

AMALFI MAN

As he and his students shuffled through the gate into Pompeii, Dennis overheard someone heading the other way shout out that this would be a “rotten place to play football.” The speaker was a fat American in plaid pants, and the stupidity of the words made Dennis feel good all over. He might do some stupid things but he would never talk about football in a place like this.

Next to Dennis walked Alex -- scrawny, serious little Alex. Most others in Dennis's group had ignored the American, but Alex had actually smiled. And this was not the first time today. On the bus drive from Amalfi, he had looked quite happy. Dennis wondered if the other students might notice that this sullen kid could be breaking out of his shell. They had, after all, already noticed that he was the only one to wear a sports coat and the only one to smoke French cigarettes. Ben, the director of the tour, wouldn't believe the smile. To him Alex would always be a “mean-spirited little prick,” but Ben was never around. At this moment, when the tour of Pompeii was about to begin, Ben was probably back at the hotel humping one of his Italian girlfriends.

Dennis had time to think about such things because Gina had been in charge for the past ten minutes. In her blue uniform, she was a guide who meant business. The minute she had climbed onto the bus in the Pompeii parking lot, she started talking. “I am Gina and I will teach you all about Pompeii.” She then marched the twenty-five young Americans and Dennis all off the bus, past the man in plaid pants, and into the ancient city, where she paused on the other side

to begin her talk. "Probably you have learned that Pompeii was a wonderful city with lots of things going on -- both for business and pleasure. And then the volcano exploded and before long the city was covered by a thirty-foot layer of ash. Not lava. Ash. Then, only two hundred years ago, it was discovered by archeologists. They found the whole city well preserved underneath." Dennis had read all about this many times, but hearing Gina with her Italian accent made it spring to life in his imagination as it never had before. "Just think," she went on, "how excited these people must have felt to find such wonderful things hidden. Will any of us ever be that excited in our whole lives?" Dennis thought she was staring at him while she said all this. He smiled back pleasantly.

Then off she strutted to the first stop: the elaborate remains of the home of a rich aristocrat. From the pillars and the walls Dennis could figure out where the rooms must have been. In the middle was a sunken fountain. The ladies back then, Gina told them, had it so good that they could gamble. They adorned themselves with rouge and perfume. They could enjoy the day by the sunken pool. Eventually business people forced them out. One sign on one business man's villa had read, "Hail Profit." Dennis listened but he also thought about Alex, who still stood next to him. Once he stifled a yawn. Another time he reached for his cigarettes, but put them back in his pocket. Had he been a little further back Dennis might have asked. "Alex, why are you here anyway? These kids aren't your type."

Then his thoughts returned to Gina, who was now pointing to a doorway. What was so liberating about trips like this was that it didn't matter if your mind

wandered. If he wanted to think about Alex or anything else, he could. Gina wasn't going to call out: "Hey, you in the tan pants, Grateful Dead t-shirt, and sandals, what have I just been talking about?" As long as he acted in charge, it didn't really matter where his mind chose to wander.

Back to Alex. Where would this strange person's mind wander? Did it wander? He was watching Gina, but he seemed to be fidgeting more than the others. When people passed, he would usually turn to look at them and lately even smile a silent hello. And he would mutter to himself and that was one reason Ben hated him. Last night at dinner Ben brought up the muttering again. "You'd think the little gnome had an imaginary friend the way he keeps talking to himself, I had him in class all year. I know."

Dennis felt too much in control to let this kid shake him. Who could have guessed that he, 24-year old Dennis Clark, could step into the leader's role so effortlessly? Gina might be calling the shots now, and Ben might be the official head, but Dennis was The Man. He planned each day. He made announcements at meals. He checked up on the kids. He argued with Enrique about the condition of the bus. He carried the passports and the tickets. He even acted as banker and shrink. Tomorrow he would lead the way to Capri. In two days, they would depart for Sicily and he would still be in charge.

Two weeks ago he was in charge of nothing. That was the day of his evaluation with Duncan Bates, chairman of the English department. Afterwards, Dennis had erased the gruesome encounter from his memory. But now just a few

weeks later, now with the kids bunched around Gina, he could replay the whole scene.

Into the office he had crept and stood until Bates had nodded at a school desk. Dennis squeezed into the seat and waited uncomfortably. The first things that caught his eyes were the yellow Cliff Notes in the bookshelf behind Bates. Bates began the attack before he could notice anything else. Why couldn't Dennis prepare for class? Why couldn't he make the kids shut up? Why couldn't he assign books on the "Approved" list? Did he need to be so rude to the librarian? Wasn't he aware of the smoking rules? "I know this was only your first year, Dennis, and I know you had difficult students, but you've got to act more professionally. It's all in the report." He touched a maroon folder on the desk next to an old photo of the Bates' family taken in front of the school. Bates was sporting sideburns and a light purple leisure suit with bell-bottoms.

"Dennis," Bates was now speaking in a soothing voice, "you've heard all of this before. We believe in you. We know how well you did as a student teacher. We know that you were a strong student in college. The kids like you a lot. You showed me something when you agreed to scrap that tape recorder project. But until you learn to be professional," his voice had hardened, "you will have a devil of a time managing your job and your life. Another year like this one and I won't be able to recommend you for tenure."

Dennis felt the rock-hard clumps of gum under the desk. He could have said a lot and maybe he should have. He had been, after all, assigned the "at risk." Few of these kids even thought about college. They shared a loathing of all

adults and a particular hatred of adults at Forest High. By the end of September, he had broken up three fights in class. In October his father had died, and he had to fly back to New York for a week. By the time he returned, his girlfriend had moved out. Early in January he pulled his groin playing basketball. In February he tried to quit smoking, but couldn't. His landlord had a nervous breakdown, and Dennis agreed to take over the management of the building. In the spring he dated a girl who turned out to be married. Later he dated another girl who could never remember his name. On their last date, he left her at the movie theater watching 101 Dalmatians and walked home.

But instead of responding, Dennis sat in the little desk and squirmed. When he had to talk, all he could come up with was that he had always been a "slow starter." He then added weakly that next year he would be teaching the college-bound students. "They should be," he heard himself lie, "more my style."

This seemed to be the end of the conference, but then Bates -- quite suddenly -- offered Dennis the chance to help lead the school tour to Italy. "Clarence can't go because, as you probably know, he will be having prostate surgery. We didn't think Ben should run the trip all by himself, so we thought you might want to assist him. It's late notice, but you're young and free. And," Bates was now rising to his feet, a big smile hanging from his face, "your earring will fit in well over there. Shall we shake on it?" That man, Dennis had thought to himself on the way out, is a real asshole.

Now here stood Dennis in Pompeii gazing at places where people had not lived since 200 AD. Instead of a groveling casualty of Chairman Bates inquisition,

he was a confident survivor as calm and cool as his smug smile suggested. This was what was so amazing about teaching: the year ends and you can start all over. What happened last year had disappeared forever into the past. In just a few weeks, he had been transformed from a struggling novice into an experienced pro.

An older American couple slowly moved by and smiled at this scene of the young teacher in casual clothes watching over his kids while they soaked up Italian culture. He could recognize that approving look anywhere. These old folks might not quite go for his long hair, but they sure liked what they saw him doing. He stepped back to take a picture of the scene, gesturing to Alex to join the group, but instead he slipped off to the side and lit up a Gallois. This time he did not smile.

Dennis leaned down to him as they followed Gina to what was once a Pompeii theater. “Camera-phobic, Alex?” I thought your parents might like to see all the culture you guys are collecting.”

“Mother would despise Pompeii. She’d rip up a picture.” He made a tearing motion with his hands.

“What would she like?”

“Don’t bother asking, Dennis.” He walked off to join the group. Dennis wondered if any of the other kids would call him by his first name. School policy discouraged such familiarity, but first names on a trip weren’t a big deal. For certain, none would do what Rose Espesito did last fall and in front of the class call him a cocksucker right to his face.

Later, on the way back to the bus, Dennis listened to the pebbles crunching under his feet. He stretched and turned to make sure the kids were following. Behind them he could see Gina, now with a cigarette in her mouth and sunglasses pulled over her eyes, climb onto a motor scooter and speed away with a final wave to the kids. When Dennis gave the OK, Enrique gunned the engine and eased the large blue coach out of the parking lot and back to Amalfi. Alex slept next to Dennis the whole way back.

“How was the ancient decadent city? Did they show you the whore house? How about the room with the organ measurements?” Ben spoke with his usual wheeze. From the door of the hotel room, Dennis could not see him in the semi-dark but knew he was lying on the bed. Ben had spent most of the days on the hotel bed ever since the group arrived in Italy two weeks before. And now at Amalfi he was stretched out one more time. Next to him would be a USA Today turned to the sports page. Sometimes the TV would be on. His cigarettes would be within reach.

“None of the kinky stuff, but the day was a success.” Dennis came in and sat in a chair by the window. Outside was one of the greatest views anywhere -- blue sky, bluer water, fishing boats, steep hills, and craggy faced farmers -- everything all packed together. But Ben, usually hungover, kept the curtains snugly closed. Dennis went on. “We drove to Vesuvius. Esther nearly threw up. She didn’t like all those twists and turns. We climbed Vesuvius in the morning and had lunch and then spent the afternoon in Pompeii. How did the fact finding go in Capri?”

“Easy now, my good fellow. You know I had plans back here. One of my ladies is staying at the Santa Catarina Hotel.”

“Isn’t that where Hilary Clinton stayed last year? Just think you almost had a shot at Slick Willie’s wife.” Dennis knew Ben would like to imagine that encounter.

“How did you know about the Clintons?” Ben coughed and spit. Dennis hoped he had pulled a wastebasket next to the bed.

“You told me the other afternoon when you were drunk.” Dennis had been astonished to learn that away from school Ben, the respected chairman of the math department, turned into a lush and a womanizer. Around the kids he was discreet, but he told Dennis everything. On the plane over from Chicago to Rome, he had calmly announced that Dennis would be running the tour because he had things to do all over Italy. “You’ll do a good job, David.”

“Dennis, My name’s Dennis.”

“You’ll do a first-rate job. Just don’t let Alex get under your skin.” That said, he had reached for a passing stewardess and ordered another scotch.

“You were starting to tell me about the Santa Catarina.” Dennis spread apart the curtains and squinted out.

“Some other time. Dinner looms. I have to tell our little globetrotters what I have planned for Capri.”

“You are coming along aren’t you? I could arrange to have you sit next to Alex. “Dennis let the curtain close.

Ben scowled. "I've got more research here in Amalfi. But if I did board the Enrique Express, the last person I'd want to be near is that loathsome little reptile. He makes me appreciate our clean-cut, boring, college-bound regulars. You know I had Alex in class all year. He's detestable -- thoroughly detestable." He shuddered.

"No one can be that bad. What was he like?" Dennis watched Ben pull on his slacks.

"He's not like anything. He stares and mutters. The kids don't care for him much, and I can see why. Look at them: little preppies with clean-cut bodies. Who knows what they are doing to each other or to themselves in private, but in public they know how to act. This little fucker, he just glowers. Who knows why he came on this trip, but I should have kept him out."

"He's starting to smile. Have you noticed?"

"In my class," Ben snorted, "the closest he came to a genuine smile was a nasty smirk. I guarantee that by the end of the trip, you will hate the kid as much as I do."

Dennis could picture Alex sitting in the back of Ben's math class -- a skinny, slouching figure with pimples. While the others crowed at Ben's jokes, he would stare at his dark, little fingers.

Before dinner, Dennis checked out Alex's application for the trip. As Ben's assistant, Dennis had the job of keeping the records handy in case someone needed an address, a blood type or something like that. He sat on his bed with an accordion file in his lap and pulled out Alex's folder. As it turned out, he had

signed up so late that he didn't have an application, but someone had made a copy of his transcript and stuck that in the file. It showed that Alex had attended Forest High School his freshman year and lived with his mother. The next year, he transferred to Taber Academy outside of New Bedford, Massachusetts, to be near his dad. His grades were mostly C's. His test scores were high. The second semester grades were not listed, but Dennis could see that in the first semester in Ben's algebra-trig class he had received a C-.

Dennis moved to a chair besides the window. He didn't have Ben's view, but he could see the gulf of Salerno. He thought more about Alex. From the start of the trip, he had shared a table with Gladys Scopes and Drew Fields. Dennis didn't know Gladys, but he knew that Drew brought a laptop computer with him on the trip. In the first few days of the trip, whenever Dennis looked over, Alex would be staring sullenly at his tablemates. But in the last few nights he had seen him smile and even laugh.

Dennis sat taking in the glorious view. He propped his feet on the rail and reached for the beer that Ben had slipped into his pocket and decided that Alex's dark personality wasn't a mystery. He's miserable because his folks have passed him back and forth. He doesn't have the physical gifts to make it as a jock or ladies' man in school, and he's too cynical to get involved with clubs.

But now he's starting to smile.

"Tonight, you're on your own." Dennis' voice bounced off the pale blue back wall of the spacious Italian hotel dining room. The twenty-five students from

his tour were spread out in front of him at a dozen or so variously shaped tables. In a pinch the room could hold 100. "Tonight people, we don't have anything scheduled. Walk through town. But get plenty of sleep. Tomorrow it's the ferry to Capri and remember that Ben wants us to walk up from the bottom. No cable cars for you folks."

"We're real men. Right Mr. Clark?" Terry Holmes called out from the back. Whenever Terry said anything everyone else cringed. Terry was a nice kid, but simple, and he always laughed at the wrong time. You didn't want to sit next to Terry if you could help it. But Dennis couldn't ignore him, so he put his fist on his forehead and dropped into a body builder's pose.

"Call him Dennis," someone else shouted out. "He's not that much older than we are."

"Do you care, Mr. Clark?" Jeffrey Tobin always wanted to know how people felt about things. He was the only boy at table seven.

"No, Tobin, I don't care at all. We're in Italy." Tobin shrugged and with that people started to leave.

Like a cruise captain, Dennis ate with different people each night. And this night he had eaten pasta and sole with three senior girls. They reminded him of his sister -- clean cut, friendly, and naturally polite. They could step into the adult world right now, and no one would know the difference. A few years ago he would have avoided such students, but not anymore -- not after what happened to him this year. With these kids, he could finally relax. Sally Fenster, who happened to be the editor of the school paper, did ask some pointed questions

about Ben. (“Isn’t Mr. Haywood supposed to be around more?”) but the meal was generally uneventful. Dennis captured the conversation with an exaggerated description of his first trip to Europe.

Then, during the ice cream dessert, Ben, in his new yellow suit, rose to address the travelers. His unparted hair had been slicked back with a wide-toothed comb. Lately he had started to use hair dye so that the whole effect was glistening black. After praising the kids for their “mature behavior” he rattled off his plans for Capri and the bus to Sicily. Soon after, he had excused himself and hurried away, stopping briefly as he passed behind Alex to make a face.

Now, with dinner over and his own remarks completed, Dennis had to decide what to do with himself. Last night he had written three poems. One poem, a rendering of old Italian men in their dark suits, he quite liked. Tomorrow night he’d supervise charades and Trivial Pursuit. Tonight would be different, though. Tonight he would take a walk with Alex.

When Dennis reached Alex’s table, Gladys was reading aloud a letter from her brother. It was all about the catacombs outside of Palmero. “Mr. Clark, we’ve got to go to this place when we’re in Sicily. My brother says it’s filled with perfectly preserved corpses.

“Sounds great, Gladys. I’ll mention it to Mr. Haywood.” Dennis cleared his throat. “Alex I’m walking down to town. Why don’t you come along? You guys can come along too,” he added in a lower tone as he looked over at Gladys and Drew. “I bet you haven’t seen Amalfi at night.”

“We’re staying here.” Drew announced firmly. He was a little guy with a red crew cut. I have to write postcards. Eight postcards.”

“Only eight? Drew, you’ve gone irresponsible on us.”

“Eight will do. I have one of Vesuvius for my mom. I have one of the buried people from Pompeii for my father....”

“I’ve got the idea.” Dennis reached over and slapped him on the shoulder.

A few minutes later Dennis was standing alone in the lobby while Alex went for his cigarettes. The hotel served Americans student groups only. Except for three badly torn posters for Al Italia and youth hostel announcements, this could have been a dorm lobby at a Midwestern university. Several plastic chairs had been repaired with duct tape. On the tables were stacks of old issues of Sports Illustrated and a guide to American universities.

Alex led as they made their way along a small sidewalk that bordered the Amalfi Drive, the same road that made Esther sick to her stomach earlier that day. In a few hundred steps they came to the stairs that would take them to the town of Amalfi.

Talk! Dennis urged himself. Talk. What do you have to lose? “Alex, I’ve been pleased at how much you seem to be enjoying the trip. Are you enjoying it as much as I think?” His voice carried through the night air, but no response came from Alex. They took another sharp turn and were suddenly greeted from below with the view of a large, flat open area -- probably tennis courts -- where teenaged Italians in blue sweat pants and sweat shirts were dribbling basketballs

in unison. A coach in a similar outfit holding a whistle and clipboard stood at the side taking notes and shouting encouragement.

Alex and Dennis paused to stare down. The air smelled of flowers and garlic. The sound of the dribbling basketball blended with the squealing of tires back on the Amalfi Drive. "This would have made a good picture," Dennis said.

"You really think so?" Alex snapped. "I think it's stupid. Why don't they play their own games? They're never going to be good anyway, so why bother?" Dennis was about to mention basketball's popularity in Europe, but Alex kept on: "What could be dumber than a bunch of short, greasy Italians trying to play basketball? I could play as well as these assholes." He spat over the side.

"When did you play basketball?" Dennis sounded surprised.

"In gym. I'm pathetic. When we had co-ed gym the girls elbowed me all over the court. I'd end up standing in the corner, and after a while they'd forget I was there." They were walking again, and by now had almost reached the bottom. Alex slowed down and now they were walking side by side.

Then suddenly he broke into a half jog. "Let's look at the souvenir shops first." He headed towards a store with a rack of postcards in the front. Inside were displays of tourist books, film, more postcards, plates, ashtrays, and small figurines. And, even though they were hundreds of miles from Rome, the store sold dozens of Vatican mementos including a Pope bottle opener. At the counter smoking and scowling sat a young man with a mustache and a red and blue striped shirt.

Whistling “Eleanor Rigby” louder than he needed to, Alex picked through the t-shirts and hats while Dennis looked absentmindedly at a map of Sicily. He’d have time to talk to Alex, but he would have to force the issue. Then, all at once, Alex stopped whistling, dropped a sweatshirt back into a pile of shirts, walked briskly up to the young Italian man at the cash register and said something to him in Italian while waving his arms aggressively. The man sat up straight, bulged out his eyes, and pointed his finger at Alex’s forehead. He lunged for Alex. A small display case of keys hit the floor with a sharp clatter, but by now Alex was heading out the door and into the crowded street.

“What did you ask the guy?” By the time Dennis caught up with Alex, they were in Amalfi Plaza. Looming above was a large church looking gold in the nighttime. On the left was a round fountain. In its center were statues of nude goddesses with water spraying from their nipples. Much of the open space was filled with cafe tables. Dennis could see some of the kids from the trip sitting together. One waved for them to come over.

They stopped by the fountain and Alex, staring hard at the nipples, replied, “I asked the guy where I could buy a lady for the night. I said he was supposed to be the biggest pimp in Amalfi.”

“You what? Why would you want to do something like that? What do you think he felt? How would you like to be called a pimp?” Dennis felt helpless.

“Hey, I was just fucking around. Just fucking around. Don’t you understand? I felt like agitating that low life. People who work in those stores really depress me. Can you imagine looking at tourists all day long and

answering the same questions?" Dennis wondered if he should turn around and head back to the hotel.

But he walked on and finally asked, "I didn't know you spoke such good Italian." They were standing in front of a store filled with shoes. Dennis seemed to remember that Italian shoes were the world's best, but these looked silly to him. Pointy toes and tassels.

"Rich brats like me have always traveled. We know how to sound foreign. That's part of the package." He stopped talking and reached into his sports coat pocket for a blue pack of Gallois. All the other kids sported short-sleeved shirts and shorts, but Alex always wore his dark sports coat. "You know," he started up again. Dennis couldn't believe how much he was talking. "You wanted to know why I seem to be having such a good time?"

Dennis shrugged. What did it matter now? He just listened.

"Well," Alex went on, "I'm not really having such a good time, but I never expect to have a good time. For me, it was Italy or my father. My father, in case you were wondering, is a total scumbag. For some reason I feel relaxed. But don't call me happy."

"So you're making the best of it. That's good." Maybe this was going to work after all. The two had started walking down one of the streets that ran off the piazza. The street was jammed with people walking and chatting or just looking into the windows of the expensive shops. One couple -- two middle-aged Americans, gray but erect -- could have been his parents. For all he knew, his parents could have once shopped on this elegant little stretch of Italy.

“I guess I’m making the best of it, but I wouldn’t put it that way. It’s just a forgettable experience. Not good, but not horrible. You’re easy going and Haywood is always off chasing women so I’m not complaining. And these people I eat with. They’re so serious, what else can I do?”

“But you have started to smile.” Dennis wanted assurance.

“Forget the smile. Forget it. Forget it. For get it. OK? I mean if you can smile, anyone can,” Alex stopped and was looking at Dennis with his head tipped to one side. His tongue moved over his lips in concentration.

“Me? What are you talking about? I always smile.” Dennis demonstrated with an exaggerated grin. “I’m the smiling fool. I’m the tour leader, the social dictator. Smiling is what I do. You’ve seen me make the announcements.”

“Not many smiles this year, though, not according to Sally Valentine.” They were stopped in front of a gelato store. Several American kids walked out eating the ice cream. Dennis didn’t know any of them.

“Do you mean Sally Valentine from my class?” How would Alex know her? Sally yawned and frowned during all conversations. Most of the time she was hunkered down in the back of the class. Whenever he asked why she hadn’t done her homework, she would shrug and stare back blankly. He had decided back in September that she was a truly unhappy child and would never be anything else. And, now it turns out, she knew Alex. Why not?

They were seated at a cafe in a small square and giving orders to a chubby little waiter who spoke perfect English. A beer for Dennis and coke for

Alex. "Keep them coming," said Dennis as the waiter placed the drinks in front of them.

"Sally told me you took a lot of shit from that class."

"She's right. Not much to smile with that group." Dennis couldn't tell where this talk was heading, but Alex's stare made him feel edgy.

"She liked the way you kept trying." Alex lit a fresh cigarette and sat up straighter.

"Don't try to make me feel good, Alex. She didn't like anything, especially my teaching." It was hard to believe that anyone had been paying such attention to his work.

"She said you kept bringing in new stories, and videos and games. She said that for a long time you kept trying new things."

"She must have told you about the role playing experiment."

"The one where the two girls tore each other's clothes? She told me a lot. When you're like me, talking with someone like Sally Valentine is a highlight. I don't have much else to do. It amazed me that in such a school like Forrest, we'd have a class like that."

"Greasers and low lives?"

"Yeah, I suppose. And that so much else was happening in that building. Here's you, some college kid, trying to humor a bunch of gangsters and meanwhile I'm dozing away in Ben's class trying to ignore his horrible jokes."

“If I’d known you were so interested,” Dennis joked, “I could have invited you in. I knew that the administration was watching my class, but I didn’t know you were out there too.”

“Those administrations finally wore you down didn’t they? All those coaches got their way.” Alex sat up straight.

“Not really. I got tired and anyway no one in the class seemed to care. These kids liked me because I was young and not part of the school team. But they didn’t care about what I cared about.”

“Is that why you junked the tape recorder project?” Alex took a big gulp from Dennis’s beer.

Dennis paused and stared at his hands. “I decided to cancel it,” he said slowly, “It wasn’t going to work. The kids weren’t going to like it anyway.”

“It sounded like a great idea to me -- a whole day where the kids would go out into the hall and interview everyone. How did you set it up?”

“We made a questionnaire with the usual ‘What do you think?’ and ‘What’s bothering you?’ stuff.” Dennis remembered discussing privacy issues with the kids (“You can’t ask the teachers about their sex lives. OK?”)

Alex kept talking. “I wish my English teachers had thought of something like that.”

“I wanted the kids to get out of the classroom. I wanted them to ask questions and then to think about the answers, but it wasn’t such a good idea after all.” Dennis paused and swallowed.

“Is that what the school said?”

“They got word of it, and asked me to think about what I was doing. It was after the fight. My personal life was a disaster. I decided to dump the idea. It wasn’t going to work. I didn’t want to get the kids in trouble.”

“Come on, Dennis,” Alex had turned his chair directly towards him and stared into his face. “This wasn’t about the kids at all.” He poked Dennis hard in the chest and Dennis slapped away his hand. “And, incidentally, wasn’t that about the time you decided to move up to the other bores on this tour.” Alex had raised his voice so much that the waiter was looking over at them.

Dennis wondered if he looked as devastated as he felt. How could he have let this person do this to him? Ben was right. This was why people hated Alex so much. What, in God’s name, is this person going to like as an adult?

Dennis sat staring at Alex. He didn’t try to stop his lip from quivering. Alex tapped his fingers on the table and stared past him. If he was pleased with himself, he didn’t show it. Then Dennis bit his bottom lip and pushed back the table. In a second he was on his feet. “You little shit!” Dennis exploded. “You think you found a way to get to me. You must think I’m like that guy at the store -- the one you called a pimp. I might be a fool a lot of the time. But I’m not going to get sucked into your game.” For a moment, he thought about grabbing Alex by his long, stringy hair and slamming his pointed face down on the cafe table. But that thought passed and instead, he turned around and rushed away through the square. To get through the shopping street, he had to push people aside. A group of kids from his tour stepped back and let him through. No one said anything.

Halfway back up the stairs, Dennis stopped to look down at the lighted basketball court, now overflowing with older kids in blue shirts fiercely dribbling, just as the younger ones had dribbled an hour before. Alex would have a lot to say about the skinny kid who kept dribbling the ball off his foot. Dennis tried to take it all in, but instead his mind filled with ugly pictures: There was Alex only inches away pointing his bony finger and spitting insults into his face; There was Betsy Peck from last year's class dropping her head the moment he announced to his students that the tape recorder project was postponed; there was the man in the souvenir store, his mouth dropping in astonishment and then curling into a snarl; there was his dying father in the hospital bed nodding asleep while Dennis told him about his plans to teach. To keep his head clear, he kept climbing the stairs, every so often checking his hands. By the time they reached the top, they had stopped shaking.

Ever since the Forrest High School group reached Amalfi five days ago, Ben was the last person to return to the hotel at night. Dennis checked up on the kids, read a little, wrote in his journal and fell to sleep. The next morning he would find Ben at breakfast -- red-eyed and beaming. One time he hadn't even changed his clothes from the night before.

Tonight, however, when Dennis entered the hotel lobby, he spotted Ben slouched in one of the long couches by the far wall. His hair was sticking up. His yellow pants were wrinkled and spotted. Under his right eyes bulged a blueish-red bruise, He gestured for him to come over.

“Some lunatic Italian jumped me tonight,” he began even before Dennis sat down in a red plastic chair right next to the couch. “I’m walking back from the square alone. I had left my date back at her pension, and I’m heading for a place to drink alone. It’s real; crowded and suddenly I hear someone pushing through all the people. ‘Skoozi,’ the guy’s shouting, ‘skoozi, skoozi, skoozi.’ I step back to let him past. But it turns out he’s looking for me! He’s a young guy with wild eyes and oily black hair, and he’s panting like an animal, and he is really, really pissed. When he sees me, he gets right into my face and starts shouting. He wants to know if I’m in charge of the American kids. When I say yes, he calls me a pimp and then steps back and takes a wild swing at me. I duck, but he catches my cheek. Then the crowd drags him away and he runs off into the night like a werewolf. When I am finally able to move, I find a cab and come straight back to this depressing place. And I’ve just been sitting here shaking like I’ve been through an air raid. Do you have any idea what the fuck is going on?”

“Uh huh.” Dennis muttered. “I do.” He got out of the chair and sat down next to Ben on the couch. He could hear the springs scraping the floor. In a low voice he began, “I went into town with Alex. We were in this souvenir store and suddenly he insults the guy at the counter. He calls him pimp.”

“Jesus Christ!” Ben rose to his feet and began furiously rubbing his hair. “I’m lucky the guy didn’t stab me with an Amalfi letter opener. What did you do?”

Dennis kept his voice steady. “It happened fast. He ran out into the square. It took a while to catch up with him. I almost sent him back, but he made such a joke out of it, I didn’t want to overreact.”

“Overreact! Christ, he called some stranger a pimp.” Ben had his hands in his back pocket and he was starting to pace. “Talk about ugly Americans. You should have sent his ass right back up here. End of story. What a great excuse to flush that little vermin away once and for all. He’s a vile kid, Dennis. Can’t you see that?”

“I know. I know. I know.” Dennis was aware of a slight whine in his voice. “But I was determined to talk to him tonight. I guess I wanted to find out if he was more than mean. If I sent him home, we couldn’t have talked. Big, big error.”

“Well, what happened when you two finally talked?” Ben dropped down into the red chair.

“What happened?” Dennis looked down at the floor. “He set me up and flattened me. I was no match for him. I was run down in Amalfi.”

As Ben listened to Dennis’s description, he first nodded and frowned, but by the end -- after all the business about the tape recorder -- he was starting to smile. He stretched out his legs and loosened his tie. “Dennis, you know you don’t have to worry. You really don’t. The only person who’d better worry is that despicable little crud. Only worrying won’t do him any good because he’s nothing. And he’ll always be nothing more than a spiteful little prick, who will probably be strangled before he gets to be thirty. But you,” Ben grabbed Dennis by the shoulders and pulled him around so they were face to face. “You’ve got a great future. Look how well this trip is going. Now go to bed, and thank God you’re not Alex. I’ll take care of the bed checks.”

Dennis stuffed his hands into his pockets, took a deep breath and looked hard at Ben -- maybe harder than he had ever looked at anyone in his whole life. He wanted to say, "Not true," but all he could do was shrug. He headed down the hall, through the dining room and up the stairs. Most of the kids seemed to be asleep. In one room a group was playing Trivial Pursuit. They waved and called out as he passed. "Hey, Mr. Clark, what kind of wood did Noah use to build the ark?" It was the unmistakable bray of Terry Holmes.

"Gopher wood." Dennis called back and kept on walking.

From his window he looked out at the harbor. Alex, he figured, was down there somewhere sitting alone and smoking one of his French cigarettes. Dennis could imagine that brown sports coat with the spots and his skin so white, so cadaver-like.

"I hear you're going back to the States." Dennis was standing in front of Alex's room with a package in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. He had gotten up early and taken a swim in the ocean. He felt clean.

"Why aren't you in Capri?" Alex stepped back as Dennis entered and leaned against the window ledge.

"Ben's taking the group. He is the chief after all." On the bed lay Alex's suitcase. "How did you arrange to leave so quickly?"

"I called Mother last night when I got back to the hotel. She faxed something right away and that was it. She knows how to get things done."

“It must run in the family. You sure go things done last night. You really did a job on me.” Dennis lifted himself onto the window ledge.

“It wasn’t planned you know. Don’t think I rehearsed all of that for you.” He folded his arms over his chest and then dropped them awkwardly. “We started talking. I knew you wanted to figure me out. I was expecting some deeply sincere teacher bullshit. Lately you seem very confident that you can ‘reach’ all of us adolescents.”

Dennis nodded and smiled weakly.

“I could remember how miserable you looked during the school year and then -- of course -- I did know what had happened in the class.”

“And you went after me.” Dennis put the package on the bed next to the suitcase and took a long sip of his coffee.

“You could say that. I just felt like telling you the truth. I thought you could take it. How often do we have an opportunity like that? Anyway I’ve always been able to tell off adults. Other kids would beat the shit out of me if I talked to them that way.” He reached into his pocket for his wallet and checked the bills. Then he patted his other pocket.

“Got enough money?” Dennis asked. “Your passport in place?” Alex nodded. “What did you do after I left the cafe last night?” Dennis noticed that even with all his clothes in it, Alex’s suitcase was only half full.

“I paid the bill you left behind and then I looked after you. I caught up to you when you were looking at those basketball players. The big ones really looked pathetic. But you looked like you should be alone.”

“I got over it faster than I thought I would.” From where he sat by the window, Dennis could see the hotel maids walking by with arms full of laundry.

“I can see that. You look a lot better than you did last night.” Alex had moved to the sink and started combing his hair.

“Were you thinking if apologizing? Is that why you tried to catch up?”

“I suppose.” Alex turned. The comb was still in his hand.

“You don’t need to apologize. What you said was true. I did take the easy way out. I did have a good idea. I did let the school tell me what to do. I’m a worm. I didn’t feel guilty then. I do now. What you said worked.” Dennis was now sitting on the window ledge pounding his knees.

Alex lowered himself to the floor, leaned against the wall and pulled up his knees. “So what are you going to do with all your guilt?”

“Nothing at all. The plan’s the same. I’m still going to teach the college-bound kids. Maybe I’ll get you in class.”

“Sorry. Prep school for me. Mother and I decided that last night. I don’t want to go back to Forest again. I knew that even before last night.”

“Last night was much harder on you than me, wasn’t it?” Dennis wanted to catch Alex’s eye, but the boy kept staring at his hands. Then he bit his nails, stood up and began to fuss with the socks in his suitcase. “Harder? What do you mean? You’re the one who ran away from the table. Christ, I thought you were going to kill yourself.”

“You did not. You know all about people like me. People like me can survive embarrassments like last night. In a few days I’ll be fine. The truth will

settle in. It might make me a better teacher -- maybe. I might even try an interviewing assignment next year. The principal won't mind having all the smart kids in the hall. In my own sloppy, gutless way I'll stumble along. But what about you?"

"I told you. I'm going to prep school. I'll be gone." He walked over to the sink, grabbed his comb, toothbrush and toothpaste and put them in his dob kit. He moved to the bed and put the kit into his suitcase and started to zip it shut. "What's this?" he pointed to the object wrapped in newspaper.

"I brought you a present. Open it." Alex stared at it for a moment, shrugged, tore off the paper and pulled out a small cassette tape recorder.

"Where could you get one of these in the morning?" He sounded surprised.

"It's Ben's. He uses it to memorize Italian phrases."

"It probably has his pick-up lines. 'Hey senora, you want to factor polynomials in my villa?'"

"No doubt. Anyway I stole it from him. Keep it and use it."

"You want me to be an interviewer, don't you?" He seemed to like the idea.

"That's one way you could use it."

"Can I start with you?"

"Let me get a fresh cup of coffee first. I'll be right back."

"What about the pimp? Should I interview him?"

"That's up to you."