

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Men from Boys

John Harvey

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mark Billingham is the author of a series of novels featuring London-based DI Tom Thorne, the latest of which is *From the Dead*. The second in the series, *Scaredy Cat* was shortlisted for the CWA Gold Dagger for Best Crime Novel of 2002. He has also worked for many years as a stand-up comedian which some regard as big and brave, while others think it just shows a child-like need for attention. Mark tells jokes for money far less frequently these days, as those that read the books are not usually drunk, and can't throw things.

Visit his manly, yet also boyish website at: www.markbillingham.com.

Lawrence Block has never been a short-order cook, an over-the-road truck driver, or a professional prize fighter, nor has he gone to sea. He has written any number of books, including *Small Town*, which, like its author, is set in New York City.

Andrew Coburn is the author of eleven novels. His work has been translated into nine languages, and three of his novels have been made into *films noir* in France. Grace Stassio, writing for *Under Cover*, says that while reading Coburn, 'he goes down like neat Scotch, nice and smooth'. In real life Mr Coburn prefers skimmed milk stormed with Hershey Syrup, the harsher the Hershey the better. The *New York Times* says, 'Coburn writes in a brilliant style of chilly elegance and is merciless in probing tormented characters.' Mr Coburn is unlikely ever to disagree with this.

Michael Connelly was born in Philadelphia but grew to manhood while living in various parts of Florida, where his story in this volume is set. He has published thirteen crime novels and after a decade and a half living in Los Angeles has recently returned to Florida where he is busy regressing from man to boy with the aid of a fishing pole.

Former journalist, folk singer and attorney, **Jeffery Deaver** is the author of twenty-seven novels; he's been nominated for five Edgar Awards from the Mystery Writers of America as well as an Anthony Award, and is a two-time recipient of the Ellery Queen Readers' Award for best Short Story of the Year. His most recent book is *Edge*, a stand alone thriller based in Washington, D.C.

Readers can visit his website at: www.jefferydeaver.com.

He acknowledges the excellent book, *Scarne's Guide to Modern Poker*, which was very helpful in writing the story in this collection.

John Harvey is the author of eleven Charlie Resnick novels, the stand-alone *In a True Light* and four short stories featuring Jack Kiley, of which 'Chance' is the most recent. He has previously edited *Blue Lightning*, a collection of short fiction with musical themes. For more fax 'n' info, check out www.mellotone.co.uk.

For those who want to chase it down, the Townes Van Zandt recording referred to in 'Chance' is *A Far Cry From Dead* and is available on Arista 07822-18888-2.

Reginald Hill has written a lot of books and hopes to write a lot more. He has won awards but can't remember where he put them. He lives happily in the Lake District from which he can only be extracted by large sums of money or alien abduction. People with large sums of money, or aliens, should contact his agent.

Bill James has published twenty-five crime novels featuring Assistant Chief Constable Desmond Isles and Detective Chief Superintendent Colin Harpur. Reviewers describe Isles variously as clinically mad, Satanic, terrifyingly violent and instantly recognisable as an A.C.C. Harpur's wife was murdered and he longs to be remembered as an inspired single parent. 'Like an Arrangement' is taken from the twentieth Harpur and Isles book, *The Girl With the Long Back*, published in 2003. James also published spy novels and another crime series set around Cardiff docks.

Dennis Lehane is the author of nine novels, including *Mystic River* and *Shutter Island*. He often sets his short stories in the American South, where he lived for eight years until he tired of people not getting his jokes and moved back to Boston. He continues to live in Boston with two English bulldogs, Marlon and Stella, who don't get his jokes either.

Author-drummer **Bill Moody** has toured and recorded with Maynard Ferguson, Earl 'Fatha' Hines, Jon Hendricks and Lou Rawls. *Looking for Chet Baker* is the fifth in the Evan Horne mystery series. Moody lives in northern California, where he plays jazz and teaches at Sonoma State University.

George Pelecanos never fully made the transition from boy to man. For more on his books and other obsessions - Westerns, action films, soul and punk, blaxploitation, *film noir*, musclecars, ladies' shoes, ladies' feet, etc - go to www.georgepelecanos.com.

Peter Robinson is the author of the Inspector Banks series. His short story 'Missing in Action' won the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 2001. Though he thinks he's a man, there are those who say he'll always be a little boy at heart.

Jim Sallis is a poet, novelist and all-round literary hired gun. Author of the acclaimed Lew Griffin cycle, Jim has also published books on musicology, multiple collections of poems, stories and essays, a biography of Chester Himes and a translation of Raymond Queneau's novel *Saint Glinglin*. His work appears regularly in literary journals such as *The Georgia Review*, in mystery and science fiction magazines (for one of which, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, he writes a books column), and in major US newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe*. He loves Mozart, Hawaiian and steel guitar, French literature and, most of all, his wife, Karyn.

John Straley is a former private investigator who lives in Sitka, Alaska. His poems and essays have appeared in various journals in North America. He is the author of six novels featuring private investigator Cecil Younger.

Brian Thompson was born in Lambeth, London, read English at Cambridge and now lives in Oxford. His works include *Imperial Vanities* (HarperCollins, 2003) and *Nightmare of a Victorian Bestseller* (Short Books, 2002).

Don Winslow has worked as a movie theatre manager, a production assistant on documentaries and a private investigator. In addition to being an author, he now works as an independent consultant on issues involving litigation arising from criminal behaviour. His novels include *The Death and Life of Bobby Z* and *California Fire and Life*.

Daniel Woodrell is the author of eight novels, has twice been a finalist for the Dashiell Hammett Award, and won the PEN Center West Award for the novel *Tomato Red*. He lives happily in the boonies of America, which is a region beyond the sticks, out past Podunk and way downriver from Nowheresville. His house has a bedroom and a half and a

flush toilet, and he is not above bragging about either luxury to his neighbours. He figures Roy Rogers said it best, 'When you take the boy out of the man, you haven't got much left.'

ALSO BY JOHN HARVEY

In a True Light
Nick's Blues
Gone to Ground
Far Cry

The Elder Novels
Flesh and Blood
Ash and Bone
Darkness and Light

The Resnick Novels
Lonely Hearts
Rough Treatment
Cutting Edge
Off Minor
Wasted Years
Cold Light
Living Proof
Easy Meat
Still Water
Last Rites

Short Stories
Now's the Time
Minor Key
A Darker Shade of Blue

Poetry
Ghosts of a Chance
Bluer Than This

As Editor

Blue Lightning

You can visit John Harvey's website at
www.mellotone.co.uk

MEN FROM BOYS

Edited by
John Harvey



WILLIAM HEINEMANN : LONDON

'Points' by Lawrence Block. First published in *Enough Rope* (William Morrow, New York, 2002). © Lawrence Block. Reprinted by permission of the author.

'The Resurrection of Bobo Jones' by Bill Moody. First published in *B flat, Bebop, Scat: Jazz Short Stories & Poems*, edited by Chris Parker (Quartet Books, London, 1986). Reprinted by permission of the author.

A version of 'Like an Arrangement' by Bill James appears in the novel *The Girl With the Long Back* (Constable, London, 2003). Reprinted by permission of the author.

INTRODUCTION

It began with a simple enough idea: a book which would collect together stories by those writers in the crime and mystery area whose work I respect, admire and enjoy most. Simple? Well, no.

For one thing, the choice would be too vast, the book too large. But then, unbidden, the title leapt to mind: *Men from Boys*. And once it was there, lodged in my brain, it wouldn't leave. It was – it is – a kind of statement, a declaration, but also, and crucially, it provided a focus and a theme.

It also had the effect of cutting the number of writers I might have approached by half. No McDermid, no Fyfield, no Stella Duffy; no Grafton, no Paretsky, no Julie Smith. No Alice Sebold. No Suzanne Berne.

Just men.

Men writing, for the most part, about what it is to be a man.

To succeed; to fail. To open one's eyes.

What the majority of the pieces in the collection address, some directly, others more tangentially, are issues of self-knowledge, of accepting – or denying – certain responsibilities. What does it mean to be a father? What does it mean to be a son? What does it mean to be a man?

As the protagonist in Don Winslow's 'Douggy Doughnuts' comes to realise, there are things you do and things you don't do. Again and again – but never two ways the same – the people who inhabit these stories are having to determine what is right, what will give them dignity, what will earn them self-respect.

Some – the young men in Mark Billingham's 'Dancing Towards the Blade' or Michael Connelly's 'After Midnight', for instance – make their choices with their fathers' voices

ringing in their ears; others have to contend with parents who are venal at best, incorrigibly corrupt at worst.

Little is perfect. In Daniel Woodrell's beautifully understated 'Two Things', the best a father can say of his relationship with his son is that it was 'something terrible I have lived through'. Andrew Coburn's marvellous novella takes us through three generations of an extended family whose members variously fall to sudden acts of violence or simple self-regarding avarice, and where the strength of purpose and single-mindedness of the father is passed on not to the son but to the daughter.

So did I achieve my aim to include all of those, now admittedly male, writers I revere? Of course not. No matter how many times I wrote and faxed, e-mailed and phoned, no matter how much pleading and cajoling I engaged in, there were some - a few - whose dance cards, for whatever reason, were regretfully too full. A pleasant diversionary party game might be to guess who these were. Just don't ask: I'll never tell.

But if all had accepted that would have simply meant a bigger book. There is no one here whose name I am not pleased and proud to include; no piece of work that has not earned its place.

The trouble with writing short stories, as James Ellroy has recently lamented, and as most of us I'm sure would agree, is that they take so damned long to write. For every earnestly crafted page, at least a chapter of a novel would likely come whizzing off the computer and with less heartache. 'There is no room for error in short stories,' says Annie Proulx. 'The lack of a comma can throw everything off.'

That's why we keep doing it, of course. Trying to. One reason, anyway. Testing ourselves, testing the skill. It

certainly isn't, unless we're lucky enough to turn heads at *The New Yorker*, for the money.

'There's a joy', says Donald Westlake (and, yes, he'd be in here if I had my way), 'in watching economy of gesture when performed by a real pro, whatever the art.' He compares writing short stories with playing jazz: 'a sense of vibrant imagination at work within a tightly controlled setting'. He says it's what turns writers on. Readers too.

There's a real pleasure for me in the way the writers of these stories create worlds that are instantly recognisable and believable yet as widely apart as a deprived London housing estate and the trenches of the First World War, the claustrophobia of a late-night back-room poker game or a rundown jazz joint in Manhattan and the slow but irrevocable decay of the small New England town on which Don Winslow riffs so passionately. I'm in awe, too, of the way James Sallis leads us through a landscape delineated with absolute clarity, except that by kicking away the narrative props that we're used to, the scene takes on a bewildering half-amnesiac state which mirrors what is going on in the central character's mind.

The prospect of Bill James's lustful yet lethal Assistant Chief Constable Isles let loose in a posh private girls' school and of Brian Thompson's semi-retired geezers girding up their loins to take on the Russian mafia both fill me with delight, and I give myself up joyously to the promise of Dennis Lehane's 'Until Gwen', whose first sentence hurtles us along with dangerous expectation. 'Your father picks you up from prison in a stolen Dodge Neon with an eight-ball in the glove compartment and a hooker named Mandy in the back seat.'

And . . .

But enough from me. Enjoy. Read on.

John Harvey
London, January 2003

DANCING TOWARDS THE BLADE

Mark Billingham

He was always Vincent at home.

At school there were a few boys who called him 'Vince', and 'Vinny' was yelled more often than not across the playground, but his mother and father never shortened his name and neither did his brothers and sisters whose own names, in turn, were also spoken in full.

'Vincent' around the house then, and at family functions. The second syllable given equal weight with the first by the heavy accent of the elder members. Not swallowed. Rhyming with 'went'.

Vincent was not really bothered what names people chose to use, but there were some things it was never pleasant to be called.

'Coon!'

'Fucking coon . . .'

'Black coon. Fucking black bastard . . .'

He had rounded the corner and stepped into the passageway to find them waiting for him. Like turds in long grass. A trio of them in Timberland and Tommy Hilfiger. Not shouting, but simply speaking casually. Saying what they saw. Big car. Hairy dog. Fucking black bastard . . .

Vincent stopped, caught his breath, took it all in.

Two were tallish – one abnormally thin, the other shaven-headed – and both cradling cans of expensive lager. The third was shorter and wore a baseball cap, the peak bent and pulled down low. He took a swig of Smirnoff Ice, then began to bounce on the balls of his feet, swinging the frosted glass bottle between thumb and forefinger.

'What you staring at, you sooty cunt?'

Vincent reckoned they were fifteen or so. Year eleven boys. The skinny one was maybe not even that, but all of them were a little younger than he was.

From somewhere a few streets away came the noise of singing, tuneless and incoherent, the phrases swinging like bludgeons. Quick as a flash, the arms of the taller boys were

in the air, lager cans clutched in pale fists, faces taut with blind passion as they joined in the song.

‘No one likes us, no one likes us, no one likes us, we don’t care . . .’

The smaller boy looked at Vincent and shouted above the noise, ‘Well?’

It was nearly six o’clock and starting to get dark. The match had finished over an hour ago but Vincent had guessed there might still be a few lads knocking about. He’d seen a couple outside the newsagent as he’d walked down the ramp from the tube station. Blowing onto bags of chips. Tits and guts moving beneath their thin, replica shirts. The away fans were long gone and most of the home supporters were already indoors, but there were others, most who’d already forgotten the score, who still wandered the streets, singing and drinking. Waiting in groups, a radio tuned to *5 Live*. Standing in lines on low walls, the half-time shitburgers turning to acid in their stomachs, looking around for it . . .

The cut-through was no more than fifteen feet wide and ran between two three-storey blocks. It curled away from the main road towards the block where Vincent lived at the far end of the estate. The three boys who barred his way were gathered around a pair of stone bollards, built to dissuade certain drivers from coming on to the estate. From setting fire to cars on people’s doorsteps.

Vincent answered the question, trying to keep his voice low and even, hoping it wouldn’t catch. ‘I’m going home . . .’

‘Fucking listen to him. A posh nigger . . .’

The skinny boy laughed and the three came together, shoulders connecting, forearms nudging one another. When they were still again they had taken up new positions. The three now stood, more or less evenly spaced across the walkway, one in each gap. Between wall and bollard, bollard and bollard, bollard and wall . . .

‘Where’s home?’ the boy in the cap said.

Vincent pointed past the boy's head. The boy didn't turn. He raised his head and Vincent got his first real look at the face, handsome and hard, shadowed by the peak of the baseball cap. Vincent saw something like a smile as the boy brought the bottle to his lips again.

'This is the short cut,' Vincent said. 'My quickest way . . .'

The boy in the cap swallowed. 'Your quickest way home is via the airport.' The smile that Vincent had thought he'd seen now made itself very evident. 'You want the Piccadilly Line to Heathrow, mate . . .'

Vincent chuckled softly, pretending to enjoy the joke. He saw the boy's face harden, watched him raise a hand and jab a finger back towards the main road.

'Go round.'

Vincent knew what he meant. He could walk back and take the path that led around the perimeter of the estate, approach his block from the other side. It would only take a few minutes longer. He could just turn and go, and he would probably be home before they'd finished laughing.

'You heard.' The skinny boy leaned back against a bollard.

He could *easily* turn and go round . . .

'Now piss off . . .'

The edges of Vincent's vision began to blur and darken, and the words that spewed from the mouth of the boy with the shaven head became hard to make out. A distant rhythm was asserting itself and as Vincent looked down at the cracked slabs beneath his feet, a shadow seemed to fall across them. A voice grew louder, and it was as if the walls on either side had softened and begun to sway above him like the tops of trees.

The voice was one Vincent knew well. The accent, unlike his own, was heavy, but the intonation and tone were those that had been passed on to him and to his brothers and sisters. It was a rich voice, warm and dark, sliding effortlessly around every phrase, each dramatic sentence of a story it never tired of telling.

His father's voice . . .

Looking out from his bedroom window, the boy could see the coffee plants lying like a deep green tablecloth across the hillside, billowing down towards the canopy of treetops and the deep, dirty river beneath. If he raised his eyes *up*, he saw the mountain on the far side of the valley, its peaks jutting into the mist, the slopes changing colour many times a day according to the cloud and the position of the sun. Black or green or blood red. Other colours the boy had no name for.

A dozen views for the price of one, and he'd thought about all of them in the time he'd been away. He'd tried to picture each one during the bone-shaking, twelve-hour bus ride that had brought him home from school five days before.

'Hey! Stand still, boy. This is damn fiddly . . .'

Uncle Joseph, on his knees in front of him, his thick fingers struggling with the leather fastenings, as they had every morning since they'd begun. It was hard to tie the knots so that the strings of beads clung to the calves without slipping, but not so tightly that they would cut into the flesh.

When he'd finished with the beads on the lower legs, Uncle Joseph would move on to the thick bands of dried goatskin, each heavy with rows of bells and strapped around the thighs. These were expensive items, handmade like everything else. Lastly, Joseph would wrap the dark, highly polished belt round the boy's waist. On three out of the last four mornings, much to the boy's amusement, he'd sliced a finger on one of the razor-sharp shells sewn into the leather.

Behind him, Uncle Francis worked on attaching the beads that crossed his back and chest in an X, like brightly coloured bandoliers. Francis was always cheerful, and the boy imagined that he too looked forward to that moment when Joseph would cry out, curse and stick a bleeding finger into his mouth. It was always Francis and Joseph who

dressed him. The rest of his uncles waited outside. He'd been amazed at quite how *many* uncles he had, when they'd gathered on the night after he'd got back; when the family committee had met to organise it all.

There had been lots to decide.

'Do we have drummers?'

'Of course. This is important. *He* is important . . .'

'Grade A. Definitely Grade A . . .'

'These drummers are not cheap. Their damn costumes alone are a fortune . . .'

'I think they should come *with* their costumes. It isn't fair. We shouldn't have to pay for the costumes separately . . .'

'We should have *lots* of drummers!'

And on and on, deep into the night, arguing and getting drunker while the boy listened from his bedroom. Though he didn't understand everything, the passion in the voices of these men had caused excitement to swell in his chest. Yes, and an equal measure of dread to press down on it, like one of the huge flat stones that lay along the river bed at the bottom of the valley. He'd lain awake most of that night thinking of his friends, his age-mates in the other villages, wondering if they were feeling the same thing.

'All set, boy,' Uncle Joseph said.

Uncle Francis handed him the headdress, rubbed the back of his neck. 'Feeling fit?'

Outside, he was greeted with cheers and whoops. This was the last day of gathering and there was more noise, more gaiety than there had been on any day previously. This was the eve of it all: the final glorious push.

He took his place in the middle of the group, acknowledged the greetings of his brothers, of uncles and cousins whose names he could never remember. Though no one was dressed as extravagantly as he was, everyone had made the necessary effort. No man or boy was without beads or bells. The older ones were all draped in animal skins – monkey, zebra and lion. All had painted faces and

strips of brightly coloured cloth attached to the edges of their leather vests.

A huge roar went up as the first drum was struck. A massive bass drum, its rhythm like a giant's heartbeat. The smaller drums joined then, and the whistles, and the yelps of the women and children, watching from the doorways of houses, waving the gatherers goodbye.

The boy cleared his throat and spat into the dirt. He let out a long, high note, listened to it roll away across the valley. The rhythm became more complex, more frantic, and he picked up his knees in time to it, the beads rattling on his legs and the shells clattering against the belt round his waist.

He began to dance.

The procession started to move. A carnival, a travelling circus, a hundred or more bare feet slapping into the dirt in time to the drummers. A cloud of dust rose up behind them as they picked up speed, moving away along the hard brown track that snaked out of the village.

The mottled grey of the slabs was broken only by the splotches of dogshit brown and dandelion yellow.

Vincent looked up from the floor of the walkway.

The eyes of the two taller boys darted between his face and that of their friend. It seemed to Vincent that they were waiting to be told what to do. They were looking for some sort of signal.

The boy in the cap raised his eyes up to Vincent's. He took a long, slow swig from his bottle, his gaze not shifting from Vincent's face. Then he snatched the bottle from his lips, wiped a hand across his mouth and glared, as if suddenly affronted.

'What?'

Vincent smiled, shook his head. 'I didn't say anything.'

'Yes you fucking did.'

The boy with the shaved head took a step forward. 'What did you say, you cheeky black fucker?'

The smaller boy nodded, pleased, and took another swig. Vincent shrugged, feeling the tremble in his right leg, pressing a straight arm hard against it.

'Listen, I don't want any trouble. I'm just trying to get home . . .'

Home.

Vincent blinked and saw his brother's face, the skin taken off his cheek and one eye swollen shut. He saw his mother's face as she stood at the window all the next afternoon, staring out across the dual carriageway towards the lorry park and the floodlights beyond. He saw her face when she turned finally, and spoke. 'We're moving,' she'd said.

One more blink and he saw the resignation that had returned to her face after a day doing the maths; scanning newspapers and estate agents' details from Greenwich and Blackheath. As the idea of moving *anywhere* was quickly forgotten.

'I've already told you,' the boy with the bottle said. 'If you're so desperate, just go round.'

Vincent saw the face of his father then. As it had been that day when his brother had come home bleeding, and then, as he imagined it to have been twenty-five years before. In a country Vincent had only ever seen pictures of.

The boy sat at the back of the house, beneath the striped awning that his father had put above his bedroom window. Rose rubbed ointment on to his blisters. They stared across the valley at the sun dropping down behind the mountain, the slopes cobalt blue beneath a darkening sky.

He knew that they should not have been sitting together, that his uncles would not have approved. Contact with young women was frowned upon in the week leading up to the ritual. He would regret it, his uncles would have said, in the days afterwards, in the healing time after the ceremony.

‘Talk to young women . . .’ Joseph had told him, ‘let them smile at you now and shake their hips, and you will *pay*.’

He didn’t care. He had known Rose since before he could walk and besides, Joseph, Francis and the others would be insensible by now. They had sat down around the pot as soon as they had finished eating supper. Talking about the day, filling in the elders on how ‘the boy’ was doing and getting slowly drunker. Sucking up powerful mouthfuls of home brew from the pot through long bamboo straws.

The boy had watched them for a while, no longer jealous, as he would have been before. Once it was all over, he would have earned the right to sit down and join them.

‘Fine, but not yet, you haven’t,’ Rose had said when he’d mentioned it to her.

It had been a hard day and the boy was utterly exhausted. He reckoned they had danced twenty miles or more, visited a dozen villages, and he had sung his heart and his throat out every step of the way. He was proud of his song, had been since he’d written it months before. Even Rose had been forced to concede that it was pretty good. He’d practised it every day, knowing there was prestige and status attached to the best song, the best performance. He’d given that performance a hundred times in the last week and now his voice was as ragged as the soles of his feet.

It had been a successful day too. Uncle Philip had not announced the final tally, but it had certainly been a decent haul. Relatives close and distant in each homestead had come forward dutifully with gifts: earthenware dishes piled high with cash; chickens or a goat from cousins; cattle from those of real importance. Philip had made a careful note of who’d given what, in the book that was carried with them as they criss-crossed the district, each village ready to welcome them, each able to hear them coming from a mile or more away.

Everyone had been more than generous. By sundown the following day, the boy would be a rich man.

‘Are you scared?’ Rose asked.

He winced as she dropped his foot to the floor. ‘No,’ he said.

The boy wasn’t sure why he lied. Being frightened was fine, it was *showing* the fear that was unacceptable, that would cost you. He remembered the things that had scared him the most that day, scared him far more than what was to come the following afternoon. He had been sitting with the elders in the village where his father had been born. Squatting in the shade, stuffed full of roasted goat and green bananas, with barely the energy to nod as each piece of advice was given, each simple lesson handed out.

‘You will not fear death . . .’

‘You will defend your village against thieves . . .’

Then he’d been handed the baby.

‘There are times when your wife will be sick, and you must look after yourself and your children.’

‘You will learn to cook . . .’

‘You will learn to keep a fire burning all day . . .’

They roared as the baby began to piss on his lap, told him it was good luck. They were still laughing as the boy danced his way out of the village. All he could think about, as he began his song again, was how being unafraid of death and of thieves sounded easy compared with taking care of children . . .

He thought about telling Rose this, but instead told her about what had happened in the first village they’d visited that day. Something funny and shocking. A distant cousin of his father’s had been discovered hiding in the fields on the outskirts of the village. Trying to dodge the handover of a gift was a serious matter and not only had the offering been taken from him by force, but he had brought shame upon himself and the rest of his family.

‘Can you believe it?’ the boy said. ‘That man was Grade A! Cowering in the tall grass like a woman, to avoid handing over a bowl. A *bowl* for heaven’s sake . . .’

Rose pushed her shoulder against his. ‘So, you think *you’re* going to be Grade A? Grade B maybe? What d’you think, boy?’

He shrugged. He knew what he was hoping for. All he could be certain about was that this was the last time anybody would call him ‘boy’.

The one with the bottle stood a foot or so forward from his two friends. He reached over his shoulder for the lit cigarette that he knew would be there, took three quick drags and handed it back. ‘What team do you support anyway?’

‘Fucking Man U, I bet . . .’

For a moment, Vincent thought about lying. Giving them their own team’s name. He knew that he’d be caught out in a second. ‘I don’t follow a team.’

‘Right. Not an *English* team . . .’

‘Not any team,’ Vincent said.

‘Some African team, yeah? Kicking a fucking coconut around . . .’

‘Bongo Bongo United FC!’

‘“Kicking a coconut”, that’s classic . . .’

‘Headers must be a nightmare, yeah?’

The skinny one and the one with the shaved head began to laugh. They pursed their lips and stuck out their bumfluffy chins. They pretended to scratch their armpits.

‘You know what FC stands for, don’t you? Fucking coon . . .’

Vincent looked away from them. He heard the monkey noises begin softly, then start to get louder.

‘Look at him,’ the one in the cap said. ‘He’s shitting himself.’ He said something else after that, but Vincent didn’t hear it . . .

Dawn, at the river, on the final morning.

Dotted for a mile or more along the flat, brown river bank were the other groups. Some were smaller than his own, while others must have numbered a hundred, but at the centre of each stood one of the boy's age-mates. Each ready to connect with the past, to embrace the future. Each asking for the strength to endure what lay ahead of him.

The boy was called forward by an elder. As he took his first steps, he glanced sideways, saw his age-mates along the river bank moving in a line together towards the water.

This was the preparation.

In the seconds he spent held beneath the water, he wondered whether a cry would be heard if he were to let one out. He imagined it rising up to the surface, the bubbles bursting in a series of tiny screams, each costing him grades.

He emerged from the river purified and ready to be painted with death.

The sun was just up but already fierce, and the white mud was baked hard within a minute or two of being smeared across his face and chest and belly. The mist was being burned away, and looking along the bank, the boy saw a row of pale statues. A long line of ghosts in the buttery sunlight.

He watched an old man approach each figure, as one now approached him. The elder took a mouthful of beer from a pumpkin gourd and spat, spraying it across the boy's chest. The beer ran in rivulets down the shell of dried mud, as prayers were said and his uncles stepped towards him.

The group that had been nearest to him jogged past, already finished, and he looked at his age-mate, caked in white mud as he was. The boy had known him, as he'd known most of them, for all of their sixteen years, but his friend was suddenly unrecognisable. It was not the mask of mud. It was the eyes that stared out from behind it. It was the eyes that were suddenly different.

The boy was nudged forward, was handed his knife, and the group began loping away in the same direction as his friend. Drumming again now, and singing, heading for the market place. All of them, all the ghost-boys, moving towards the moment when they would die and come back to life . . .

‘Shut up!’ Vincent shouted.

After a moment or two the skinny one and the one with the shaved head stopped making their monkey noises, but only after a half-glance in their direction from the one in the cap.

‘Turn your pockets out,’ he said.

Vincent’s hands were pressed hard against his legs to keep them still. He slowly brought each of them up to his pockets, slipped them inside . . .

‘Maybe we’ll let you *pay* to go home. Let me see what you’ve got.’

Vincent’s left hand came out empty. His right emerged clutching the change from his train ticket. He opened his hand and the one in the cap leaned forward to take a look.

‘Fuck that, mate. Where’s the notes?’

Vincent shook his head. ‘This is all I’ve got.’

‘You’re a fucking liar. Where’s your wallet?’

Vincent said nothing. He closed his hand around the coins and thrust his fist back into his trouser pocket.

The one in the cap took a step towards him. He was no more than a couple of feet away. ‘Don’t piss me about. I don’t like it, yeah?’

He could easily turn and go round . . .

‘Where’s his phone?’ the skinny one said.

‘Get his fucking phone, man. They always have wicked phones.’

The one in the cap held out his hand. ‘Let’s have it.’

It suddenly seemed to Vincent that the phone might be the way out of it, his way past them. Handing it over, giving

them something and then trying to get past was probably a good idea . . .

The mobile was snatched from his grasp the second he'd produced it. The one in the cap turned and swaggered back towards his friends. They cheered as he held it up for them to look at.

The three gathered round to examine the booty and Vincent saw a gap open up between the far right bollard and the wall. He thought about making a run for it. If he could stay ahead of them for just a minute, half a minute maybe, he would be virtually home. He reckoned he could outrun the two bigger ones anyway. Perhaps his mother or father, one of his brothers might see him coming . . .

He took a tentative step forward.

The one in the cap wheeled round suddenly, clutching the phone. 'Piece of cheap shit!' His arm snapped back, then forward and Vincent watched the phone explode against the wall, shattering into pieces of multi-coloured plastic.

The crack of the phone against the bricks changed something.

By the time Vincent looked again, the gap had been filled. The three stood square on to him, their bodies stiff with energy despite their efforts to appear relaxed. The space between them all was suddenly charged.

Vincent had no idea how he looked to them, what his face said about how he felt at that moment. He looked at *their* faces and saw hatred and excitement and expectation. He also saw fear.

'Last chance,' the one in the cap said.

The boy was stunned by the size of the crowd, though it was nothing unusual. He could remember, when he'd been one of the onlookers himself as a child, thinking that there couldn't possibly be this many people in the whole world. Today, as at the same moment every year, those that could not get a clear view were standing on tables and other

makeshift platforms. They were perched on roofs and clustered together in the treetops.

He and his age-mates were paraded together, one final time, carried aloft like kings. His eyes locked for a few seconds with a friend as they passed each other. Their Adam's apples were like wild things in their throats.

While the boy moved on shoulders above the teeming mass of bodies, the dancing and the drumming grew more frenzied. Exhausted, he summoned the strength to sing one final time, while below him the basket was passed around and each relative given a last chance to hand over more money or pledge another gift.

Now, it was only the fizzing in the boy's blood that was keeping him upright. There were moments – a sickening wave of exhaustion, a clouding of his vision as he reached for a high note – when he was sure he was about to pass out, to topple down and be lost or trampled to death. He was tempted to close his eyes and let it happen . . .

At the moment when the noise and the heat and the *passion* of the crowd was at its height, the boy suddenly found himself alone with Joseph and Francis at the edge of the market place. There was space around him as he was led along a track towards a row of undecorated huts.

'Are you a woman?' Joseph asked.

'No,' the boy said.

The boy wondered if thinking about his mother and father made him one. He knew that they would be waiting, huddled together among the coffee plants, listening for the signal that it was over. Did wishing that he was with them, even for the few moments it would take to shake his father's hand and smell his mother's neck, make him less than Grade A?

'Are you a woman?' Francis repeated.

'No!' the boy shouted.

His uncles stepped in front of him and pushed open a door to one of the peat latrines. 'This will be your last chance,'