

# The Kissing Wall

Robert Dodds

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**Also by Robert Dodds:**

For adults

RATTLESNAKE AND OTHER TALES (Polygon)

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*For my grandchildren Theo, Coralie, Aila and Cedric*

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1955-1959  
THE LAND BEFORE TIME

**'Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred.'**

**Walter Benjamin**

Seymour was born in 1955. The next five years were a puzzle. When he grew older, he could never fit the jigsaw pieces together, although they all lay spread out and waiting on a large mahogany dining table in his memory. The table was in its own way a jigsaw piece. It was in a dim room, with curtains drawn. Someone, somewhere else in the house, had died. He scrambled up to kneel on a chair, a small boy given a task, to keep him out of the way. A grandfather clock ticked solemnly behind him as he studied the pieces, and it chimed the hours as dust settled gently over everything. This room was waiting for him to re-enter it, in intervals between sleep and waking, for the rest of his life.

The jigsaw pieces of these early years could not be put

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together in a line, although that was what he would have liked to do; to put them in order, along a timeline, sequentially. But the pieces lay scattered at random, their curves and protrusions simultaneously inviting and defying any attempt to join them together. Each one was vivid and self-contained. They did not promise a potential line, or even any larger picture, unless it was a kind of surreal landscape, teeming with little figures and scenes like a painting by Breughel, or Bosch.

Nor did the pieces have any sort of hierarchy, as far as he could tell. Why, for example, was this one so prominent - this image of a small white-socked, sandaled foot plunging deep into a squelching cowpat in a tussocky field? Some of the pieces had accompanying sounds, and this one made a kind of moist, sucking noise as he withdrew his foot, together with his mother's voice saying "Oh! Seymour...!"

Why had that moment, like his foot, stuck?

It was fun, though, to look at the images. Here was one of a rockery in a sloping garden. A small, plump girl with bows in her dark hair was addressing him seriously as he galloped his toy cowboys around the miniature mesas. "You will marry me, Seymour, when we grow up, won't you?" The reply, if he made one, was on a missing piece. Far more pieces were missing than were present.

There was his mother again! Running down a steep hill after a golf ball that he had dropped. A town lay in a valley below, and his mother seemed about to take flight and soar into the sky above the rooftops and smoking factory chimneys. But instead she tripped and fell, and he was overcome with an emotion he could only later name as guilt. The golf ball went bounding on. In his mind, it had never come to rest. It bounced downwards forever towards the town below that he afterwards knew was Halifax.

Here was an extended family sitting around a table playing cards: aunts, uncles, cousins. A very small brown dog was nuzzling its wet nose into Seymour's hand as he watched the baffling goings-on. As the cards fell, halfpenny coins from



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small piles beside each player's elbow were pushed back and forth across the tablecloth. "Hello Trudy!" he said quietly to the dog, feeling that it shared his sense of exclusion.

Here was a grey seascape, squashed beneath a heavy sky full of clouds like damp, lumpy laundry. He walked on and on, barefoot on the cold, wet, uneven surface, desperate to meet the long line of rolling murky surf on the horizon. But there were endless wastes of ribbed sand, scattered pools, seaweed, and channels of deep swirling water barring progress. The sea, which he had previously imagined to be blue and accessible, had cheated him.

Here was a small, dark bedroom in a small, cold house. The smell of a paraffin heater filled the room as Seymour lay waiting, trembling with fear beneath the sheets, for the arrival of Father Christmas. He heard whispering and felt something being put down at the end of his bed. He stayed as still as a stone, curled tightly into a ball, pretending to be dead. In the morning, there was a pillowcase there, bulging with hard angular shapes: the parcels that Father Christmas had brought in the night.

Here was a small devious boy in a hat. The hat was ambiguous. In a fading black and white photograph, it was a woollen bobble hat. In the shining jigsaw piece of memory, it was a splendid cowboy's Stetson. Cowboys were important to Seymour when he was small. They materialised nightly on the bulbous screen of the television: *The Lone Ranger*, *Wells Fargo*, *Gunsmoke*, *Rawhide*... Seymour re-enacted their exploits in his bobble hat.

Here he was at the wrought iron gate at the end of the front garden, parleying with two older boys, twins, who were allowed to play on the street. These boys had toy guns: cap pistols, which he wanted desperately to handle. Gulled, the twins handed their pistols through the bars of the gate, and Seymour ran off gleefully into his house, firing extravagant volleys of cap shots into the air.

There were more, many more, of these fragments. Seymour loved them all. They were ordinary

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memories, to recount; the sort of random memories that anyone anywhere could lay claim to. He had heard of more colourful and unusual early memories from others. But these were his own, uniquely his own, and written obscurely over and under and amongst them, in lettering which only his unconscious mind could decipher, was the palimpsest of what he had become.

1960  
THE AVIATOR

**'If children grew up according to early indications, we should have nothing but geniuses.'**  
**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

Seymour was dogged by a feeling that crucial information about the meaning of things had been issued to others but withheld from himself. Rarely had he felt this so strongly as on the occasion of his first day at St Paul's Primary School.

He had been invited by the teacher, a stern grey-haired lady, to take a seat anywhere he chose. It was a bright airy room with huge windows filled with sky, and little chairs were ranged behind long tables around three edges of the room. Some of the mothers were still in there, talking animatedly to each other, or to the teacher. His own mother had gone, believing it best for him. Seymour picked a chair at one end of a row, well away from any of the other children who had sat down already. On the table was a mess of coloured sticks. Other tables had wooden blocks, or picture books, or toy soldiers.

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Seymour felt certain that some task was set for him. After all, this was school, where you came to learn things. He stared dumbly at the coloured sticks, speculating. Then he caught the eye of a mother, glancing around the room.

“Excuse me...” Seymour said nervously, not wanting the teacher to hear.

“Yes?”

Seymour indicated the sticks helplessly. “What do you think I’m expected to do with these?”

The mother looked taken aback. Seymour found that adults were often disconcerted by his speech. He realised, in the end, that he should imitate the way in which other children spoke, and avoid long sentences.

“Er - I think you can just play with them, until the teacher’s ready to start the class.”

“Thank you,” Seymour replied solemnly. Another child, a little boy who looked close to tears, had now taken the seat next to him. He had bricks in front of him.

“Excuse me...” Seymour said. The little boy stared at him.

“Can I have those bricks?” Seymour said, pointing.

The little boy nodded uncertainly. Seymour swept the bricks along the table with his arm, to join the pile of coloured sticks. Now he might be able at least to construct a city of some sort, with the bricks as buildings and the sticks as roads or bridges.

“*Little boy!*”

Seymour looked up, startled. It was the grey-haired teacher, looming over him.

“What’s your name?”

“Seymour.”

“Seymour who?”

“Seymour Moore.”

“Seymour Moore, *Miss!*”

Miss what? Seymour gazed up at her, uncomprehending.

“Everyone is to play with their own things until I’m ready to begin. The spindle sticks are yours to play with. Give the bricks back to this other little boy now please.”

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Seymour shoved the bricks back along the table, filled with a nameless sense of rage and injustice. Why had this not been made clear, from the start? He didn't like this teacher, already.

Someone to whom all the information had always been given was Mark Gavin. He was in the year ahead of Seymour at school, but was a friend on account of his living a hundred yards away along Beechtree Avenue, with his innumerable little brothers and sisters. The oldest of these, Nick, appeared on Seymour's radar, but the others were all too small, and blended with their furry entourage of pets into a single collective in Seymour's consciousness - The Gavins.

Mark was a confident boy with black hair, big dark eyebrows and freckles. Seymour wished he had freckles too. The combination of a dark complexion and freckles was unusual, and beyond him. His own hair was wavy and blond.

Mark knew how to attract hedgehogs onto the lawn in the early evening darkness, with saucers of bread soaked in milk. He knew where the hole in the fence was that let you onto the golf course, where there were sand pits to play in. He knew how to bowl over-arm at cricket, and at Seymour's sixth birthday party he bowled Seymour out first ball. Seymour thought he should get a second chance, but his father, who was umpire, upheld the decision. Seymour fled to his room and cried tears of rage at the unfairness of it. On his own birthday! The sounds of the continuing cricket game came floating in from the garden through his open window and he hated his father with a murderous intensity.

Mark was a natural leader, and Seymour was in awe of him. But, early in his sixth year, he accidentally gained a short-lived pre-eminence of his own among the boys on his street.

There were some painters re-painting the outside of

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Seymour's house. Two loud, whistling fellows with a portable radio, who were still there in the afternoons when he came back from school. They had worked around from the front of the house to the back, where their clutter occupied space that Seymour considered his own, between the kitchen door and the garden shed. He kicked a ball morosely onto the rockery, letting it bounce back to him down the uneven stones, while the painters packed up for the weekend.

"You goin' to t' match tomorrer?" one of the painters said to him.

"No" Seymour replied.

"Don't you support Leeds then?"

Seymour understood what was required of him.

"Yes."

"Who's your favourite player?"

Seymour shrugged.

"Come on Dave!" the older painter called, tapping his watch. This let Seymour neatly off the hook.

When they'd gone, Seymour went over to investigate their stuff. There were pots of paint, of course, ranged against the garden fence. More interesting were planks of wood, and trestles. Seymour stared at these. An idea came to him. From the garden shed he got out a wooden box that he used for all sorts of games. It was a tea box, apparently, and was frequently referred to sentimentally by his mother as "the only piece of furniture your father and I possessed when we got married".

He set it in the middle of the lawn. Then, he picked up one of the painters' planks, memorising exactly where it was so that he could replace it later. It was heavy and awkward, but he managed to manoeuvre it into position on the lawn, and set the box on top of it. Then he got another, smaller, plank, and set it crossways across the other one, just behind the box. He laid a trestle on its side like a 'V' in front of the box. That would all do for now. The light was fading, and his Mum had already called him in for tea. In the morning,

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Saturday morning, he would find Dad's leather flying helmet and the thick goggles. He would add a tail fin and guns, and then he would be ready to do combat in the skies in his new fighter plane.

Mum had her doubts about using the painters' stuff when she discovered the prospective aeroplane in the morning. But, after some debate, she agreed that she supposed it would be all right as long as Seymour put everything back where he found it afterwards.

Sean Morris was the first boy to come across Seymour, just five minutes or so after he had completed the tail fin and taken his seat in the cockpit. Often they kicked a football around on Saturday mornings.

"Wow! What's that?" Sean said.

"It's an aeroplane," Seymour replied. "A fighter aeroplane."

Here he grasped the end of the broom balanced on the trestle in front of him, and gave off a demonstrative rattle of machine-gun fire.

"Wow! Can I have a go?"

"Climb on behind me then. Get that stick there. Now you can be the rear gunner. That's what my uncle used to be."

After a little while, Sean wandered off and Seymour went in for his mid-morning drink of Ribena. When he came out into the garden again, Mark and Nick Gavin were there, looking at his aeroplane.

"Where'd you get all these things?" Mark said.

"Painters' stuff," Seymour replied.

"Can we have a go? Sean told us about it."

"I've got to be the pilot," Seymour said, surprising himself. "You can have turns at being the rear gunner."

Mark took his place as directed, and for some minutes, until Nick's impatience could be denied no longer, Seymour experienced the thrill of being in charge. He flew the plane low over Germany, and gave orders for Mark to fire at will.

Later on, just before lunchtime, Seymour went for a

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wander along the road. He paused at Sean Morris's fence, which had gaps in it, and peered through to see if Sean was playing football. There was no sign of him, but a collection of cardboard boxes and two stepladders lying on the lawn caught his eye. He supposed Sean's father was clearing out their shed. He moved on to Patrick Ogden's house and went down the side passage to see whether Patrick was in the back garden. Three deck chairs were laid flat in a line on the ground. Two clothes poles stuck out sideways, and Patrick crouched in a large cardboard box in the middle of the arrangement.

He saw Seymour immediately and swivelled the golf club he was holding to point the grip at him, emitting a sharp "Rat! Tat! Tat!" Then he grinned.

"It's a fighter aeroplane! Do you want a go? It was Mark Gavin's idea!"



1961  
SEYMOUR AND THE BOSSY GIRLS

**'School days, I believe, are the unhappiest in the whole span of human existence.'**

**H.L. Mencken**

Seymour was not fond of his name. None of the other kids were called Seymour. Not in his class or any of the big kids' classes. He would have liked to blend in, as a Paul, or a Peter. He was the only Seymour in the entire school, and, as far as he knew, in the living world.

It sat particularly unfortunately with his surname, 'Moore'. This had only dawned on him at school, where his second name was used as much as his first. He had learned to make a pause between 'Seymour' and 'Moore', to avoid the impression of stuttering.

"It was my grandfather's middle name" his mother told him, when he asked one day where his first name had come from. "He was a lovely old man," she added, as if this explained something.

His uncle Jim didn't help matters. He had two jokes, which he alternated.

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“Hello there Seymour!” he might say on one visit. “What have you seen more of lately?” Seymour had got into the habit of smiling and replying “life” to this question, which amused Uncle Jim greatly. It wasn’t Seymour’s idea originally - his dad had suggested it to him as a “witty” response, whatever that was. Uncle Jim often dug in his pocket for a coin after this ritual exchange, which was mutually satisfactory.

Uncle Jim’s other joke was to call him “Hear-more”. His mum always scowled in mock anger at him when he said this. The basis for this joke had dawned on Seymour suddenly one day, after an irritable exchange with Wanda Morrison in the playground. Apparently Seymour’s ears were what were commonly denominated ‘wing flaps’, or ‘Mickey Mousers’, and stuck out at too much of an angle from the side of his head. So the meaning of Uncle Jim’s joke was that his ears should give him especially sharp powers of hearing. Perhaps they did. When he put an ear to the ground in the garden, he could hear the insects talking, and no one else had ever mentioned that.

Wanda Morrison, who had revealed to him this fact about his appearance, was a bossy girl two years older than Seymour. She and her pal Margaret enjoyed games of ‘family’, with Seymour cast as the recalcitrant offspring of their union.

“*Seymour!*” Wanda would peremptorily call to him, as all the classes flowed out like tributaries into the turbulent river leading to the playground doors. He’d try to slip by, but Margaret would link her arm through his, like one of those things in the Amazon on TV. A leech. Not that leeches had arms, but she was one anyway.

“Seymour,” Wanda explained, as she and Margaret led him out to their favoured area of the playground, near the rubbish bins, “You’ve been a bad boy again, and we’re going to have to put you through your paces.”

Wanda had a dog - he’d been shown pictures of it - and her training regime for Seymour was based on dog training

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principles.

“Seymour - walk along this line to the bins there, and then back again. Seymour, sit down. Seymour, stand up. Jump on the spot for one minute, starting... now!”

Margaret was also under Wanda’s sway, but in a much more privileged role than Seymour. She was the doting husband.

“Margaret - have you warmed my slippers by the fire?”

“Yes Wanda.”

“Then you may put them on my feet now.”

But Margaret also got to boss Seymour around, when Wanda gave permission.

Seymour wasn’t used to girls. He had no girl relatives, except Elisa his cousin, and she was practically grown up. He was consequently rather in awe of them. However, he knew with a cold certainty that he didn’t like to spend his playtimes with Wanda and Margaret. The other boys in his class played football with an old tennis ball, and he desperately wished that he could join them. Finally, after turning the problem around and around in his head, he asked Mark Gavin - who had several sisters - if he would do him a favour.

“What?” Mark said.

“Well - you know those girls who are always bothering me?”

“The ones you play with?”

“I don’t play with them. It’s them that want to play with me.”

“Well, just don’t.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Anyway, would you do something for me?”

“What?”

“Would you bash them up?”

Mark looked over at Wanda and Margaret, who were sitting on the low wall next to the bins.

“I can probably only bash one of them up. I can’t fight

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them both at once.”

“All right. Bash Wanda up.”

“Is she the one with the black hair?”

“Yes. The one that looks like a pig.”

Mark snorted like a pig, and Seymour felt understood.

“Okay. Four ginger nuts.” Mark stipulated.

Ginger nuts were on sale at the tuck shop every morning at four for a penny.

“All right. Give them to you tomorrow.”

“Right.”

Mark Gavin rushed straight over to where Wanda and Margaret were sitting. He knocked Wanda onto the ground and threw himself on top of her. He flapped at her with open palms while Margaret circled around in a state of agitation, wondering what to do. He landed a good slapping blow on Wanda’s cheek, and suddenly she began to cry. Seymour edged as close as he dared, to get a good look at Wanda crying.

“You bugger!” Margaret shouted, and started pulling at Mark’s jumper. Then Mark had an inspiration. He reached down and pulled off one of Wanda’s plimsolls from her foot. Disengaging himself, he ran with the plimsoll to the far end of the playground and flung it in a high arc over the fence and into the overgrown grass of the field beyond. Then he turned to Seymour, who had followed him at a trot.

“All right Seymour?”

“Thanks, Mark.”

“Want to come and play football?”

Seymour felt his heart swell with gratitude and pride.

That was not the conclusion of the episode. Shortly after the bell for the start of afternoon lessons, Seymour and Mark Gavin were called to Sister Mary’s office. There, a white-faced Wanda denounced them as bullies and plimsoll thieves. Sister Mary accompanied Seymour and Mark on a visit to the field, her black habit swishing through the long

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grass and scratching against thistles as they all made methodical sweeps back and forth until the plimsoll was located.

Back in Sister Mary's office, Wanda was asked to wait outside in the corridor for a moment, and her plimsoll was put to use on the upturned palms of the boys. Two blows each, one on the right hand, one on the left. Sister Mary raised her long bony arm above shoulder height for each swing, like a tennis player about to serve.

"And if I hear any more of this sort of behaviour, I'll be calling your parents in here to talk to me! Now get back to your classrooms the pair of you!"

Outside in the corridor, Wanda Morrison watched them pass with an angry eye. Seymour's hands were throbbing painfully already, but it was well worthwhile from his point of view. He had ceased to hold Wanda in awe, and when she next ordered him to follow her out into the playground he ignored her, and ran off to play football instead.

1962  
SEYMOUR AND THE OCTOPUS

**'Al que no quiere caldo, se le dan dos tazas.'** ('To he who does not want soup, two portions shall be given')  
**Spanish proverb**

Seymour had not been abroad. He had heard of it, but it had not excited his interest. Then his mother showed him shining photographs in a brochure. They revealed buildings of a luminous whiteness and sea of an intense blueness that were new to Seymour, and so abroad also began to acquire an allure. Some of the photos depicted beaches, where he would be able to make sandcastles with moats, and paddle. He was quickly won over to the whole idea.

The journey to abroad was long. Seymour fought down panic as they boarded the metal tube that was to lift them into the sky. Once seated, he pressed into his mother's arm, and kept his eyes averted from the window on the other side of her. With a roar like a hundred hoovers, the plane lumbered upwards, rattling in every joint. Seymour stared at the floor beneath his sandaled feet. What was under there?

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Eventually they landed at an airport, an echoing place of warm air stirred lazily by enormous ceiling fans. After many hours they boarded a second plane, a silvery plane with the word 'Spantax' on its side. Again the miracle of the vacuum cleaners occurred, and Seymour ventured to look out of the window this time. There was a land of cotton wool out there, bathed in dazzling light. Boiled sweets were distributed. At last, in the orange glow of a setting sun, they disembarked onto hot tarmac, and smelled flowers in the warm air. Seymour was abroad.

The last part of the journey was completed in a jolting minibus along potholed dusty roads. Two sisters in floral print dresses with identical handbags were their companions. The hotel had an unpronounceable name, and its surroundings could only dimly be guessed at in the darkness. Seymour fell exhausted into his bed. In the night, a small whining fly kept waking him, and in the morning his wrists and elbows were covered in itching red bumps.

The morning was a revelation. Seymour wandered dazed onto the terrace of the hotel, which was shaded by twisting leafy plants that coiled like ropes over a wooden framework. Down a few steps lay a perfect little beach, with some fishing boats drawn up on the sand. The beach was at the end of a long inlet. Along one side were jagged rocks like the walls of a dragon's castle. Along the other side were white houses and wooden jetties. The open sea was some way off, a gentle wash of sound on the edge of hearing. Seymour felt an extraordinary surge of happiness.

The sisters were on the terrace at a little table. Their floral print dresses had been exchanged for floral print swimming costumes. Seymour had never thought of having breakfast in a swimming costume, but this was evidently one of the wonders of abroad.

"Hello Seymour!" one of them said. How did she know his name?

"Hello." he replied, shyly.

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“Isn’t this lovely!”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“I wonder if there’ll be any other children here for you to play with?” offered the other sister.

Seymour shrugged. He was used to getting along fine without other children. If there were no other children, he could have the whole beach to himself. It would be perfect.

Just beyond the fishing boats, a man with a pitchfork was making a pile of something. Bravely, Seymour went down onto the sand and walked along to have a closer look.

He didn’t like the appearance of the pile. It was about as high as his waist, and quivered. It was composed of blobs of jelly, with horrible stringy bits. The man with the pitchfork was wearing high boots. He waded out into the shallow water and forked up more blobs of jelly, which he carried to the pile. He grinned at Seymour and said something that was almost certainly foreign. Seymour smiled back uncertainly. He had a churning feeling in the pit of his stomach. This paradise was rotten at the core. The beautiful alluring sea was full of floating blobs of jelly, disgusting grey horrors, which lurked unseen in the depths. He ran back to the terrace, where his mother and father were just settling at a table.

“Ah, there you are Seymour!” said his mother. “I wondered why you weren’t in your room. Do you like the beach?”

“There’s blobs of jelly in the sea!” Seymour exclaimed, pointing at the man and the pile.

“Jellyfish,” said his father knowledgeably. “Used to get a lot of those in the Far East. Mustn’t touch them.”

“Why not?”

“They sting.”

“What, like bees?”

Seymour had been stung in the ear by a bee earlier in the summer. It was still a vivid memory.

“I don’t know exactly. I’ve never been stung by one. But you’d better wear your jelly sandals in the water.”



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*Jelly sandals!* Was that where they got their name?

“I’m not going in the sea!” Seymour said firmly.

His mother gave his father a look.

The Ugly Sisters, as Seymour had now privately christened them, were within earshot, and clearly felt no qualms about joining in the conversation.

“The man will probably get all the jellyfish out of the water by the time we’ve finished breakfast.”

“We’ll be going in for a swim Seymour. You can come with us if you like.”

Seymour looked at his mother for help.

“We’ll all give it a try,” she said, “and if there’s too many jellyfish, we’ll just have to paddle at the edge.”

The hotel manager, a man with a big black moustache and a large belly, came up to introduce himself. He waved away the jellyfish airily.

“They no problem. Some days they come, some days they don’t come. When tide goes out, the jellyfish they go out too. There no problem. You see.”

“*Donde está la iglesia?*” said Seymour’s father. His beginner’s Spanish book was open on the table.

The manager spread his hands wide in wonderment.

“*¿El señor habla español?*” he marvelled.

“*Muy poco,*” said Seymour’s father, indicating a tiny gap with his thumb and little finger.

The manager said something else in foreign, at which Seymour’s father shook his head, defeated.

“The church, it is up the hill behind us here,” he said. “Why you want the church?”

“We are Catholics,” replied Seymour’s dad. “Do you know what time mass is held this morning?”

“Yes. Of course. It is at ten o’clock. You have good time after breakfast to go there.”

In the tiny church at the top of the village, they were the eighth wonder of the world. They modestly occupied one of the back rows, which meant that the villagers developed cricks in their necks from having to twist around to observe

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them. Seymour found himself just behind a foreign boy of his own age, although smaller. The boy turned and grinned at him, and half brought out of his pocket what looked like a lizard. He displayed this to Seymour with a wink, and then pushed it back into the pocket. Seymour was unsure exactly what he had seen, and whether he should respond in any way.

After mass was over, the priest hovered outside the open doors of his church. Seymour's father laboriously explained, in a mixture of English, foreign, and ad hoc sign language, that they had come from a distant land far over the ocean. Meanwhile, the boy from the row in front made a kind of clicking noise with his tongue to get Seymour's attention. When he had it, he produced the lizard from his pocket again and put it on the sandy ground. The lizard was a toy. It had a long plastic tube trailing from its tail, and when the boy squeezed a little rubber bulb in his hand, the lizard jumped a few inches into the air.

Seymour signalled that he would like a shot at this, and the boy shook his head and pointed down the hill into the village. He said something a few times, which Seymour reported to his father when he had finished bonding with the local representative of the faith.

*"Tienda?* That means 'shop'. Perhaps there's a shop where you can buy those things."

"Can I have one? Mum - can I have one?"

Seymour's mother was of a softer disposition than his father when it came to buying junk.

"Well, we'll see," she replied.

It was as good as in the bag.

In the creek, the ugly sisters were swimming about slowly. They reminded Seymour of something he'd seen on television. Manatees. He had a good memory for new words. Seymour and his parents ventured down to the water's edge. They were smeared all over with white sun lotion.

"Come on in! It's lovely and warm!" cried a sister. The

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pile of jellyfish had been spirited away. Seymour scanned the perfect clear water for blobs.

“No jellyfish?” called his mother.

“No. The manager says there are never any when the tide is out.”

The three of them waded forward together, Seymour holding on to a parental hand on each side.

“Lift me up if we see one!” he said nervously.

Soon he was waist deep, and his mother and father swung him up and splashed him down into the warm water. He was laughing. It was wonderful. His previous experience of seawater had been that it was like a kind of icy acid that would eat at your toes and force you eventually to run away. This was more like a bath.

Back on the beach, they were drying off, lying on towels in the heat, when the Spanish boy appeared. (Seymour’s father had now explained to Seymour that everyone here was not only foreign, but also Spanish). He sat down at a small distance, and made his lizard jump about. He smiled shyly when he caught Seymour’s eye.

“Mum, can I go to the shop now and buy one of those?”

“Come on then. I don’t suppose we’ll have any peace until you’ve got one.”

His mother put on something like a short dressing gown over her swimming costume.

“What was the word for ‘shop’ again, Peter?”

“*Tienda*”

“Right...”

Holding Seymour’s hand, his mother approached the Spanish boy. She pointed at the lizard.

“¿*Tienda*?” she said.

The boy nodded, understanding straight away. He stood up, said something in Spanish, and gestured for them to follow him.

The shop was only a hundred yards away, at the corner of a little alleyway that snaked up the hill. It was small and dark inside, and had a sweet smell of onions. There were baskets

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of fruit and vegetables and bread everywhere, and shelves with odd collections of things – wooden implements; boxes of pens and pencils; painted models of fishing boats.

The owner, a big round lady who accounted for all the space left available in the shop by the merchandise, gave the little boy a hug and said something approving to him. He pointed out a plastic bucket in a corner, which was home to rubber jumping creatures of all kinds. Seymour, who had intended to go into lizards, found himself side-tracked by a big spider, black with red and yellow spots. He gave it a test on the floor of the shop, and it jumped very satisfactorily. His mother completed the bargain with the shopkeeper, and they left the shop, Seymour very contented with his acquisition.

The holiday progressed. The little whining flies in the night were identified as mosquitoes, and a spray applied to Seymour's skin to keep them at bay, with partial success. The ugly sisters separated out as Doris and Enid and were officially identified by Seymour's father as 'a menace'. Apart from two German couples who vanished daily in a boat filled with scuba gear, they were the only other guests in the hotel. Observing the comings and goings of Seymour and his parents developed into quite a hobby for the sisters, amounting almost to organised surveillance. Seymour and his mother could not set off exploring the rocks at the side of the cove without one of them enquiring "And where are you going?"

The skin on the back of everyone's legs and necks turned lobster pink, and then raw and peeling, in spite of layers of sun cream. A new, larger, beach was discovered half a mile along the shore on a rocky path. This faced the open sea, and so had the additional attraction of waves to jump over. Also there was a beach café, where Seymour discovered a new drink. It was called Coca Cola, and came in a small bottle with a distinctive shape. The waiter would put down in front of Seymour a small round metal tray with a glass on it. In the glass were a lump of ice and a slice of

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lemon. Then the lid of the Coca Cola bottle was prised off, and the black hissing liquid was poured onto the ice and lemon in a single flamboyant sloosh. It always threatened to fizz over the top of the glass but never quite did. A straw was handed over, sleeved in paper. Seymour lingered over unwrapping the straw, dipping it into the drink, and taking the first sip. The anticipation was intense. The Coca Cola was delicious. Seymour discovered that it was also available at the hotel terrace, and developed constant cravings for it. His mother rationed him to three bottles a day.

After the first week had passed, Seymour's father expressed a desire to explore the countryside, and a small car known as a Fiat 500 was rented. In searing heat, the family drove in and out of hamlets of white walled houses, parking in any available shade, and walking to visit whatever was identified in Seymour's father's guide book - a church, a Neolithic pile of stones, a splendid view over a valley. Sometimes they saw no inhabitants at all. Sometimes they were followed, at a distance, by a limping dog, calling forth all Seymour's mother's most tender instincts. Between outings, she bought biscuits at the little shop to feed these mongrel loners.

It turned out that the lady in the shop was the Spanish boy's mother, and his name was Pedro. He was usually hanging around near the beach in the mornings, and he and Seymour had struck up a rudimentary relationship based on jumping rubber creatures. Pedro was given free rein to borrow from the plastic bucket in the shop. Seymour was permitted by his mother to purchase a further lizard and a toad to add to his spider, so on occasions there were as many as eight or nine rubber animals available for play. They devised competitions in which you were allowed ten hops to cover as much distance as possible. The firm surfaces of the wooden jetties were preferable for these competitions to the clogging sand of the beach. Seymour's spider turned out to be a champion, generally beating whatever Pedro could produce to vie with it.

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Seymour taught Pedro to say 'hello', 'goodbye' and 'my name is Pedro'. In return, he was taught '*araña*', which was 'spider', '*lagarto*', which was 'lizard' and '*gracias*' which was either 'thank you' or 'goodbye' as far as he could tell.

In the middle of the second week, Pedro spent a lot of time one morning trying to explain something that Seymour couldn't get the hang of at all. At lunchtime, the hotel manager came over to the family table.

"*¡Hola! ¿Que tal?* Are you enjoying your holiday?"

He had got the measure of Seymour's father's Spanish now, and always used a few words initially before moving into English for the meat of the conversation.

"*¡Gracias!* Yes, it's lovely here."

"Lovely!" echoed Seymour's mother.

"I have a message for Seymour here," the manager went on.

Seymour nearly choked on his Coca Cola.

"It is from the family of Pedro, the boy you are playing with every day," the manager said, fixing Seymour with his liquid brown eyes. "It is from his mother, who work in the shop. She and Pedro, they want to know if you come to eat dinner with them tonight? In their house - it is very near here. I tell them your answer?"

Seymour looked, panic-stricken, at his parents. The hotel manager laughed.

"Is all right. There is no cannibals here. Not since more than ten years ago!"

"I don't want to go!" Seymour hissed at his mother.

"Well, it's very kind of them," his mother said. "They might be offended if you don't go."

Giving offence to others was the cardinal sin of all sins, essential to avoid. Seymour's father identified its murky presence also.

"Yes, we don't want to offend them. It's a charming gesture. You'll get a chance to see how the local people really live."

Seymour had no wish to be given this chance. The local

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people could lead mysterious lives in underground caverns as far as he was concerned, and welcome. But his fate was sealed. Offence could not be given.

“Seymour will be delighted to accept the invitation,” his father said decisively.

The hotel manager smiled.

“I tell them. Pedro will come to get you here at seven o’clock. I tell them you eat early times, you English.”

A shadow hung over the afternoon on the beach, both literally and figuratively. Seymour was oppressed by the thought of the evening’s engagement, while above, the first clouds of the holiday gathered, big towers of white vapour, building slowly and gracefully upwards until a whole city loomed over them, threatening to tumble.

“Looks like rain this evening,” Seymour’s father commented.

By seven o’clock, as Seymour waited on the hotel terrace with his mother, there was a low distant sound, as if dinosaurs were growling at each other in some hidden part of the island.

“Thunder!” his mother said. “I’ll see if we can borrow an umbrella.”

Seymour had insisted that his mother should accompany him to the door of Pedro’s house, and come and collect him an hour later. She was wearing her best print dress for the occasion. She and his father were to have a romantic candlelit dinner in his absence.

The hotel manager could not provide an umbrella, but offered one of the sunshades from the beach, a pile of which was lying furred in a corner of the terrace. These were big, and rather heavy, but just as Seymour’s mother was deliberating, a few heavy drops of rain began to fall.

“Thank you. I will borrow one of these then,” she agreed.

Pedro appeared a few minutes later. The rain was a very foreign sort of rain, consisting of drops which fell only sparsely, but each of which contained about a cupful of

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water. The hotel manager had been charged to explain to Pedro that Seymour's mother was accompanying them to their house, but not expecting to be invited in. Pedro nodded, and then gestured for them to follow him. He looked startled when Seymour's mother put up the sunshade, which was a vivid orange with a pattern of tropical birds.

They followed Pedro along the dusty street at the back of the hotel, and then turned into a little alleyway that ascended steeply between high white walled houses. The sunshade scraped slightly against the sides of the alleyway, and at one point became stuck. Pedro waited patiently while Seymour's mother tried to pull it free. There was a sudden flash of lightning, and a loud clap of thunder right overhead. The rain turned into a furious battering on the sunshade, and the alleyway swiftly became a stream washing around Seymour's open-toed sandals.

Pedro indicated a dark doorway about twenty yards up the alleyway, and ducked in.

"In you go then, Seymour!" said his mother. "Don't wait for me."

"You'll come and get me in an hour, won't you?"

"Of course! Go on!"

Seymour ran up the slope quickly, and glanced back as he entered the doorway. His mother was still struggling with the sunshade, which was wedged securely between the walls of the houses.

Pedro, grinning with pleasure, showed him into a room. It was a small room, with no carpet on the floor. There were two paintings of the Virgin Mary on the walls, recognisable by her halo. A wiry man with a black moustache, wearing a white vest, sat at one end of a table laid with cutlery. He nodded in a friendly way at Seymour and said "*¡Hola!*", then turned his attention back to the small girl in a wooden high chair seated at his side. He was spooning something into her mouth. When she caught sight of Seymour, her eyes widened like saucers and food



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dribbled unheeded down her chin.

Seymour took the seat indicated by Pedro. An uncomfortable wooden seat with metal knobs that pressed into his back. Then Pedro set about helping to carry things in from the kitchen. There was a pair of glass containers in a metal stand, holding yellow and pale red liquids. There was a basket overflowing with chunks of white bread, like rocks. There was a dark bottle with a cork half in and half out of its neck. Then Pedro too sat down.

Pedro's mother entered the room with a broad smile. She was bearing an enormous metal frying pan, which she set down on a wooden mat in the centre of the table. Seymour stared at the pan. As far as he could make out, it contained absolutely nothing edible. It was a yellow steaming pile of rice, bulging with mysterious chunks of meat, and shells, and claws, and tentacles. He stared at it. Tentacles? There was no question of a mistake. There was an octopus in the pan!

Seymour sat rigid with horror. He accepted a chunk of bread. As guest of honour, his portion of food was ladled out first. He watched as spoonful after spoonful of the hideous mixture was ladled out onto his plate. He held up a hand in feeble protest, but this was taken as mere politeness, and the plate that was eventually put in front of him was a veritable mountain of ghastliness. At the summit, like a mountaineer, sat a small octopus in all its glory, its tentacles resting after its climb.

Seymour scraped back his chair. He desperately wanted to run away, back to the hotel. But all he could come up with was a delaying tactic.

"Can I use the toilet please?" he said. There was a moment's incomprehension, then Pedro's mother understood.

"Ah, *sí* - toilet." She pointed out into the little hallway. Seymour made his way along the dimly lit corridor.

There was a door to the kitchen and then two openings without doors, revealing darkened bedrooms, both

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tiny. Then a door at the end, which opened onto a little enclosed courtyard. The rain was still bouncing off the ground out there. Seymour was baffled. Did the family simply use the yard as an outdoor bathroom? But then he caught sight of another door on the other side of the courtyard. He dashed through the rain and pushed at the rough-hewn planks. There was a fearful squeal from uncoiled hinges. In the gloom inside were a toilet and a wash basin. There was a smell unlike anything Seymour had encountered before. He looked in vain for a light switch. He felt faint, but pulled the door closed behind him. He didn't actually want the toilet anyway. He stood for a few moments, enduring the smell, then pulled the frayed rope that dangled from the rusting cistern. A vigorous flush of water cascaded into the empty bowl.

Seymour felt an overwhelming desire to bolt straight along the corridor to the street door and run off. But the imperatives of politeness and a tender concern for the feelings of others had been deeply ingrained in his nature. He couldn't spurn this kindly Spanish family's efforts to be hospitable. If only he were a callous, impolite, badly brought-up child who could do such a thing! With his stomach churning, he re-entered the dining room and sat down.

His hosts had started eating. Seymour stared at his plate. Something had changed. The octopus on top of the pile of rice had grown larger. Its colour had changed from a pale grey to a livid green. As he stared, it twitched slightly, then – Oh, God save him! – it jumped into the air and fell quivering onto his lap!

Seymour screamed as if the house were falling on top of him. He scraped back his chair, careless of what they thought of him. He was going to run back to the hotel and hide there until it was time to leave for home.

But then he saw the trailing plastic tube, which connected the octopus to the hand of Pedro. Pedro grinned and showed all the gaps between his pointed little teeth, and

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squeezed the bulb again to make the rubber octopus jump. Pedro's mother smiled indulgently and lifted the toy from Seymour's lap.

"*Basta, Pedro con estos juegos tontos!*" she said. Seymour understood her to be telling Pedro off, but gently. Pedro's father showed no sign of having noticed anything. He was shovelling rice and whatever else was on his plate into his mouth at a great rate.

Shakily, Seymour pulled his chair back in, and set about eating those parts of his meal that he could identify. A heap of rejected marine life grew at the side of his plate - shells, claws, tentacles. He tried not to look at it. He was offered some red liquid from the dark bottle. *Vino*. Just half a glass, but one sip was enough. Luckily there was water too, and he gulped it down gratefully from a plastic tumbler with snowflakes etched on it.

When he had forced down the minimum quantity of rice that could be considered polite, Seymour said "Thank you, that was delicious!" and put his eating irons down in a way that he hoped made it clear that he would on no account eat more.

Pedro's father surveyed his plate with interest. At a nod from his wife, he swept it away into the air and scraped all the sea life onto his own empty plate with a fork. Then he set to again with gusto, and glanced approvingly a couple of times at Seymour, as if identifying him as the ideal dinner guest for future occasions.

An hour after his arrival, on the dot, Seymour's mother called "Hello?" at the open street door. Seymour and Pedro broke off their game of jumping competitions between the octopus and a couple of lizards.

"How did you enjoy your Spanish meal?" his mother said as she led him by the hand down the dark alleyway. The rain had stopped now, and the moon was piercing the parting clouds with a sword of white light.

"It was fine," Seymour replied.

"What did you eat?"

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Seymour thought for a moment about telling the truth. But he decided a little colour would be impressive.

“Some rice, but mainly claws and an octopus.”