crowd of boys who make sport of watching and, amid the cheering and jeering, so launches into 'Knuckles' and so viciously batters him with as full-fisted a medicine as his own that both my assailant and his companions-in-arms thereafter keep their distance and in their assaults upon us confine themselves to the safer harbours of mere verbal taunts, mild innocuous showers

of words that run off our backs like water on hide.

Dieter is my protector and for his protection, mere gratitude does not suffice; but more than gratitude I cannot show until, on another occasion, I become his saviour.

One sultry March afternoon, we go swimming after school at the local baths. No hero I, I content myself by merely paddling about in the centre of the pool in the midst of a handful of boys who, splashing and larking about in the water, create fountains of spray and wave upon wave of foam. Dieter, however, as ever athletic and energetic – and vain – swims the length of the pool times not given to counting, until he is seized at the deep end by a cramp that slows him down and draws him to a halt. Some five yards from the end, a ruffian on mischief bent, dives, crashes, splashes into the water beside him. Dieter's poise falters. He begins to struggle and from where I paddle, I see him lash out and strain for breath before his pained pale face and blond hair sink in a writhing thrashing amorphous shadow beneath the surface. Crisis brings strength unknown to my limbs. Not one to create scenes by frenzied appeals and shouting, I swim quickly, if awkwardly, towards Dieter, grope, reach and find an armpit, hoist him upward, and, taking hold of his arms as he gasps and spouts water, I haul him, my own breath choking, to the safety of the pool's edge where he clings, panting, his chest rising and falling, rising and falling, bellows in their motion. His breath returned, he swings an arm about my shoulders, searches my face which in turn searches his, roams over it with the sweep of his pellucid blue eyes, purses his lips with stifled emotion and passing his wiry white fingers through my wet hair says with the 'r's more guttural than ever, 'Do you know what you are, Morry? A giant. A giant.'

And in that moment, I grow, I swell and I soar, ascending to heights of delight and blissful beatitude.

Then it occurs to me. For six months we have visited each other's houses, yet never have I met his parents, nor he mine. Photographs of his father and his mother stand on the mantelpiece of the lounge-room where we play monopoly, but the

photographs are old and outmoded and his parents stand stiff and formal and smile with lemons on their tongues, their lips and cheeks touched up with a tasteless mauve tint while the pale blue pupils of their eyes diverge and focus upon objects wide apart. If explanation be needed, this lack of encounter with each other's parents is easy enough to explain. Weekdays for our parents are filled – crammed – with work, with ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day of labour in the throes of a compulsion to succeed in this however begrudgingly adopted home of Australia, and naturally – and, in a way, unnaturally – we see little of them ourselves. By contrast, weekends are given to pursuits engaged *en famille*, taken up with visiting and receiving, with riding by tram to Music for the People concerts or to the Botanical Gardens, or simply with whiling away the time, somehow, with newspaper or book or cotton thread, in the quiet unobtrusive leaden repose of the back-yard or the sun-room or the kitchen – in the tranquil wondrous pastimes of suburbia.

Mrs. Greta Schmidt, when finally I do meet her – it is a public holiday, and shops, factories and schools are closed – is a dragon, albeit (and admit it I must) a beautiful one, spewing hot fire with every word. She hates me. Tall and slender, her sharp nose riveting the air, her glistening sun-golden hair tortured into a ribboned tail, her very breasts almost accusing, she frames me with narrowed eyes through which icy-blue pupils send shaft upon shaft of arrows barbed with venom. She hates, despises me from the very first and I see that hatred in her shining granite jowls, cannot help but see it as she counts the pennies I swallow with every jam biscuit and every sip of milk that Dieter has offered me. She is beautiful, yes, but not unblemished, and against her severe beauty, the hollow black space that gapes in place of a molar when she speaks stands out in prominent and abundantly welcome relief.

'From Poland, your parents, ha?', she asks, interrogates, her voice, like Dieter's, rolling forward but unlike his, resounding with the ever-nearing rumbling of a distant avalanche.

'Warsaw,' I say.

'Warsaw?' A huff where a 'w' is intended and the 's' a slur.
'And your father, he fight with the army, yes?'

I shake my head.

'But the Polish, they are brave people. Your father not fight with them?'

'Papa is not . . . a Polish man.' To call my father a Pole is to call him Satan.

'Ach. Papa is not Polish. But not a gypsy?'

'He was sent away,' I say. 'With Mama . . . He was . . .'

'Jewish' is on my tongue, but facing the menace in her flaring nostrils, I falter.

'He was . . . sent away. To Russia,' I say instead, and to impress her even a little, I add, 'To Siberia . . . it is very cold there.'

But not as icy as Mrs. Schmidt whose very laughter, a thin vibrating thread, adds no warmth as she rubs thumb against index and middle finger.

'But you people, you know always how to be warm, no?'

I shrug my shoulders, uncomprehending.

'Money has a long tongue, no?'

Dieter, across the table from us, gives a little giggle, his mother's epithet a joke. Prickling with heat, the tingling flush of an embarrassment vague yet sufficiently real, I nibble at another biscuit, sip my milk – her milk – and say nothing.

But the dragon's fire is not yet spent, nor satisfaction complete. I notice for the first time the gathering wrinkles of age about her throat and focus upon the black gap between her teeth.

'And here, in Australia, in a factory they work, your parents, ha?'

I might be ashamed of my parents' crippled English, of their lack of forthcoming before strangers, of the unchanging dreary drabness of their clothes, but their occupations I feel no need to defend.

'Mama makes shirts. Papa makes pants.'

Her nose twitches.

'And they work hard, no?'

'Yes,' I nod.

'Very hard, of course.'

'Yes.'

'Naturally.' The word in its harshness rolls unnaturally. 'Naturally. *Your* people to work in a factory. For *that* should be chosen, ha? Should make hands dirty? No, no, forbid God, ha? Work hard, yes. Today, in a factory, yes; tomorrow in a shop; but after tomorrow, ha? After tomorrow, other people should make hands dirty. Italian, Greek, good Germans, no? To make your people rich. Like in the old country – in Germany, in Russia also, America . . .'

She would go on. The torrent begun to gush is far from its final tributary. but it is Dieter who stems the flow. Leaning back on two legs of his chair, his hands clasped behind his neck, he topples suddenly. His glass overturns, the milk spills and Dieter barely saves himself from clattering to the floor by gripping the under-edge of the table which his feet have drawn towards him.

His mother is over him. Her hard pale cheeks flush. Her palm swipes at him once, twice, missing the mark each time as Dieter, eagle-swift, shields himself with raised arms and her jaw becomes unhinged in a cascade of abuse upon her son, all the while wiping with a damp cloth the spent milk from the table. Her German which she now unleashes I do not fully understand, but know from Dieter's repeated glances in my direction that not all her invective is over spilt milk and that my presence is not a little responsible for it.

Whether he listens, whether he hears, I don't know. But following his lead, I flee, barely avoiding collision with his father, a solid balding oak of a man with a board-creaking tread who at that moment enters straight into the lap of his wife's continuing vituperation.

Outside, the full effect of Dieter's mother's venom courses through me and I want to run, to run through the desolate suburban streets and through the football oval and the gardens to wherever I can escape those sharp pursuing barbs of the golden-haired dragon. I can't look into Dieter's face, for in his

is hers, and even behind the white-toothed smile and the dimples I see her malice and disdain.

But Dieter, out of range of the house, where neither his mother nor his father peering from behind the curtains might see, places a steady hand on my shoulders.

'Morry, you remember how you saved me one time? At the baths?'

'So?'

'Now I saved you.'

I search his tapering pale-complexioned face.

'The chair, the glass, the milk . . . She was hurting you . . .'

'She did not hurt me,' I say, shrugging a shoulder.

'I did it on purpose.'

I snort. 'Tell me another one,' I say, angry, disbelieving.

'Another one? All right. What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo?'

Mischief now plays on his face. His nose twitches in an effort to keep himself from laughing outright. I shrug my shoulders. What I intend as indifference he takes to mean yielding.

'A woollen jumper with a pocket! And have you heard about the four French kittens, un, deux, trois and quatre who went swimming? They couldn't really swim and un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq.'

His laughter, close to my ear, rolls over the fences in the neighbourhood gardens and tumbles along the street on all sides. What is frozen within me thaws. The hurt recedes.

'How do you keep a skunk from smelling?', I ask.

'Put perfume in his bath,' Dieter says, rollicking in spry gaiety.

His mirth is contagious.

'No, hold his nose. - And what is a crocodile's favourite game?'

'Tell me.'

'Snap.'

Now we both laugh.

'Catch me,' he says, beginning to run. I chase after him,

we elude each other around an elm, then, coming together, wrestle on the moist green lawn of the nature strip. Ever the stronger, Dieter this time puts little effort into resisting me and lets me gain the upper position. As I sit astride his belly, he bends his knees behind me and extends his arms above his head. The muscles of his neck are flaccid. Puckering his brow, he looks up at me.

'My mother, she is not so bad as you think,' he says. 'Tonight I will tell her how you saved me. After that, she will be different to you. She does not know you. I do.'

'She hates me. And my father. And my mother.'

'She doesn't know them. How can she?'

'Why?'

'So serious, you. Tell me, what is the difference between a sigh, a mink coat and a monkey?'

'Dieter! Why?'

Dieter raises his shoulders, heaves with his belly, once, twice, rolls me over with a thrust of his arm and our positions are reversed, my back now on the moist grass and he straddled over me, peering down.

'Or what has a neck but can't swallow?'

'Why?!'

A shrug of the shoulders, a pouting of the lips, a questioning look. The sun behind him rims the shadow of his face with a halo of gold.

'They say you, your people, are everywhere.'

'Me? My people?'

'Die Juden. Jews.'

His words ring like lies in my ears. He – they – must be lying. I am the only Jewish boy in class, in the school; there is not another Jewish family in my street and only three that I can recall in the neighbourhood. If there were more, would Mother, my mother, so bemoan repeatedly the wilderness that is Northcote, the exile where she rarely sees a Jewish face or hears a Yiddish word?

'They are not everywhere!', I say, passion the spirit that gives voice to protest.

He waves the back of his strong tendinous hand against the air.

'As if I care.'

The halo fades as the sun disappears once more behind a cloud. The smile – the white-toothed dimpled smile – by which I know him best returns, broadens. His nostrils dilate in imminent mirth.

'You still haven't told me: what has a neck but can't swallow?'

He waits for a moment, takes his weight off me, rises, pulls me upward and brushes stray blades of grass and twigs and dust from my back.

'So, give up?', he says, 'Give up?'

I nod.

'A bottle!'

And once more his laughter rolls like vaulting waves in all directions and it is pure and clean and contagious and I cannot help but add my voice to his, even though beneath the surface, there runs the stream of vague unease, resentment, hurt.

And time comes, soon after, when Dieter meets Mother, my mother. We are home from school, playing chess in the lounge-room of our house and Mother returns early. The game is nearly over.

Laden down with two string bags of fruit and groceries, her cheeks flushed high crimson with the effort of her perpetual haste, she peers into the room where Dieter and I lie stretched on our bellies, poring over our game. She nods at Dieter who rises on one elbow to say 'Hello,' pauses to study with swift glancing parries of her gaze his hair, his eye, his chin, evidently arrives at a private verdict and, thrusting a final hard rapping glance at me, recedes and continues with brisk clattering steps down the length of the corridor.

Two moves before checkmate, when my rook and queen are hounding Dieter's beleaguered king into final capitulation,

Mother calls me from the kitchen.

'In a minute,' I call back.

'Now!', she says emphatically.

Before Dieter, I prefer to avoid a scene. Grimacing with chagrin while he shrugs his shoulders as if to say 'It can't be helped,' I go.

Mother, barely home and the sun outside not yet set, is already occupied at the stove.

'You saw your mother with those bags,' she says in Yiddish, her back to me as she pours water into a pot, 'You could at least have helped.'

'I was playing with Dieter.'

Her tone is a razor. 'You were playing with . . .' She balks at repeating his name.

'We are friends . . . We sit together at school . . . He . . . I saved him from drowning.'

'Put the fruit away.'

'But Dieter is waiting.'

'Tell him you're too busy to play with him now.'

I have seldom known her so rock-hard. Her hair is in a bun. Loose strands, some turning grey, tremble as she cuts up potatoes into the pot.

'But . . .'

Her lowering expression as she turns her head cuts me short. It is not the flush of haste that now colours her cheeks but something more vexatious, more galling.

'Such people are not our friends,' she says.

Argue with granite. In obedience, I turn to go back to the lounge-room. But at the kitchen door, Dieter is standing, lean, erect, watching keenly, holding in his wiry pale-complexioned hands the chess-set which he has packed.

'You won,' he says smiling, though not in his normal open way, as he hands it to me.

Mother moves from the stove to the sink, stiffly, without looking at us. I know that Dieter could not have understood her remark, but know just as clearly that he is aware of his superfluity in the house. With his diamond-sharp light blue

eyes and the muscles of his jaw rippling in sinewy tension under the pale flesh, he gazes intently upon Mother's back as though that might compel her to acknowledge him. But Mother does not desert her occupation. The evening dinner becomes her sole outward concern, even though she has set about it earlier than usual and with an application more intense.

I accompany Dieter to the front-gate. His blond hair as he walks with his customary buoyant step before me glistens in the orange light of the sun setting beyond Victoria Street. A mild breeze courses around us and the air is scented with the lively redolence of ripening roses and hydrangeas. Across the road, Mr. King is mowing his lawn. The trees in his garden sway to the rhythm of the breeze. Watching Dieter, I feel the need to make amends.

'My mother . . . she has a headache,' I say, lying with what could be the truth.

Dieter, his muscles knotting into cords, leaps over the gate. Coming to rest on the other side and obviously satisfied with his performance, he grins.

'I just remembered, did you hear about the teacher who was cross-eyed?'

'She's not always like that,' I say.

He cracks his knuckles and bends down to pick up a stone.

'I'm sure you did nothing wrong.'

'Well did you hear about the cross-eyed teacher?' His teeth are ivory as he laughs.

'Really . . .,' I say.

Licking his lower lip, his brow in concentrated furrows, he twists his agile trunk, crooks back his arm to the limit and hurls the stone with the full might of his body.

'She couldn't control her pupils,' he then cries out, watching the stone rise and glide and fall and crack into the very centre of an elm down the street. 'Bull's eye,' he adds with delight, slapping me on a shoulder. 'Did you see that? Did you see that?'

'Good shot,' I say, but without enthusiasm, even his riddle

failing to humour me.

'Ach, you are so serious. One day your face will fall off . . . Well, see you again tomorrow, Einstein? At the corner?'

I nod. He runs in the direction of his house, stops twenty yards away, turns and calls to me, 'Then Picasso will wait for you;' and then, walking backwards, retreating, adds, 'Your mother, Morry . . . she has a headache, I understand.'

The next morning, I don't meet Dieter at the Jenkins Street corner. Instead, my thoughts incessantly circling in swirling eddies, and repeatedly and expectantly looking behind me, I bypass it and take another route to school.

Before my eyes, the clearer eyes of memory than of immediate sight, I see again Mother's tight stretched lips as she says to Father over dinner: 'Your fine young son has found himself a German shegetz for a friend.'

Father wipes his chin where a flat noodle has been clinging.

'And that is the best you can do?', he says.

I defend what is under threat.

'There is nothing wrong with him,' I say. 'You don't even know him.'

'Tell me,' Father says, breaking off a piece of bread which he delivers to his mouth, 'does your friend have a grandfather, a grandmother, uncles, cousins, aunts?'

A peculiar question. I shrug my shoulders.

Father leans towards me. There are crumbs between his teeth. 'Whatever he has, remember this, he has more than you.'

And as I walk to school, I see too the photographs – the old tattered fading photographs with the names and the dates on the back that Mother has taken from her dresser drawer and placed into my hands.

'You are a child still, may you live to a hundred and twenty,' she says, 'but maybe – you will be Bar Mitzvah soon enough – maybe you will understand. It's time, at least, that you know.'

Some of the photographs I have seen before, others have emerged from an unsuspected darkness.

In a force united, my parents sit on either side of me, Father's face close to my shoulder, his breath smelling staley of cigarettes, Mother more subdued now, her cheeks, her brow, her chin less severe – both pointing, reminiscing, explaining, as one by one, a succession of salvaged faces – young, old, long, short, round, square, bearded, shaven, smooth-skinned, wrinkled faces – passes before me.

'This is your grandmother Baila – she had seven children . . . here your aunt Rebecca – a more beautiful girl never lived . . . your uncle Isaac who played the fiddle . . . your other grandmother Sarah . . . your cousin Simcha – a child, a prodigy . . . If not for the, those . . . those murderers,' (Mother crushes the word between her teeth) 'you would have a family so big, you couldn't stop counting . . .'

And in the descending brooding oppressiveness that binds my parents and myself in an intimacy but rarely repeated thereafter, I become familiar with ugly horrible frightening words, words like Hitler and Nazis, gas chambers and crematoria where all of those whose photographs I now hold were killed because they were Jews.

'And now,' Father says, 'you, child of our martyrs, you are friends with one of *them*;' while Mother, raising my chin towards her own firm steady barely mobile face, adds with the force of a conviction deep-seated and passionate, 'The Germans, they hate us. Such people are not our friends.'

And now as I enter the school-yard, Greta Schmidt confronts me at the gate, that tall slender beautiful golden-haired dragon spewing arrows barbed with venom and words of fire, in her pale-complexioned angular face Dieter's face, in her light-blue eyes Dieter's eyes, in her rolling voice Dieter's voice. And, in that moment, Mother's warning assumes a bodily form as real as the grey gravel grinding beneath my feet, as solid as the sturdy red-bricked building of the school before me, and as clear as the bell that now cleaves the morning air with its shrill piercing startling clamour.

Dieter arrives late; the algebra lesson is well under way.

As he enters, his surprised blue eyes darting briefly in my direction, Mr Chandler, an ogre with malice to be fed, seizes him by the nape of the neck.

'Ah, *you*, is it?', he yelps, private triumph in his tone. 'I'll show you! For homework, you shall write a hundred times, "I must never again come late to school". Now get to your place.'

Behind me, 'Knuckles' Bill sniggers in my ear, 'Your friend has fallen in the fat,' while 'Bullneck' Kevin sprays blobs of ink upon my collar and adds an eloquent 'Yeah!'

Dieter sits down next to me. Intuitively, I edge towards the end of the seat, my eyes lowered and clinging to the exercise book before me.

'I waited for you,' I hear him whisper.

Mr. Chandler, all ears, eyes and a tangle of sharpened senses, misses nothing.

'You!', he hurls down his rigid finger, 'do you want two hundred lines?'

Dieter murmurs a humbled 'No' and for the remainder of the lesson, while Mr. Chandler, gnashing his ill-fitting teeth, laments the brainless obtuseness of the class in not comprehending the simplest of quadratic equations, he draws between simulated periods of attention a succession of grotesque gargoylian caricatures of the gryphon pounding the stub of chalk between his claw-like fingers against the board.

The quadratic equations extend the lesson interminably; my fretting at having to confront Dieter contracts it to a wink.

Go – escape from time.

The bell rings too shrilly, too piercingly. Shoes scrape harshly against the wooden floor, we jostle one another through the doorway, scuttle down the corridor, run, screaming, outside.

In the yard, he won't leave me alone. Showing his white teeth, his whole face bright in the sunshine. Dieter clasps my shoulder.

'What's the matter with Einstein today?'

I draw my shoulder away, as if contaminated.

'You sick?'

I shake my head, purse my lips, watch a group of boys kicking a football on the lawns.

'Tell me, what is grey, has four legs and a trunk?'

'Leave me alone!', I shout.

'He talks!', Dieter says in mock amazement. 'I waited at the corner.'

I try to break away from him. That voice of his, those tendinous hands, his very shadow at my feet stir within me something wild and frantic and desperate. Mother, Father, Greta Schmidt, they haunt me, and also those fading photographs and those ugly words, those frightening words – Nazis, gas chambers, crematoria – that have given to fear, even to terror, a long horrible night of fitful sleep.

'You made me late for school,' Dieter says. 'Because of you I got a hundred lines.'

I glance at him. There are two Dieters. Dieter, the same tall blond muscular Dieter I have known for nearly a year, the same strong swift sharp-eyed Dieter who draws landscapes and gargoyles with wondrous ease, the Dieter who protects me from the venomous caprices of 'Bullneck' Kevin and 'Knuckles' Bill. And yet there is another. How well he hides behind that open face and laughing eyes! The Dieter who really hates me, hates my mother, my father, my people. Would Father, Mother deliberately lie?

I want to break away and yet he clings.

'Nearly two hundred lines,' he says. 'What have I done to you?'

That wild and desperate torrent wells fiercely into the open. My very hands tremble; I feel heat and prickling in my face.

'You killed my grandfather!', I cry out, my voice nearly choking in my throat. 'And my grandmother! Because of you I have nobody!'

'You're cuckoo,' he says, placing a forefinger to his temple.

'You hate us!'

'Well, you haven't told me. What is grey, has four legs and a trunk?'

'The Germans killed millions of us!'

For the first time, darkness clouds Dieter's face. His eyes narrow, he bites his lower lip. His jaws set into stone.

'We killed you?'

'Don't pretend you don't know. With gas! In camps! My mother told me. She lost her parents there, and all her brothers and her sisters. My father too. They can prove it. We've got photographs. I saw them. You killed them, didn't you? Admit it. You hate us, don't you? Why? What did we do to you?'

Flies to honey, a group of boys has gathered around us.

'Fight! Fight!', one of them cries and others, expecting action, come running. 'Knuckles' Bill rubs his hands.

Dieter, squinting, his steel-blue glare searing, points to his chest.

'Germans never killed anybody.'

'Liar!'

'We are good people. You,' he says, now pointing a steady pale tapering finger at me, 'you killed Jesus Christ.'

The boys clustered in a throbbing circle around us, clap, hoot, jeer.

'Yeh . . . That's right . . . good on yer' . . . show 'im . . .!'

'I didn't kill anybody!'

'Everyone knows. Ask my mother. Die Juden, Jews are the devil. They killed our Lord . . . they are everywhere . . .'

'Hit 'im,' cries 'Bullneck' Kevin, so close I can see the tear in his jumper.

He is bigger, stronger, more agile, I know. But rage blinds the eyes to reality and I charge towards Dieter, flailing my arms about desperately.

'Liar!'

'So,' – his tone is marble – 'my friend wants to fight.'

A cheer swells from the watching crowd.

Before my fury, Dieter, his hands in knotted fists, steps aside. 'Try again,' he taunts.

Again I come at him, again he steps aside.

'If you touch me, I'll thrash you,' I hear him say.

'Thrash him! Belt him!', the spectators cry.

They are mere sound now, commotion, hubbub, and an

unclear blur milling in a whirl around me; even Dieter, an apparition now, mobile, lunging, elusive, until in one swift unguarded moment, my feet give way, the gravel rises, the clouds describe vast circles around the sun, all faces converge and I lie on my back, spread-eagled, with Dieter kneeling on my arms, his lean, hard face close to mine as he bores his fist into my chest.

'I warned you,' he says, menace in his eyes.

'Sock him one,' I hear 'Bullneck' Kevin cry.

Dieter rocks on my arms. They throb, excruciatingly, beneath their weight.

'Take back everything you said and I'll let you go.'

To retreat. To call Father, Mother liars?

I shake my head vigorously. A stone digs into my scalp. Dieter's knees sink deeper.

'Say, "Germans are good people" and you can go.'

In his chin, his lips, his eyes, I see Greta Schmidt's dragon-like face.

'Give him one!', the boys around us cry. 'In the face . . . in the mouth . . . in the eye . . .'

I shake my head again. 'No,' I exclaim.

Dieter raises a fist.

'One more chance. Say aloud "The Jews killed the Lord".'

The sun glares, the sky shimmers, the clouds, frail feathers, stand mute.

'It's not true! It's not true! It's not true!', I protest desperately, just as from the school, the bell rings, reverberates, resounds in a saving clamour, even in its piercing shrillness so welcome, so pleasant.

The blow does not fall.

'You lucky dog, you,' Dieter says between his teeth. 'Another minute and . . .'

He rises. The crowd disperses, disappointed, grumbling.

'Darn'd, bell.'

'Shoulda' knocked 'is teeth out, 'e shoulda'.'

'Had it comin' to him.'

Slowly, making certain that Dieter is well clear, I begin to

rise, but fail to see 'Bullneck' Kevin who, coming from behind, thrusts a vicious shoulder against mine, snarls, and hisses in my ear, 'You plucky bastard. But just you wait now.'

I brush the gravel from my back and seethe from fury, frustration, rancour and shame. He has escaped, the murderer, untouched, unscathed, almost laughing – I see him now – as, back erect and shoulders straight, he ambles triumphantly back to class. And that escape I cannot bear. It mocks, it sneers, it taunts. And, hurt, I want to hurt, and injured, I want to injure.

Dieter recedes. He is near the steps, about to enter, about to disappear. Driven, I run after him and, close behind, hurl into his back the most vicious epithet I can find.

'Fritz!'

The name released, it makes its own way towards him. Stillness follows. A few boys straggling behind him pause and turn their heads. Dieter is at the head of the steps. He, too, stops and turns, a cold thin smile on his face, a cruel deliberate malicious smile on lips that form a single word, uttered so softly that it lacerates more strongly than the sharpest razor.

'Yid!'