

The Orphanage

MAX GORDON PHILLIPS

26

There were no windows in his room. Except for the cherished hole in the wall near the head of his bed, only the scarred wooden door relieved the monody of the cold-sweating gray concrete interior.

At times, when he was alone, he would lie on his bed and watch the dirty boys and girls in ragged clothes, like his, playing in the street. Sometimes they would bounce lacerated volleyballs against the walls, sometimes fight, sometimes pitch pennies toward a chalk bull's-eye inside a chalk circle drawn on the sidewalk.

It was wrong. He knew it was wrong. Wrong to watch the bad boys and girls playing in the street. He would stuff paper into the hole, then pull it out and watch. He feared the mechanical godmother would find out. He dreamed she was monitoring him with an electronic machine. He was looking outside now, watching the wind sweep a dirty paper bag along the dirty street. With no warning knock, the door opened. He swung his head around. The mechanical godmother was standing in the doorway staring at him.

"So," she said, "you've been looking outside through a hole in the wall." The boy said nothing, fearing she would plug the hole with more gray concrete. "You're rotten," she told him, "rotten to the core. I've always known it. From the time you first came here, I knew it." The boy stared back at her with unblinking eyes.

"It is necessary for me to inform you," she continued, "that today is your tenth birthday. According to state law we must inform you on your tenth birthday that you may leave the orphanage if you so choose. After you are presentable you are to tell the headmaster your decision. Come this way, please."

She led him out the door and down the hall to the shower room, where, on a scarred wooden chair, were stacked new clothes and new shoes. She left him with instructions to bathe himself, put on the new clothes and new shoes, and sound the buzzer when he was ready. Obediently he finished his tasks and sounded the buzzer. As he walked about, his new clothes felt stiff and his new shoes squeaked.

The shower room door opened and the mechanical godmother appeared. "Come with me," she said. "We are going to see the headmaster."

Despite his hot shower he felt suddenly cold. He tried to stop trembling. He had never been to the headmaster's office before.

The headmaster was a small old wrinkled man. As the boy entered his office the face behind the desk did not smile. "So," he said, "you are the boy who has been looking outside into the street through a hole in the wall." He rose, walked over to the boy, fastened a pinching grip on his shoulder, and led him out the door, down the hall, and out another door into an interior court which enclosed a small garden paradise with freshly mowed, sweet-smelling, bright green grass, many colors of flowers, and children in beautiful clothes and shiny shoes playing croquet.

These children had been allowed to play there, the headmaster explained, because they had kept the orphanage rules. "But the mechanical godmother has told me," he said, "that you have been watching the bad children play in the street. This is the reason you have not been allowed to play here."

The headmaster frowned at the boy. "But," he said, setting his thin lips in a tight line, "the state law, over which I have no control, requires that you be given a choice on your tenth birthday. You may stay here or you may go into the street."

The other children had stopped playing croquet and were gathering around, watching. "Come with me," he told them, resuming his pinching grip on the boy's shoulder, "all of you."

He led them to the main entrance, which was guarded by a set of great double doors. Walking over to them, he swung them open, each one in a wide arc. The children gasped at the scene in the street — dirty children in ragged clothing pitching pennies at a chalk mark inside a chalk circle drawn on the sidewalk.

"I'm going to make you an offer," the headmaster told the boy. "In cases such as yours we are supposed to simply give you the choice of going out into the street or returning to your room. But so many children have been choosing the street that I am going to lower the standard and make

you a special offer. If you decide to stay with the orphanage, you will be allowed to join the other children in the paradise garden. So which do you prefer, the paradise or the street?"

Everything went quiet. The children were packed tightly around in a semicircle, their faces white, startled, staring. The mechanical godmother stood waiting, staring, her arms folded. "Well?" said the headmaster.

"Outside," said the boy. "I want to go outside." He broke away from the headmaster's grip and started walking rapidly, then running, toward the open gate. The children gasped. Some began to cry.

"Just one minute! Just one minute! No so fast, young man." It was the mechanical godmother, reaching out after him. He felt the familiar pinching grip on his shoulder, felt himself being dragged backward into the orphanage.

"Those new clothes," she said, "and those new shoes. Do you expect to go walking out into the street wearing those expensive things? They belong to the orphanage. You must take them off and put on your old rags. Orphanage rules."