
Opening Extract from...

The Brave

Written by Nicholas Evans

Published by Little, Brown

THE BRAVE

NICHOLAS EVANS

Little, Brown

SEMPER FORTIS

The boy followed the guard along the corridor, watching the sway of his wide backside and the belt with its handcuffs and baton and the big bunch of keys that jangled as he walked. The back of the man's blue shirt was stained with sweat and he kept wiping his neck with the palm of one hand. It was a part of the prison the boy hadn't been allowed into before. The walls were bare and whitewashed and there were no windows, just fluorescent boxes on the ceiling speckled inside with dead bugs. The air was still and hot and smelled of stale cabbage. He could hear distant voices, someone shouting, someone laughing, the clank and echo of metal doors. Somewhere a radio was playing the Beatles' new number one, 'A Hard Day's Night.'

The boy's weekly visits usually took place in the long hall next to the waiting room. He was almost always the only child there and the guards knew him by now and were friendly, chatting with him as they led him to one of the booths. Then he'd have to sit there staring through the glass divider, waiting for them to bring his mother in through the steel door in the back wall. There were always two guards with rifles. He would never forget the shock of that first time they had led her in, the sight of her in her ugly brown prison dress and handcuffs and ankle chains, her hair cut short like a boy's. He'd felt a pain in his chest, as if his heart were being prized open like a mussel shell.

When she came in she always scanned the booths for him and smiled when she saw him and the guard would bring her over and sit her down in front of him and remove the cuffs and she would kiss the palm of her hand and press it to the glass and he would do the same.

But today it was different. They were going to be allowed to meet in a private room, just the two of them, with no divider. They would be able to touch. For the first time in almost a year. And for the last time ever.

Wherever the guard was leading him seemed a long way inside the prison. It was a maze of cement corridors with a dozen or more barred and double-locked doors. But at last they reached one made of solid steel with a little wired-glass window in it. The guard pressed a button on the wall and another guard's face, a woman this time, appeared in the window. The door buzzed and clicked open. The woman had plump cheeks that glistened with sweat. She smiled down at him.

'You must be Tommy.'

He nodded.

'Follow me, Tommy. It's just along here.'

She walked ahead of him.

'Your mom's told us all about you. Boy, is she proud of you. You're just thirteen, right?'

'Yes.'

'A teenager. Wow. I've got a thirteen-year-old too. Boy, is he a handful.'

'Is this death row?'

She smiled.

'No, Tommy.'

'Where is it then?'

'You don't want to be thinking about that.'

There were steel doors all along one side of the corridor with red and green lights above them and the woman stopped

outside the last one. She looked through the little spy hole then unlocked the door and stepped aside for him to go in.

'There you go, Tommy.'

The room had white walls and a metal table with two metal chairs and there was a single barred window through which the sun was shafting down and making a crisscross square on the cement floor. His mother was standing in the middle of it, quite still, shielding her eyes from the sun and smiling at him. Instead of the prison uniform she was wearing a plain white shirt and slacks. No handcuffs or ankle chains. She looked like an angel. As if she were already in heaven.

She opened her arms and held him to her and it was a long time before either of them was able to speak. He'd promised himself he wouldn't cry. At last she held him away from her to inspect him then smiled and ruffled his hair.

'You need a haircut, young man.'

'Everyone has it long now.'

She laughed.

'Come on, sit down. We haven't much time.'

They sat at the table and she asked him all the usual questions: what was going on at school, how had the math test gone the previous week, had the food in the cafeteria gotten any better? He tried to give more than one-word answers, tried to make it sound as if everything was fine. He never told her what it was really like. About the locker room fights, about how the bigger kids taunted him for having a convicted murderer for a mother.

When she ran out of questions she just sat there and stared at him. She reached out and took his hands in hers and stared at them for a long time. He looked around the room. It wasn't as frightening as he'd imagined. He wondered where the gas pipes and valves were.

'Is this it?'

'What, sweetheart?'

'You know, is this the actual chamber?'

She smiled and shook her head.

'No.'

'Where do they do it then?'

'I don't know. Somewhere back there.'

'Oh.'

'Tommy, there's so much I wanted to say . . . I had a whole speech prepared.'

She gave a false little laugh and put her head back and for a while didn't seem able to go on. He didn't know why, but it made him feel angry.

'But . . . I've forgotten it all,' she went on.

She rubbed the tears from her cheeks and sniffed then took hold of his hand again.

'Isn't that funny?'

'You were probably going to tell me how to behave for the rest of my life. To be good, do the right thing, always tell the truth.'

He pulled his hand away.

'Tommy, please—'

'I mean, what would *you* know about that?'

She bit her lip and stared down at her hands.

'You should have told them the truth from the start.'

She nodded, trying to compose herself.

'Maybe.'

'Of course you should!'

'I know. You're right. I'm sorry.'

For a long time neither of them spoke. The shaft of sunlight had angled to the edge of the room. There were golden flecks of dust floating in it.

'You're going to have a fine life.'

He gave a sour laugh.

'You will, Tommy. I know you will. You'll be with people who love you and who'll look after you—'

'Stop it.'

'What?'

'Stop trying to make me feel good!'

'I'm sorry.'

He would always regret that he hadn't been kinder to her that day. He hoped she'd understood. That he wasn't so much angry with her as with himself. Angry at his own powerlessness. Angry that he was going to lose her and couldn't die with her. It wasn't fair.

How long they sat like that he had no idea. Long enough for the sun to move away from the window and for the room to fill with shadow. At last the door opened and the plump-faced guard stood there, with a sad, slightly nervous smile.

His mother pressed the palms of her hands together.

'Well,' she said brightly. 'Time's up.'

They both stood and she hugged him so hard he could hardly breathe. He could feel her body quaking. Then she held his face between her hands and kissed him on the forehead. But he still couldn't look her in the eye. Then she let go of him and he walked away to the door.

'Tommy?'

He turned.

'I love you.'

He nodded and turned and went.

ONE

THEY FOUND the tracks at dawn in the damp sand beside the river about a mile downstream from where the wagons had circled for the night. Flint got off his horse, the odd-looking one that was black at the front and white at the back, as if someone had started spraying him with paint then had second thoughts. Flint knelt down to have a closer look at the tracks. Bill Hawks stayed on his horse watching him and every so often glancing nervously up at the scrubby slope that rose steeply behind them. He clearly thought the Indians who had kidnapped the little girl might be watching. He pulled out his gun, checked it was loaded, then holstered it again.

'What do you reckon?'

Flint didn't answer. To anyone else, including Bill Hawks, the tracks just looked like holes in the mud. But to Flint McCullough they told a whole story.

'Must have ridden downstream in the water so as not to leave tracks around camp,' Bill said. 'You can see this is where they came out.'

Flint still didn't look at him.

'Uh-huh. At least, that's what they want us to think.'

He swung himself back into the saddle and steered his horse into the water.

'What do you mean?'

Again Flint didn't reply. He rode across the shallows to the opposite bank, then followed it downstream another thirty

yards or so, his eyes scanning every rock and clump of grass. Then he found what he was looking for.

'Flint? Mind telling me what's going on?'

'Come see for yourself.'

Bill rode across to join him. Flint had dismounted again and was squatting on the bank, peering at the ground.

'Darn it, Flint, will you tell me what you're up to? What are we waiting for? Let's get after them.'

'See here, among the rocks? More hoof marks. Deeper ones. The tracks on the other side are kinda shallow. No riders. It's an old Shoshone trick. They turn some horses loose then double up to send you off on the wrong trail. This here's the way they went.'

Bill Hawks shook his head, impressed and a little irritated, as people often were, by Flint's brilliance.

'How much of a start have they got on us?'

Flint squinted at the sun.

'Three hours, maybe three and a half.'

'How many of them?'

'Three horses, five or six men. Plus the girl.'

'Let's go.'

Flint mounted up and the two of them rode away along the riverbank.

'Tommy! Bedtime!'

It was his mother, calling from the kitchen. She always got the timing wrong. Tommy pretended he hadn't heard.

'Tommy?'

She appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron.

'Come on, now. It's half past eight. Up you go.'

'Mum, it's *Wagon Train*. It goes on for an hour.'

She looked confused. The familiar evening smell of gin and cigarette smoke had wafted with her into the sitting room. Tommy gave his most angelic smile.

'It's the one I love most. Please.'

'Oh, go on then, you little rascal. I'll bring your milk.'

'Thanks, Mum.'

Flint had found the little white girl a few days earlier, wandering alone in the wilderness. Her dress was torn and stained with blood and her eyes were wide with terror. The major questioned her gently about what had happened but she seemed to have lost her voice. Flint said she must have been with another wagon train that had run into a Shoshone raiding party and that somehow she had managed to escape. Then, last night, the Indians had crept into camp and snatched her from her bed.

But Flint McCullough, who was without any doubt the bravest and cleverest scout in the entire world, would find her, kill the Indians and bring her safely back.

In this evening's episode Flint was wearing his tight-fitting buckskin jacket with the fringed shoulders. Tommy, naturally, was wearing the same. Well, almost. His mother had made his jacket out of some beige fabric left over from her new bedroom curtains but the result was too big and baggy and, to be honest, nylon velour didn't look anything like buckskin. Still, it was better than nothing and he had a hat and a gun belt with a real leather leg-tie on the holster that were both a bit like Flint's. And the black Peacemaker six-shooter with the white handle, the one his sister Diane had given him for his birthday, looked so convincing that Tommy thought he could probably use it to rob a real bank. For this evening's adventure he had loaded it with a new roll of caps, the pale blue ones which came in a white tube and made a much better bang than the cheaper red ones you got at Woolworth's.

It was early September and the evenings were closing in. The air that drifted through the big bay window was cool and smelled of rain-soaked dust and apples rotting on the lawn. A blackbird was singing loudly in the old cherry tree and down across the meadow that stretched away from the foot of the

garden, a cow was calling for its calf. Tommy was sitting at one end of the enormous new sofa. It had red and green flowers all over it that made you dizzy if you stared at them too long. It had come with two matching armchairs and they took up so much space you now had to squeeze sideways to get to the television set, which stood in one corner of the room in its important mahogany-veneered cabinet.

The house had once been a farmworker's cottage on to which his parents had built an ugly extension. Despite a unifying coat of whitewash, the place seemed at odds with itself. It stood in an acre of garden on a gentle, wooded hill from whose crest you could see the steady encroachment of the town as, one by one, farmers sold their fields to developers. Work was already under way on a massive four-lane motorway which would go all the way from Birmingham to Bristol. Tommy's father could often be heard complaining that the area wasn't really countryside any more.

But Tommy loved it. He'd lived here all his life. He didn't care much for the front garden. It was too small and prim and civilized. But if you walked out through the back yard, up the crumbling red brick path, past the old greenhouse and the derelict raspberry cages, you found yourself in a world altogether less tame. And it was here, where the willow herb and nettles and brambles ran rampant and nobody but he ever ventured, that Tommy spent most of his waking hours. It was his own, secret Wild West. Indian country.

He'd made a few friends at the little local school that he'd been going to for the past three years and sometimes went to their houses to play. But his mother rarely allowed him to invite them back. Tommy didn't really mind. He knew the other boys thought he was a little odd and too obsessed with westerns. They often preferred to play soldiers or cops and robbers and even if he could persuade them to play *Wagon Train*, there was always a fight about who got to be Flint McCullough. The

fact was, Tommy preferred to play on his own. Anyway, all the best cowboys were loners.

He had Flint's walk off to perfection. And the way he tilted his chin and lifted an eyebrow when he was thinking or squatting to study some tracks or poke the embers of a fire to see how old it was. In the wild end of the garden, in the little clearing where he'd whacked down the brambles, Tommy even had his own horse, the fallen limb of an old sycamore with branch stumps exactly where the stirrups should be and some brown string tied to another stump for reins. He would swing himself into the saddle just like Flint, easily or in earnest, depending on what the story playing in his head required.

There were deeper things to emulate too, things that were more difficult for an eight-year-old fully to grasp. These were all about what was going on *inside*. Flint could read a man's character as shrewdly as he could read hoofprints in the dust. He kept his thoughts to himself, rarely smiled and only ever spoke when he had something crucial to say. In his solitary adventures, Tommy would assume these manly traits, humming the theme tune or the more dangerous music they played whenever Indians appeared. And when the plot required, he would speak (aloud, but not so loud as to be overheard by anyone walking up the lane beyond the hedge) in Flint's western drawl.

He didn't always play *Wagon Train*. He liked being Red McGraw from *Sliprock* too, the fastest draw of them all. He would stand like Red, looking dangerous, in front of his bedroom mirror, his hand hovering over his gun, and recite the words with which the show always began:

In the town of Sliprock, lawless heart of the Old West, where the many live in fear of the few, one man stands alone against injustice. His name is Red McGraw.

Sometimes, for a change, he'd be Rowdy Yates from *Rawhide* or Cheyenne Bodie or Matt Dillon. Maverick was okay too, except he spent too much time sitting around in saloons

and wore funny town clothes. Tommy preferred those who wore buckskin and rode the range, fought Indians and caught rustlers and outlaws. What he definitely never played, wouldn't be seen dead playing, were any of those silly, cissy cowboys, the ones who carried two shiny silver guns, like Hopalong Cassidy or The Lone Ranger, and had holsters with no leg-ties. How could you be a serious gunfighter without a leg-tie? Worst of all were the ones who *sang*, like Gene Autry and the ridiculous Roy Rogers.

His mother had reappeared now, a glass of milk in one hand, a plate with a slice of apple pie on it in the other, a fresh cigarette jutting from her lips. Without shifting his eyes from the screen, Tommy took the milk and pie.

Flint and Bill Hawks were hiding behind some rocks now, spying on the Indian camp. Night had fallen and the Indians were all asleep around a campfire, except for the one keeping watch over the little girl, and even he looked as if he was nodding off. The girl was tied to a log and looked pretty miserable.

'Be careful now. No spills, please.'

She took a puff of her cigarette, blew the smoke at the ceiling and stood with her arms folded, watching for a while.

'Oh, he's the one I like, isn't he? What's his name?'

'Flint McCullough.'

'No, the actor I mean.'

'Mum, I don't know.'

'Robert something or other. He's so handsome.'

'Mum, *please*!'

Just as Flint and Bill were about to launch their rescue, on came the commercials. Tommy's mother groaned and left the room. To his parents commercials were 'common'. Respectable families only ever watched the BBC which had the good taste not to show any. Tommy couldn't see what the problem was. In fact, the commercials were often better than what went either

side of them. Tommy knew most of them by heart. Like Diane, he'd always been a good mimic and sometimes when his parents had visitors, his mother would ask him to do the Strand cigarette man. Under protest, pretending to be more reluctant than he really was, Tommy would leave the room and a few minutes later slouch in again wearing his father's old trilby and raincoat with the collar turned up, puffing moodily at an unlit cigarette he'd taken from the silver box on the lounge coffee table, and say: *You're never alone with a Strand*. It always got a big laugh and sometimes people even clapped. For an encore, while he still had on the outfit, his mother would ask him to do Sergeant Joe Friday from *Dragnet*.

Oh, Mum, he would groan with fake embarrassment, which would naturally prompt a pleading chorus of *Oh, go on, Tommy, please!* So he would duly adjust his face to its most serious, manly expression and, in Sergeant Friday's deadpan delivery, announce that the story they were about to see was true and that only the names had been changed to protect the innocent. *The facts, ma'am, just the facts.*

By the time he'd finished his apple pie, Flint and Bill had everything pretty well sorted out. The Indians all got shot or ran away, the little girl was rescued and when they got back to the wagons, her daddy had turned up. He had a bandage around his head but was otherwise okay. They gave each other a tearful hug then sat down with everybody else around the fire for supper. It was bacon and beans, which was the only thing Charlie the cook seemed to know how to make.

Just as Flint had so cleverly guessed, it turned out that the other wagon train had been attacked by a Shoshone war party who apparently wanted the little girl to be somebody's squaw, though Tommy wasn't quite clear what that might involve. Anyway, she got her voice back and it all ended more or less happily, as it nearly always did.

Tommy took off his cowboy hat and sat fiddling with the brim, eyes glued to the screen until the theme tune and the credits had finished.

'Come on, Tommy,' his mother called from the kitchen. 'Up you go. Your father will be home any minute.'

'Coming.'

He carried his empty glass and plate through to the kitchen, which had recently been *modernized*. Everything was now covered with pale blue Formica. His mother was standing by the stove, stirring a pan and looking bored. On the radio, the BBC newsreader was saying that the Russians were planning to send an unmanned rocket to the moon.

His mother's real name was Daphne, but she hated it, so everyone always called her Joan. She was a short, rounded woman with plump arms and fair skin that flared red whenever she got cross, which happened quite often. In fact, her reddish brown hair always looked cross, especially on Fridays when she had it re-dyed and set into a helmet of tight, wiry curls.

Tommy washed his glass and plate in the sink and left them on the draining board where his mother's cigarette lay propped in an ashtray, oozing smoke. Beside it stood a cut-glass tumbler of gin and tonic. She always poured her first the moment Big Ben struck six o'clock on the radio. This was probably her third.

'What time will Diane be home?'

'Late. She's getting the last train.'

'Can I stay up?'

'No, you cannot! You'll see her in the morning. Go on now, up you go.'

Diane was twenty-four and lived in London, near Paddington Station, where she shared the top floor of a big old house with three other girls. Tommy had been there only once when his mother took him to London to see a doctor in Harley Street. Diane came home almost every weekend and the moment she

arrived the house was at once filled with light and laughter. She always brought him a gift of some sort, something funny or unusual and often, in his mother's opinion anyway, entirely unsuitable for a boy his age. She would bring the latest records that everyone in London was dancing to or the soundtrack of some new musical she had been to see. On her last visit she'd brought *West Side Story* and they played it again and again on the gramophone, singing along with it until they knew every number by heart. Tommy had been singing *I like to be in America* ever since.

Diane was more fun than anyone else in the whole world. She was always playing tricks on people, even total strangers. She would phone up, pretending to be someone else and do naughty things that grown-ups weren't supposed to do, like swapping the salt and the sugar or propping a mug of water on the top of the bathroom door so that whoever walked in got soaked. Their mother would erupt (which was precisely what Diane wanted), while their father would put down his newspaper and sigh and say, *Diane, please. What sort of example is that for the boy? Could we perhaps try to be a little more responsible?* And Diane would say, *Yes, Father, sorry, Father*, then behind his back, pull a face, imitating him, or put her thumbs in her ears and stick her tongue out and go cross-eyed and Tommy would try not to laugh and usually fail.

Diane was an actress. She wasn't really famous yet but everybody agreed she soon would be. There was already another, older actress called Diana Bedford, so she used their mother's maiden name and acted under the name Diane Reed. Tommy was enormously proud of her. He had photographs of her and newspaper articles and large posters of the plays she had been in pinned to his bedroom wall, alongside all his western posters and pictures.

The photo he liked best was the one from a glossy magazine in which she was wearing a black satin evening gown and big

sparkly earrings and a white fur stole draped around her shoulders. She was outside the Café Royal, a famous London restaurant where all the stars went, and it was night-time and she had her head tilted back and was laughing as if someone had just cracked a great joke. Tommy had never seen anyone more beautiful. The headline said *CATCH A RISING STAR* and underneath it said: *Diane Reed – Face of the Sixties*. His mother, who managed to pour cold water over almost everything, had observed that since it was still only 1959, perhaps this was jumping the gun a bit.

As he lay in the bath tub, Tommy was aware again of the feeling at the top of his stomach. It was a ball of dread that was getting steadily bigger, like the stacks of strange new clothes on the spare-room bed. Two pairs of grey flannel shorts, two grey sweaters, four grey shirts, six pairs of grey knee-length socks, four pairs of underpants and vests, sports shorts and shirts (one white, one green), a dozen white cotton handkerchiefs, a green-and-yellow-striped tie, and finally, the dark green blazer and cap, each emblazoned with a yellow badge of two crossed swords and a shield with the school motto, *Semper Fortis*, written on it. Tommy's father said this meant you always had to be brave, in a language called Latin, which Tommy would soon be learning even though it was 'dead' and nobody ever spoke it.

On to every item of clothing his mother had stitched a small tape that said *BEDFORD. T.* Tommy had never seen his name written like that. It was painted the same way on the big black trunk and the wooden 'tuck box' that both stood, gradually being filled, on the floor beside the bed. It seemed strange to be going to live in a place where nobody cared what your first name was. But in just two days' time that was where he would be.

Exactly why his parents were sending him away to boarding school, he still couldn't understand. When they'd broken the news, he thought he must have done something wrong and

they didn't want him around any longer. He knew Diane was against the idea. He'd heard her arguing with them about it downstairs one night last winter after he'd gone to bed. She'd been sent away herself when she was eleven to a grim place called Elmshurst in the Malvern Hills and hated it so much she ran away three times. The last time, about a year before Tommy was born, she'd apparently been delivered home in a police car. So, knowing how awful it was, why would his parents want to do the same to him?

Diane never held back when it came to family arguments and it generally wasn't long before she would start shouting. At which point his mother would storm out of the room, usually slamming the door, while his father would stick his pipe in his mouth, hoist his newspaper and pretend he wasn't listening, which was a sure way to make Diane even angrier. Among his mumbled replies to her attack that particular night about boarding school, all Tommy could make out were phrases like *do the boy good, toughen him up a bit, make a man of him*. Tommy had always been in a hurry to grow up, but even so, eight did seem a little early for manhood.

He'd never dared ask his father to explain what precisely the process might involve but his mother assured him that going off to boarding school was simply what all boys from respectable families did. Anyway, she said, he should count himself lucky because some children were sent away when they were only six. What was more, as Tommy had heard her telling Auntie Vera (and anyone else who'd listen), Ashlawn Preparatory School for Boys was considered to be one of the best in Worcestershire. Its list of famous *old boys* included a man who had once played rugby for England, another who'd helped design the Mini and an army major who had won the Victoria Cross fighting the Japanese.

'What did he do?'

'I've forgotten, but I know he was very brave.'

'Braver than Dad?'

'Of course. All he ever did in the war was get shot.'

His father had fought against the Germans and been shot in the leg which was why he still limped a little. He'd even been a prisoner of war for a while though, rather disappointingly, he hadn't escaped, as they always did in films. Tommy was as keen on bravery as he was on manhood. The two things went together. All those hours watching westerns hadn't been for nothing. He'd wondered lately how Flint McCullough would react to being sent off to boarding school. No tears, for sure. A tilt of the chin, perhaps. A manly nod. Tommy tried but the ball of dread in his stomach didn't seem to want to shift.

At its core was the problem everyone – well, his parents and a long line of doctors – had been trying to solve for as long as he could remember. It was the great shame that blighted their lives and was probably the reason they didn't want him to live with them at home any more.

It didn't happen every night. He could go two or sometimes even three nights in a row and then his mother would get all excited.

'Well done, Tommy, that's it! You've cracked it! Good boy!'

Then, the next night, as if some spiteful goblin inside him were playing tricks with them all, it would happen again: he would wake in the early hours to the silence of the house and that familiar warm wetness between his thighs. And he would lie there, cursing and hating himself and silently sobbing with rage and self-pity.

Nobody seemed to be sure why he wet the bed. His mother claimed it was the result of a bad attack of mumps at the age of three. This, she maintained, had weakened his *waterworks*. One doctor, the one Diane called The Trick Cyclist, said that Tommy was doing it on purpose, just to get attention. He prescribed a routine of reward and punishment. And for about a month, they had put it to the test. A dry night and Tommy was allowed

to stay up for an extra half hour. A wet one and he wasn't allowed to watch television or have any ice cream or chocolates. It was soon clear that the only effect of this routine was to make everybody miserable and bad tempered and, like all the previous remedies, it was eventually dumped and off they trooped to see another doctor, then another.

The one they went to see in Harley Street provided them with a special new kind of rubber undersheet. It had already proved, he told them, a great success in America and was fitted with electric sensors and a length of black rubber cable that you had to plug in to the wall. At the first hint of wetness, even the slightest trickle, it would administer an electric shock – nothing too severe, the doctor assured Tommy's mother, *just enough to rouse the boy* – and set off an alarm bell. Tommy didn't know how much it cost, but judging by his mother's expression when she saw the invoice, it was obviously a lot.

In the early hours of the first night they tried it, there was a blue flash and a loud bang and Tommy was launched out of bed like a space rocket. He landed on the floor with a burn on his bottom that took two weeks to heal.

These last few months, with the date of his departure to the brave and manly world of Ashlawn Preparatory creeping ever closer, the hunt for a cure had escalated to a kind of frenzy. And the more they all talked about it, the less control he seemed to have over his bladder.

All summer long he had been taking some little yellow pills, which were supposed to make him sleep so lightly that he would wake when he had to pee. They didn't succeed in waking him but all day long he felt like a different person, like some crazed character from a cartoon. He'd never had more energy in his life, was unable to sit still, not even for a minute, and was so noisy and frantic that a few days ago his mother couldn't bear it any longer and flushed the remaining pills down the toilet.

The latest – and what would probably be the last – attempt

to stop his bed-wetting was to prop the foot of his bed up on two stout logs. His mother had read about it in a magazine. The idea, she explained, was to relieve the pressure on his bladder by *harnessing the force of gravity.* This meant that Tommy had to sleep with his feet at an angle of about thirty degrees to the floor. So far he had wet the bed every night and woken each morning crumpled against the wall with a stiff neck.

By the time his father arrived home, Tommy was in bed, trying to banish thoughts of boarding school by reading one of his collection of Illustrated Classics, *Custer's Last Stand*. General Custer was one of Tommy's real-life heroes. There was a full-page picture of him, in his buckskin suit, completely surrounded by bloodthirsty savages, a smoking gun in each hand, his long yellow hair flying in the wind.

Arthur Bedford was an accountant and worked for a company that made parts for motor cars in Birmingham. Tommy didn't really have a clear idea about what this involved except that it meant looking after money and being very good at arithmetic, which was, by a long way, the most horrible subject in the world. The mere word *division* made him shiver. So it seemed only natural that his father came home looking weary and miserable. Though, come to think of it, he nearly always looked that way. This probably had something to do with the fact that he was always being criticized or nagged by Tommy's mother. Whatever the poor man did or failed to do seemed to irritate or annoy her.

The only occasions his father looked happy were when he was in the greenhouse, tending his tomatoes, or in his little workshop at the back of the garage, where he would sit for hours on end with a magnifying glass and a little lamp strapped to his forehead, carefully piecing together broken bits of porcelain. People would send him their smashed vases and plates and cups and saucers to mend. He was very good at it. When he'd

mended something you wouldn't guess it had ever been broken.

The most exciting, if slightly puzzling, thing about him was that he belonged to a club so incredibly secret that you weren't allowed to ask him anything about it, nor even mention that you knew about it. They called themselves The Freemasons and held secret meetings once a month on a Thursday evening at a place called The Lodge. They had a special secret handshake so that they would know immediately if you were a real member or a spy trying to infiltrate them. Tommy's father kept all his secret Masonic equipment in a slim brown leather suitcase which he hid on top of the wardrobe in his bedroom. Tommy had once sneaked a look inside it, expecting to find some sort of deadly weapon, like a ray gun or something, but all he found was a little blue-and-white satin apron, some strange-looking medals and badges and a magazine called *Health & Efficiency* which had pictures of naked women in it. He didn't tell anyone, not even Diane. She didn't seem to know any more about The Freemasons than he did, except that at their meetings at The Lodge everybody had to roll up their trouser legs and put hangman's nooses around their necks. She said it probably had something to do with golf because a lot of the men at his father's golf club were Freemasons too.

Tommy heard his father's car now, crunching across the driveway and into the garage. It was a new Rover 105S in two-tone green with beige leather seats and a walnut dashboard and his father treated it as if it had been made personally for him by God. The car door clunked shut and Tommy pictured his father walking slowly around, inspecting the paintwork for any tiny chips. He did this after every trip, however short, then, with a soft cloth and a bottle of methylated spirit, he would clean the squashed insects from the headlamps and the grille.

Arthur Bedford's reaction to his son's bed-wetting was much the same as it was to most things Tommy did. He remained

wearily aloof. Cleaning up, changing the sheets and doing the laundry, along with almost everything to do with the children, was women's work. Tommy knew perfectly well however, from the sighs and the occasional overheard remark, that his father saw the problem as part of a general pattern of feminine weakness.

It had only recently begun to dawn on Tommy that his parents were a lot older than those of other children his age. His mother was nearly fifty and his father nearly sixty. People often thought they were his grandparents. His mother had once explained that they had *tried* for many years for a little brother or sister for Diane but that God hadn't wanted it to happen. Then, at last, along came Tommy. He was a *blessing*, she said. What had changed God's mind Tommy didn't know. And he wasn't quite sure about the *blessing* bit either, because he'd once overheard Auntie Vera describe him as an *accident*. Perhaps it was possible to be both.

'Good heavens. Still awake, are we?'

His father was peering in from the landing outside Tommy's bedroom, his unlit pipe sticking like Popeye's from the corner of his mouth. This meant he had to talk with his teeth clenched, which made him sound like a ventriloquist's dummy. The opposite of Tommy's mother in almost every respect, his father was tall and thin, with lots of bony angles to him. His clothes always seemed to have enough room for two of him. His hair was thick and floppy and silvery white except at the front where it was stained yellow by smoke from his pipe.

'*Wagon Train*,' Tommy explained.

'Ah.'

He stood, swaying a little, outside the bedroom door as if he couldn't decide whether to come in or say goodnight from where he was. He made a little jutting movement with his chin.

'That old fellow's going to miss you.'

Tommy didn't know what this meant. He put *Custer's Last*

Stand down and watched his father step carefully among all the toy cowboys and Indians who waged constant war across the carpet. He looked as if he wanted to sit down on the bed but then noticed its strange angle and the logs propping it up and decided it was safer to stand. The bedside lamp made his baggy cavalry twill trousers glow while his top half remained in shadow. He plucked the teddy bear from the pillow and Tommy realized that this was the 'old fellow' he'd been talking about.

'Hmm. Poor old chap's looking a bit worse for wear.'

It was true. Old Ted had bald patches and bore the scars of many repairs. He'd once belonged to Diane and had been the victim of countless fantastic misfortunes. He'd been tortured and hanged, burnt at the stake, tossed from windows and subjected to hugely invasive surgery.

'Can't I take him with me?'

His father laughed.

'Teddy bears at prep school? Good heavens, no! What would they think?'

'What would who think?'

'Staff, other boys, everyone.'

'Doesn't everyone have a teddy bear?'

'Only when they're little.'

He ruffled Tommy's hair.

'Don't worry, we'll look after him.'

He tucked the bear back into bed.

'Well, better see what the old girl's done to my supper. Lights out now.'

He bent down and for a moment Tommy thought he was going to kiss him, which he hadn't done for years. But he was just looking for the lamp switch. His tweed jacket smelled of smoke and the whisky he'd been drinking at the golf club.

'Emptied the bilges, have we?'

'Yes.'

'Let's see if we can have a dry night then, hmm?'

'I'll try.'

'That's the spirit. Night-night, old chap.'

'Night.'

Tommy lay on his back, staring at the slice of yellow light that angled across the ceiling from the landing while he performed his nightly ritual, reciting in a whisper one hundred times, *I will not wet the bed, I will not wet the bed, I will not wet the bed . . .*

His parents were watching the TV news in the sitting room. A man was talking about President Eisenhower coming back to London from Scotland where he'd been to visit the queen. His first name was Dwight but everyone called him Ike. He seemed like a nice old man. Tommy had a photo of him shaking hands with John Wayne.

His thoughts drifted back to Flint and how clever he was to have found those hoofprints by the river. He wondered what would have happened to the little girl if she hadn't been rescued from the Indians. Worse than boarding school, for sure. Just two days more at home and that was where he would be. The place had looked pleasant enough in the spring when his mother and father had taken him to see it. Vast rolling lawns and lots of trees. Football pitches. A gym with ropes you could climb. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad after all.

Somewhere in the float of these thoughts, Tommy must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew was that the house was all quiet and the landing light had been switched off. Someone was stroking his forehead.

'Diane?'

'Hello, my darling,' she whispered.

She was kneeling beside his bed and he had the impression that she'd been there for some time. She leaned closer and kissed his cheek. She was still wearing her raincoat. Her hair smelled of flowers.

'Have you just got here?'

'Yes.'

She kept stroking his forehead. Her hand felt soft and cool. In the dark he couldn't see her face clearly but her smile was sad and somehow he knew she'd been crying.

'What's the matter?'

She put her finger to her lips.

'Sshh. You'll wake them. Nothing's the matter. Just happy to see you, that's all.'

Now it was his eyes that welled with tears.

'Diane?'

'What, darling? What is it?'

'I don't want to go to boarding school.'

He started to cry and that started her off again. She gathered him up in her arms and he buried his face in the warm scented softness of her neck. And they clung to each other and wept.