‘Vic’s got this theory. Parents owe their children everything, but children don’t owe their parents anything. Why should they? They didn’t ask to be born. People tell their kids, “You treat this place like a hotel.” My father used to tell me that! It’s funny, because family homes are exactly like hotels – where you’ve been brought. No kid ever checked in of his own free will, did he? And Vic says if the parents keep their part of the bargain – I mean, discharge their responsibility and do everything they can for their kids – they’ll never have a problem. Hey, it’s amazing how irresponsible most parents are. Some of these embassy people you just would not believe –’

Marietta Scaduto’s voice was dropping to a whisper: Vic was on his way back to the room with his children and some other people’s children. They were all boys – even Vic, come to think of it.

‘I don’t know why I’m bothering to tell you this – you don’t have any kids,’ Marietta said.

‘Or parents either,’ I said. ‘Does Vic have a theory about orphans? I only ask because I lost my parents in an air crash when I was five. But you do get over these things, you know. I had a happy childhood; I suppose it’s a bit like being blind from an early age. I adapted. The kind of orphan I was – bright, solitary, with my trust fund from the insurance money – it was like being privileged, inheriting a title early. And I seem to have managed. I’m not looking for a mother figure. Maybe that explains why I’m not married.’

I had said too much. It was then that she gave me a look of pure murder.

This conversation came later, over coffee, after she had told me about her poems and said she was unhappy and – rolling her lower lip down sourly – ‘I know your type.’

But Vic had a theory! She made him sound serious. The man’s wife – when she’s angry or incautious – can reveal such surprising secrets. And so can the man expose the wife. And the children most of all. But who would have thought that man sat around theorizing?

Vic Scaduto – ‘Skiddoo’ to the office – all gestures, all heel clicks on the corridor tiles, shooting his pink cuffs, tugging at his earlobe, pinching his face at his reflection in the elevator mirror, tap-dancing as he talked and as his bubblegum snapped, saying, ‘The royal facility in Kensington has a really spacious function room,’ then interrupting

himself with ‘I’ve got a stack of cables waiting’ and ‘I’m one of those rare people who has a nose for detail,’ neighing his hideous laugh – ‘It’s my Italian blood,’ he explained – and he was never breathless. He had teeth like piano keys, and spit flew out of his mouth when he talked.

More than anything he wanted a good post in Italy – running a binational center in Florence or Palermo, or being public affairs officer in Rome. Some of his relatives still lived in Sicily, farming an acre of thorns and procrastinating about selling the pig, so he said.

‘It’s not that I’m bucking for a promotion; it’s just that with my cultural background I think I deserve Italy.’ It was a sure sign of his Italian-ness that he mispronounced it, giving it two syllables and making it sound even more like an adverb: ‘It-lee.’

He had been interviewed for the transfer, he had taken the language proficiency exam, he was waiting for his report.

‘I think they were impressed.’ He meant the pair of assessment officers from Washington. Scaduto had invited them to his house. ‘I didn’t just invite them – I threw the place open to them.’

He had arranged it so that the assessment officers could spend a whole day with his family – Marietta and the three boys.

‘I wanted to show them what cultural enrichment really means.’

I said, ‘Is that Italian job so important?’

‘Not to me, but to my parents. If you’ve got immigrant parents you’ll understand. They left Italy’ – It-lee – ‘with nothing and came to America. They spent Christmas on Ellis Island in nineteen twenty-two.’

‘They must be proud of your success,’ I said.

‘That’s just it – my success is the only thing that matters to them. They left home, left their house, gave up their country, and abandoned their own parents for their children, my sister and me. They ran off and got married. My parents were bad children! They put me through college, they lived poor, they’re still poor. No one thinks about that, but it’s funny – some people who used to be poor are still poor, living where they always lived and dying in the same place. My folks live in an old row house in Queens, with planes going overhead all day – some people in the neighborhood are on disability, the noise is so bad. My father is over seventy. He hasn’t retired! He cuts fish. You should see his hands. His father probably had hands like that, in Caccamo. Then I get this London job. It’s a terrific job. I offer to pay his

fare over here so he can have a vacation, and what happens? Does he come to visit? No. “Why don’t they give you Italy? Ain’t you good enough?” He gives me braciol’ until my head hurts. My mother’s worse. She drives me nuts with her phone calls. I mean, both of them sit on Long Island waiting for me to take them back to Italy. Proud of me? Not on your life! I’m disloyal – this isn’t the way children are supposed to treat their parents. Hey, children have obligations, don’t you know that? But I’ll get Italy.’

It-lee: waiting for him to say the word made me inattentive.

‘They’ve got this image in their minds,’ he was saying. ‘They’re on a plane. Jumbo jet, transatlantic flight. Someone in the next seat asks them where they’re going. They say, “We’re visiting our son. He’s got this big job at the American Embassy in Roma. Hey, he’s doing all right. Me, I put him through school – working nights, working weekends. My wife and I, hey, we’re going home. We’re from Italy –”’

It-lee again; but Scaduto had started to object.

‘It’s a fantasy! Listen, old people are really stubborn about their fantasies. You got no idea! Ask Marietta.’

Scaduto had not said anything about his parents to the assessment officers, and yet he had done all he could to emphasize that he was overdue for a post in Italy. Such officials often visited Foreign Service personnel at home – the crowded party, the powerful drinks, the bonhomie and ‘My family’s flexible’ – but it was rare for them to spend an entire day at the house. Scaduto wanted to impress them with his complete honesty, his willingness to admit strangers to the privacy of his home. It was a considerable risk, but Scaduto said he was sure it would pay off. Anyway, he said, he liked having visitors – so did Marietta and the boys. Hey, wasn’t that the point about being in the Foreign Service? Hey, if you didn’t like people you were in the wrong job! So he said.

I was interested when he made the same offer to me, of spending the whole day with him, from just after breakfast until just after midnight. He lived far enough from the center of London for such a long visit not to seem absurd. His house was in Putney, but the western part, near Roehampton Vale and Richmond Park. It took him over an hour to get to work in the morning by car.

American couples, I discovered, lived in Notting Hill and Islington and Chelsea, and they especially favored Hampstead. But when they wanted to breed, and exchange their two-bedroom apartment for a four-bedroom house, they crossed the river. The larger the family, the farther they penetrated into the suburbs – and all the real suburbs were in the south and west. North was distant and dull – ‘the country’; but all the south was London. Vic and Marietta Scaduto and their three boys lived on a leafy street off the Upper Richmond Road, on the 37 bus route.

The house was large – probably six bedrooms, something like a turret on the left, and (the rarest of features in London) a driveway. The wistaria at the front had a stem the thickness of a human leg and (it was now May) was in hanging bloom. The rooms were furnished with treasures Vic had picked up in his previous posts. You could tell where an officer had been by looking at his living room or his bookshelf. Vic had brassware and carpets from Turkey, tables with ivory inlay from Pakistan, Kamba carvings and Kikuyu shields from Kenya. He was not a specialist in anything: he went where he was sent. (So many of us can be described, accurately, as traveling salesmen!)

In a poor country, objects – such as the ones Scaduto had in his living room – often look like treasures. But the farther they get from home, the less marvelous and exotic they seem. In a middle-class London house, these looked cheap and vulgar and badly made. Bazaar merchandise does not travel well, and most of it is so hard to dust it grows fur.

There was a smell – dusty, pollenous, knife wounds on wood, hair, and feathers: curio stink – in the room where we were all now seated. I had just arrived – by bus, quite a novelty, and certainly a conversation piece, but I was a student of London's bus routes and told them how I had transferred at Clapham Junction from the 19, which ran near Overstrand Mansions, to the 37. Vic said I was in time for coffee, and Marietta showed me into the conservatory – it was her word for the glassed-in patio area. Vic made a show of arranging chairs around a small table, and then grinding the coffee noisily – the sound made my head spin – and then explaining how he made coffee the real Italian way, before bringing it in on a little rattling table on wheels, which Marietta was quick to call a trolley.

'The boys are very anxious to meet you,' Vic said. 'The older two have been studying about the Dyaks. I told them you were in Malaysia. They'll be full of questions.'

'Most Dyaks are in Sarawak, Vic,' I said. 'I never went there.'

'You were near enough,' he said. 'God, the things they learn in geography class. A far cry from my junior high. "Coffee production in Brazil," "Lumbering in Murmansk," "Eskimos on the McClintock Channel." They're not called igloos, by the way. They're igluviga. They wear mukluks. They light their igluviga with oil lamps called koodlies. Are these kids getting an education or what? English schools are awesome. Latin, French, science, Scripture. No fingerpainting, no bull sessions, no Little League. Hey, they learn the basics!'

Scaduto was not merely proud of his children – he was respectful in a way that suggested that these children had taught him new things about the world and given him fresh ideas and surprised him with his own ignorance.

‘So they don’t go to the American school,’ I said.

‘Or to the state school either,’ he said. ‘No, all three of them are at PL.’

I smiled inquiringly at Marietta Scaduto. My smile was a request for information – and she understood.

‘Prince’s Lodge,’ she said.

‘It’s a prep school,’ Vic said. ‘A really fine one. Where are the kids, honey?’

‘Upstairs.’

Vic said to me, ‘They’ve got some school friends over.’ He winked – it was a gesture of helpless admiration for his children: Scaduto had the Italian gift of being able to wink meaningfully, and he had as many winks as other people had smiles. ‘I’ll get them,’ he went on. ‘They’re amazing. You won’t understand a word they say. I mean, they’re incredibly bright.’

He was infatuated. That was touching, but I saw no reason why in order to praise his children’s intelligence he had to belittle mine.

He said, ‘You can ask them anything!’

I said, ‘Can I tell them anything?’

He frowned, and I wished I had kept my mouth shut.

While Vic was out of the room, Marietta said, ‘I wrote a poem.’

I did not know what to say. I had just spoken a bit unwisely to Vic. So I hesitated, and that was my mistake. It made her defiant.

She said, ‘You think it’s a waste of time.’

She had black hair that hung in long lank strands, and large dark eyes. Her eyebrows were bushy, her face and arms thin, covered with hair that made her skin appear almost gray. Vic was too fat and too bald and too silly for his age, which was about forty-four; she was very thin – spiderlike and brittle. She held herself straight in the chair and, instead of moving her eyes, turned her whole head stiffly at me.

‘No, that’s marvelous,’ I said. ‘Do you write many poems, or was that the first one?’

She said nothing. Had she heard?

‘I’ve always loved poetry,’ I said, and felt ridiculous. But she had thrown me. Marietta Scaduto was one of those people who can say, ‘I just wrote a poem,’ and make it sound like ‘I just flushed the canary down the toilet’ – like the maddest, most irrational act on earth.

Her eyes did not register my stupid remark (‘I’ve always loved poetry’) or even that I had spoken. She was staring, entranced, at my forehead, as if trying to guess my age.

She said, ‘I got the idea at Kennedy Airport. You know those signs above the escalator telling you about the rest rooms and the gates and the baggage and all that? “Men, Women, Telephones”? That’s what gave me the idea. That’s what it’s called.’

“‘Men, Women, Telephones,’” I said. ‘It’s nice – it’s got drama!’

I wished then that I had stayed home. Today, this Saturday at the Scadutos’, was my fortieth birthday. I had always resisted birthday celebrations – cakes, candles, presents. It is all forced and false and embarrassing, and the song ‘Happy Birthday to You’ – monotonous and excruciating – has driven me out of restaurants. I had not wanted anyone to know that this was my birthday; I hadn’t wanted a party. This day with Vic and Marietta was the best possible alternative, I had thought. I could leave the birthday at home, be anonymous here, and, somehow, wake up forty tomorrow morning. I had considered it an event of no importance, but now I regretted that I wasn’t at Rule’s or Leith’s or the Connaught with a woman and getting a little drunk and telling her, ‘It’s my birthday.’ I thought that, because I had just realized that I could never mention my age or anyone’s age to Marietta Scaduto.

She was still staring at me.

She said, ‘You won’t like this poem. It’s a woman’s poem. It’s about women’s problems.’

I tried to protest. She didn’t hear.

‘You could write a whole book about those signs,’ she said. “‘Customs,” “Refreshments,” “Food,” “Handicapped Exit,” “Ramp,” “Concourse to Ground Transportation,” “Way Out.” Signs can be poetry. Listen, this is nineteen eighty-one! I could write a book. Men write books. Why shouldn’t women?’

I said, ‘But women do write books, Marietta, and some of them are awfully good.’ Why was I saying these idiotic things? I suppose I was afraid of the childish resentment in her eyes. ‘Why, look at George Eliot and Emily Dickinson and Edna Millay –’

‘They’re always putting us down,’ she said.

‘Who do you mean?’

‘Vic,’ she said.

‘Vic puts you down?’

‘Constantly.’

‘But isn’t that different from people like Edna –’

‘That’s why I wrote my poem,’ she said.

“‘Men, Women, Telephones”? That one?’

‘And “Rest Rooms – Women and Handicapped,”’ she said. ‘And “Customs.” And “Children.” I think that’s one of my best, “Children,” based on the sign. I mean, there’s more honest pain in it – I hope you don’t think I’m being pretentious or that I talk about my poems all day, because I don’t. In some states, the sign “Children” is a boy. You’ve seen it a million times – everyone has. It’s like a stencil. It’s from about nineteen twenty-two. He’s running – his legs are all over the place, and he’s smiling. He’s wearing these old-fashioned knickers. “Children.”’

‘It sounds –’ I couldn’t finish. I didn’t know how.

‘You’re smiling.’

‘No!’ But, protesting, I began to smile.

‘You’re just like Vic.’

They called him ‘Skiddoo’; he tap-danced; he wanted a post in Italy; he complained about his parents; he boasted about his children; he bitched about this sad crazy woman he was married to.

I said – and didn’t know why I was being so polite – ‘You hardly know me.’

‘I know your type,’ she said.

Why hadn’t I stayed home? This was my birthday!

‘Judgmental. You think I’m wasting my time. You’re completely absorbed by your job and do nothing but talk about the Embassy, as if the Embassy’s so goddamned important and there’s going to be World War Three if you’re late for work or you miss

a party. You're probably worse than Vic, you're probably like my father – he used to say that education was wasted on a girl –'

Being with her was like reading a letter to a stranger, chosen at random from the dead letter office. It was, at once, both meaningless and embarrassing – you were embarrassed to be holding these sentiments in your hand. Who was she talking to? I did not know her. I was not even moved, and I should at least have pitied her.

It was perhaps more like a glimpse of poor bare flesh – not the beauty of nudity but the wobble of nakedness.

She was still talking – was her father the link? – and then, 'Vic's got this theory –'

Parents owed their children everything, but children did not owe their parents anything; and then that business about how irresponsible most parents were.

Then I told her I was an orphan, and Vic entered with the six boys and said, 'I'm glad to see you two are hitting it off.'

We managed to get through lunch. Marietta did not mention her poems again, or the signs, or her father. Like Vic, she was devoted to her children and she tolerated their friends. In the role of hostess, serving lunch, she was mute and efficient and wholly unlike the mad poetess I had seen over coffee. The boys did not eat with us.

But I still wanted to leave – not stay for dinner, not have to face whatever plans Scaduto had made for the afternoon. I wanted to go back to Overstrand Mansions and turn forty alone.

The married couple believe – unreasonably – that when the single person is on his own he is lonely. I am usually happier alone than in company, and I felt trapped at this house. I can be contented in the narrowest space – but there is a kind of social claustrophobia that afflicts me, the persistence of uncongenial people, who crowd a room and make it airless and give me actual physical discomfort: I wanted to go.

But because I had no excuse for going, I gave myself a reason for staying. Scaduto had mentioned his parents, how they had married young and left their parents in Italy – 'My parents were bad children!' His grandparents had stayed in Sicily. He had told me something of himself, and Marietta had told me his theory – and she had griped about her father. Vic had then promised that I would be impressed with his boys. I forced myself to be interested in these generations of children. At last, after lunch, Vic brought the boys out to meet me properly. I was fascinated and horrified and instructed, and I would not have left that house for anything.

He had suggested a walk in Richmond Park – spending the afternoon there – and then

back to the house for dinner. Each of his three boys had a friend. We set off for the park, the eight of us, like the Beaver Patrol – boys ahead, scoutmasters behind. After about half a mile, the Upper Richmond Road entered East Sheen, and we turned into the genteel streets that fringed the park, passing brick and mock-Tudor villas and the trim rose gardens and the well-washed milk bottles that are the very emblem of the Tory suburbs.

Scaduto said, 'Their school is on the next street. It's one of these completely anachronistic schools. They sing hymns loud and out of tune, they're forced to run cross-country in the rain, they do Latin and Scripture –'

'And – was it lumbering?' I said.

"'Lumbering in Murmansk." One of their topics, and if you don't know it backward and forward you get a hundred sentences – "I must remember to do my homework thoroughly." Their matron's a hag. They have to sit in the corner if they misbehave. They get beaten – it works! They put on old-fashioned plays and eat disgusting food. And that's not half of it.'

'It would age me twenty years,' I said.

'It's good for them,' Vic said. 'What do you know? You don't have any kids.'

We had entered the park at Sheen Gate. The boys were waiting for us and walked with us across the meadow toward the deer – thirty or forty deer, placidly cropping grass. Vic had told them earlier, when we were introduced, that I had been in Malaysia. Now he reminded them of that and said that if there was anything they wanted to ask me this was the time.

'My father was born in Malaysia,' one of the boys said. 'He still owns part of a tea estate there. My uncle owns the rest of it, but my uncle does all the work. They have thousands of workers – Indians, mostly.'

'They grow lots of tea in Malaysia,' I said.

'My father shot a tiger in the Cameron Highlands,' the boy went on. 'We've got the skin on the wall of our billiard room. My father shot him in the eye. That's why there aren't any bullet holes in the skin.'

This impressive fact – the tiger shot through the eye – silenced the rest of the boys for a while, and the boy called Jocko, who had told the story, marched ahead like a brigadier.

'My father was born in India,' another boy said. This was Nigel. He was Mario

Scaduto's friend. He was tall and had a rather debauched-looking face. 'They've got more tigers in India than they know what to do with. But they've been wiped out in Malaysia. Jocko's father probably killed the last one. My parents say that most blood sports are nothing more than vandalism.'

'You've been to India, haven't you, Dad?' Scaduto's youngest son looked pleadingly at him to verify the fact, and then glanced at his school friend, a mouse-faced boy the others called Little-fair.

'Lots of times,' Scaduto said. 'We had a facility right near the border in Pakistan. I used to pop over all the time.'

'We went out there last summer for a holiday,' Jocko said.

'India?' Scaduto asked.

'Hong Kong.' Jocko, I noticed, had a mustache, though he could not have been more than eleven or twelve.

'That's nowhere near India,' Nigel said. 'Jocko's confusing Hong Kong with India.'

'The place is full of ruddy Indians,' Jocko said, facing the others and setting his brigadier's jaw at them. 'Indians own shops there. They're in competition with the Chinese. The Chinese work jolly hard, but they're sneaky. The Indians are arrogant – most of them lie worse than that little git Norris in Form Two, the one they call Ananiarse.'

'We saw some Indians in Trinidad last summer.' This was Littlefair. He was small and bent-over and watchful in a rather elderly way. He was mouse-faced even to the twitching of his pointed nose. 'They were having a Hindu festival. They made a hell of a racket.'

'That's the trouble with England,' Jocko said. 'Too many colored people.'

'Too many Scotsmen is what I say! Send them all back to their rotten old backward villages –' Nigel stopped speaking suddenly and turned to Mario Scaduto. 'Crikey, I'm sorry! I hope you're not Scottish!'

'They're Italian,' Jocko said. 'Scaduto's an Italian name.'

'Smart boy,' Vic said. And he whispered to me, 'They have this fantastic awareness about language.'

'Our maid's Italian,' Jocko said.

Littlefair said, ‘We’ve got two, a husband and wife. They’re Spanish. You can hear them arguing at night. All Spaniards argue after work.’

‘We’re not Italian,’ Mario Scaduto was saying. ‘We’re American. We’ve got this huge house in Silver Springs, Maryland.’ But Mario’s accent, and its nervous urgent tweet, was English.

‘We went to Trinidad on a yacht my father chartered,’ the mouse-faced boy called Littlefair was explaining.

The word ‘yacht’ was heard by the others, who began to listen.

‘We were in a hurricane. We almost sank. We had to put ashore in such a hurry the captain ran the yacht aground and completely smashed the hull. That was after we left Trinidad. Then we went to Jamaica. The colored people standing by the road, when they saw our limousine going by to take us to the hotel, they gobbed on it.’

Nigel said, ‘I’m going to camp this summer.’

‘I hate camp,’ Jocko said. ‘It’s worse than school.’

‘This camp’s in Switzerland.’

I walked abreast of Vic, just behind the boys, whose voices were raised, as if they intended for us to hear them clearly. Vic looked at me and said, ‘Aren’t they unbelievable?’ I agreed; I said they certainly were; it was the very word for them. But he was praising them. And the boys were still talking.

‘My mother says it’s not that they can’t find jobs, it’s that they just don’t want to work. They’d rather draw their dole money.’

‘Some of these people make a hell of a lot on the dole – twenty or thirty pounds a week. That’s more than we pay our maid.’

‘If you have masses of children you can make a ruddy fortune on the dole. That’s what all these Pakistanis do.’

‘Some of them work hard. They take jobs that English people refuse. Ever see them at Heathrow? They’re the ones who clean the bogs.’

‘They work all night, too. Our plane came in at three o’clock in the morning and there were Pakistanis all over the place with mops and buckets.’

‘There’s a Pakistani round our way. His shop is open even on Sunday. He never closes!’

‘That’s the trouble with them – they’re just interested in making money.’

Scaduto’s children mingled with their friends. It was impossible to tell them from the others in this chorus of voices. All the accents were the same to my unpracticed ear, like the cries of ‘My father says’ and ‘My mother says.’ After vacations, and the Far East, and immigrants, and welfare, they discussed work – the best jobs – and schools – the best schools.

‘How old are your children, Vic?’

‘Eight-fifteen, nine-forty-five and twelve-thirty,’ he said, as if reciting a timetable. ‘Mario’s twelve-thirty. He starts public school next September. If we go to Italy he can be a boarder.’

‘Radley’s a brilliant school,’ one of the boys was saying. ‘They did that television series about it.’

‘My father says they put too much emphasis on books. I’m going to Ardingly. They’ve got sailing.’

Littlefair said, ‘I’m going to Marlborough,’ and when no one commented he became even more mouselike, and twitched his nose, and said, ‘My grandfather gave them a library.’

‘My father’s an old boy of St Paul’s.’ This was the Scottish boy they called Jocko. ‘That’s why I want to go to Westminster.’

‘American schools are rubbish,’ another boy said. He was dark-haired. He was, I realized, one of the Scaduto boys.

‘Tony,’ Vic said sharply.

‘Oh, you know they stink, Dad,’ the boy said in a jeering way. ‘The kids carry knives. They take drugs. There’s no discipline. Half the teachers can’t even read.’

‘Flipping Norah!’ Nigel said.

‘They smoke marijuana in the bogs,’ Tony Scaduto said. ‘The teachers go to discos with their girl students and get them pregnant.’

‘Gordon Bennett!’ Jocko said, and in spite of myself I laughed out loud at the

exclamation.

‘I’m really impressed with English schools,’ Vic said. ‘But just because you like English schools doesn’t mean you have to run down American ones. Compulsory free education is an American idea.’

The boy called Nigel said, ‘American schools are brilliant at sports,’ and then smiled patronizingly at the Scadutos.

‘What does your father do?’ the Littlefair boy was asking the youngest Scaduto, whose name was either Frankie or Franny.

‘He works in the West End,’ Mario said, helping his brother out.

‘He has an office in Mayfair,’ Tony said.

It was a highly imaginative way of describing Vic Scaduto’s job as Cultural Affairs Officer at the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. Vic heard and gave me a pained and apologetic look. Then, in an attempt to set the record straight, he cleared his throat and spoke loudly.

‘I’m with the American Embassy, on the cultural side.’

‘Hussein – that colored boy in Form Three they call “turhead” – his father’s with the Saudi Arabian Embassy,’ Jocko said. ‘He has TV cameras in his driveway – for security reasons. And an armed guard. That weed Beavis went to a birthday party there. Hussein’s father weighs about twenty stone! Beavis said he looks like a chucker-out.’

‘Princes come to visit him, Beavis said’ – this from Littlefair.

‘Not real princes,’ Nigel said. ‘Colored ones, wrapped in blankets, with towels over their heads.’

Mario Scaduto said, ‘The colored ones are just as good as the real ones.’

Nigel smiled and said, ‘There are three thousand members of the royal family in Saudi Arabia. It’s because they have all those wives. They have billions of children. Everyone you meet is a prince, even the people who do the washing-up. It doesn’t mean a thing.’

The smallest Scaduto said, ‘I don’t believe you!’

‘My father’s company’s got an office in Jeddah,’ Nigel said. This seemed to settle the argument. He added, ‘My father goes there by Concorde.’

‘Concorde doesn’t go to Jeddah,’ Jocko said.

‘It goes to Bahrain,’ Nigel said. ‘He changes planes there.’

We had walked across the park, from Sheen Gate to the woods on the hill to the south, passing the deer, which hardly noticed us, an older people with dogs on leashes, who never took their eyes off us and seemed to listen to the boys yelling and boasting.

‘The last time we were here it was awful bleak,’ Vic said.

The last time: he meant when the assessment officers had spent the day with him.

We were surrounded by azaleas and tall and tumbling rhododendrons that grew in the high shade of the woods.

‘These are really pretty,’ he said.

‘We’ve got lots of these at home. My mother grows them. She’s entering some in the Chelsea Flower Show.’

Oh, shut up, I thought, and walked on ahead. But I could still hear them.

‘Richmond Park is famous. I’ll bet you don’t have parks like this in America.’

‘They used to. They’ve all been ruined by vandals. That’s what my father says.’ Was this one of the Scadutos?

‘I’ve been to America lots of times.’ I turned. This was Nigel.

‘So have we.’ Littlefair.

‘We never go to America,’ Tony Scaduto said. ‘We prefer it here.’

Jocko said, ‘You’re American.’

‘I don’t feel American,’ Mario Scaduto said.

‘Neither do I,’ Tony said.

‘But you are!’ Littlefair said. ‘Your parents are American, so that means –’

Vic had caught up with me, and he had abandoned the boys, given up on their conversation. They were screaming at each other now, and he looked sheepish.

He said, ‘I’ll get that job in Italy. Then everyone will be happy. My folks will come over and visit. They’ll be proud – it’s what they always wanted. I think I’ll put these kids in the American school in Rome. You don’t have to tell me they need it. I know. They won’t like it, but they’ll get used to it. A job like this can be hell on a family – you have no idea.’

My last memory of that day at the Scadutos’ was the dinner itself – not Vic asking where the lemon for the fish was and Marietta saying, ‘Get it yourself!’ and not Vic (who quickly became drunk) defending the death penalty for child molesters, joined by his three boys, who said that they were in favor of capital punishment not only for murder but also stealing; it was the memory of Marietta leaning over and telling me at great length that in spite of what people said about parents teaching their children, the truth was that children taught their parents. Children, Marietta said, sort of raised her parents and helped them grow up and if it wasn’t for her three she would probably never have taken up poetry. It wasn’t the children who belittled women writers – it was the adults. And wasn’t it a shame that I did not have any – especially here in London, where there were so many opportunities for kids? I remembered that – as a consolation – because Vic Scaduto (‘All parents are children’ – he wouldn’t leave the topic!) of course never got the job in Italy.