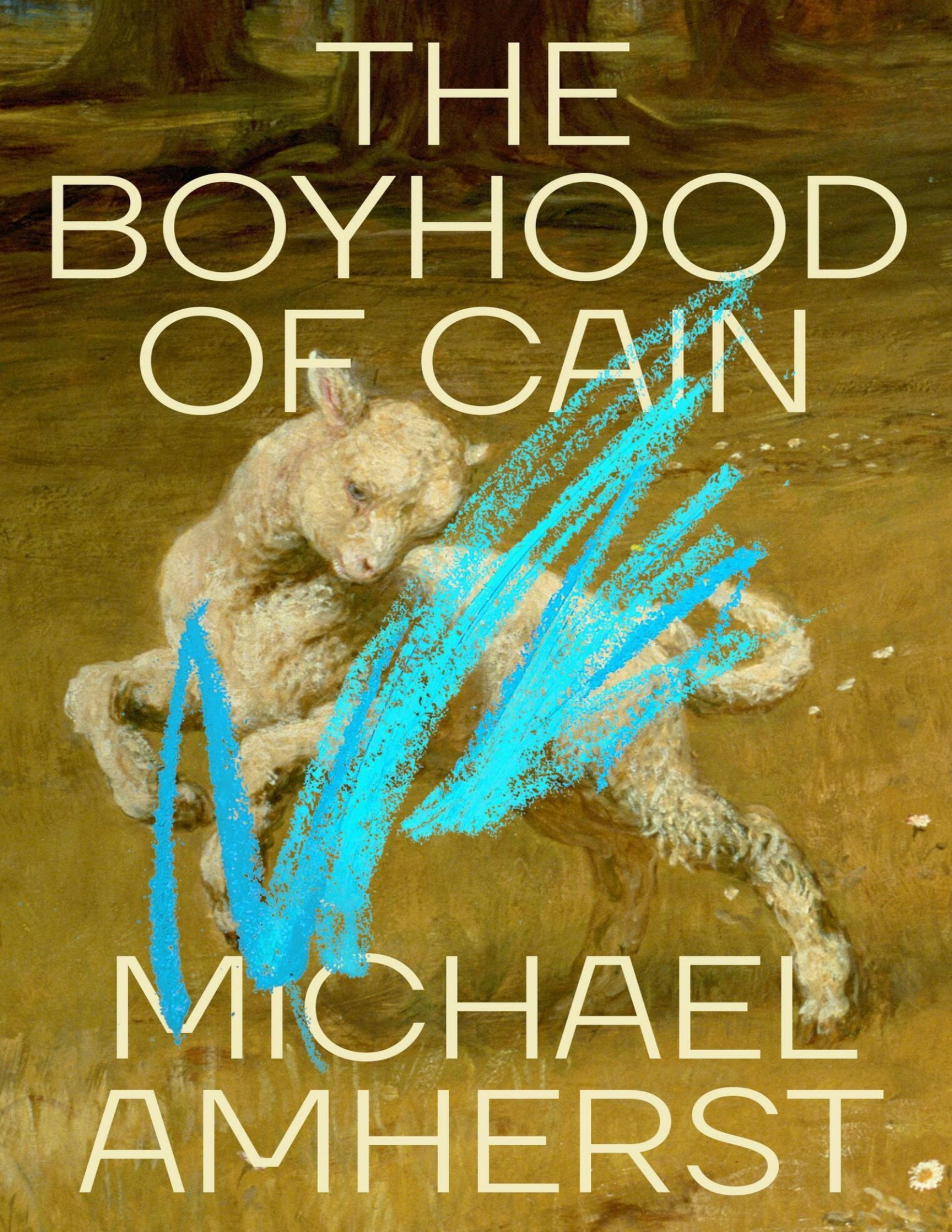
THE BOYHOOD OF CAIN



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For my parents: Miles and Jane,
and also Diana

In the religion of the once-born the world is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination, whose parts have just the values which naturally they appear to have, and of which a simple algebraic sum of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace consist in living on the plus side of the account. In the religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being.

William James,

The Varieties of Religious Experience

Chapter 1

They live in a large house near the grounds of the choir school, where his father is headmaster. The school, a preparatory school, is situated in the center of town. The main building is big, red brick like a doll's house, shadowed by the Norman tower of the town's abbey. The rest of the school is made up of former houses that line one of the town's three main streets. These streets meet at a stone cross in the town's center, erected in memory of the townspeople who died in the wars.

Neither of his grandfathers fought, on account of their poor eyesight, and the fact his family did not do their bit brings him shame. When the other boys in his year boast of their grandfathers' heroics in the army, navy or air force, he must keep quiet. His father did national service, but rather than killing Germans he played in a brass band and catered in the officers' mess. Perhaps his family are cowards.

As well as three roads, the town also has three rivers. Every winter these rivers break their banks and flood the surrounding fields. In summer, the flood-plain grows thick with lush green grass. In this way, the town is open and expansive in summer, while becoming hemmed in and dark with the water surrounding it from all sides in winter.

Every morning, unless his father has choir practice, he and his sister make the short walk with him from their front door, along Church Street and into the school. Later, when he remembers this, he has an image of them walking together, his own hand small and warm in his father's fist, his father carrying an umbrella and swinging it like the gentlemen in films. But this is a false image, or false memory, because his father is too forgetful to ever keep an umbrella for more than twenty-four hours.

Similarly, he imagines his father in a suit and people touching their foreheads in a little bow as they go by. But this is also false. His father always wears thick, plaid shirts, with one button unwinding on its thread. The only thing that is true is his own pride at the warmth and greetings that fall on his father, and by extension himself, when they're in town. This makes them a preeminent family—the first family. But then maybe that is every family's sense of itself.

Will the school also form part of his inheritance, one day? he wonders. His father is reticent about this, but surely if the school is his father's, then, like everything else—like the clock his father says has been in the family for generations and one day will be his—the school will also become his own.

As the headmaster's son he is in a unique position. Unlike his sister, who is embarrassed by her special status, he raises it with classmates often. Yet, the more he mentions it, the less they seem to like him. When the other children, particularly the boys, boast and square up to each other over their fathers' jobs, he does not see why his own father's should be a source of suspicion rather than pride.

His father does not teach him, he only teaches the top two forms. However, sometimes he will see his father around school. When he does, he waits for a sign, an acknowledgment that he is his son, a sign that he is special.

But his father does not acknowledge him in this way, no sign is forthcoming. He wants his father to lay claim to him. But he will not. His mother, on the other hand, is always happy to claim him as her own. She will call to him, wave to him at the school gates. She will lie to get him out of school or off games. His mother claims him to a degree that is humiliating.

The only time he is his father's son is when his mother cannot collect him from school. On these days, he is permitted to go through the red double doors of the main school building, the doors only to be used by teachers, and to wait on the long settle in the hall for his father to finish teaching. He is unique among the children in being able to use these doors, in being able to

access the school at weekends, and in being able to walk up the staff staircase, which is made of marble and sweeps in a curve up to the landing.

It only occurs to him how arbitrary it is to forbid the use of a set of doors one Monday morning, when he is running an errand during class and is caught going through them by the games master. He does not see why he should be able to use the doors at weekends with his father but not during the week. He can use these doors, the staff staircase, because he is his father's son. To deny him is in some way to deny his father. And yet, after the games master tells him that it is not the weekend, so he cannot go that way, he accepts: his fear of being bad is greater even than his sense of his own importance.

He dare not say that this is a stupid rule. He is yet to see any sign that the teachers possess some quality in relation to doors that he does not. All he feels is how much he wishes he were with his father all the time. With his father he can go anywhere.

One day, while waiting for his father to finish the last lesson of the afternoon, he's taken to the top of the school, where his father teaches maths. The ceilings on the upper floor are lower and each of the rooms is lit by long strip lighting that emits a low-level buzz. His father's classroom is dim and airless. The boy stands next to him at the front, while his father draws in chalk on the blackboard. The floor is covered with a dark brown vinyl that is breaking up in places to reveal the boards beneath. The boys are lined up behind desks. But these are not boys, they are all thirteen, or nearly thirteen, and they have the long limbs of men. Some even have men's voices. He cannot imagine ever being as old as they are.

When the bell goes, he and his father are left alone. With the school quiet and empty, he feels the place belongs to his father and, as a result, it must belong to him also. They walk down to his father's study, past wall displays in French and drawings of trees. He knows the words are French, although he has not yet learned what they mean; he can make his own drawings of trees but has not yet learned how to reproduce them so beautifully.

Next to the study door, there is a large wooden cupboard, which his father opens with a small key. Inside are packs and packs of shrink-wrapped exercise books. These are the books they use in class, each covered with pastel shades of sugar paper. Dark teal green with squares for maths, yellow with wide-ruled lines for his year group, pink-orange with narrower lines for use by the older children. His father takes one and then asks if he'd like some too.

Receiving a new exercise book is one of his chief joys. Whenever one of his classmates finishes their book and puts a hand up to say they need a new one, a hush covers the room. If he had bigger, messier handwriting he would get a new book more often. He feels it an injustice that he should be punished for having a better, tidier script.

The new books are stiffly bound, with shiny covers. Over time, their binding grows weaker, the pages dirty, and the sheen disappears. In the first lessons after receiving a new book, he will write smaller, more neatly, ensuring that every letter sticks to the line. Every time he harbors some hope that this time will be different: *this* time he will reach the end with no errors at all.

However, he knows that no matter how careful, no matter how well-meaning he is, he will make crossings out. When he misspells a word, he is torn between two equally bad choices: to cross it out and correct it, leaving messy evidence of his mistake, or carrying on regardless, but with the mistake there for all to find.

To make an error on the clean, white pages of a new exercise book feels, to him, a terrible sin. He wants to leave no trace or, at least, no trace of his own fault. It would be better to have written nothing than to leave signs of error.

When his father opens the cupboard to reveal a wall of such books, he cannot believe it. And when he casually grabs a couple of each of the exercise books and hands them to him, he is dumbfounded. He opens one and then another, smells the sickly release of glue and fresh paper.

His father asks what he will use them for, to which he replies, “Stories.” He does not have any stories to tell, he cannot think of any, but he likes the idea of filling the pages, writing a book of his own, like the ones he reads in the evenings at home. He would like to write a story that carries all the way to the end.

He tries to prolong their stay here because this is the happiest he can ever remember being. Here he has access to all he could want. When they finally descend the stairs to the staff car park it is with the knowledge that he is his father’s son.

Chapter 2

In class, the teacher, Mrs. Walters, tells them animals can see only in black and white.

"What about my cat?" he asks.

"All cats," she tells them.

"So what about my uniform? Can they—"

"It would all be black and white," she says. "Black, white and gray."

Throughout the rest of the lesson, they are given three photographs, which they must copy onto pieces of paper. He has a picture of a family, one of a cat and dog, and finally an owl in a tree. They are told they must draw each of these out twice, and color them in—once as they see it, and once as animals see it. The teacher shows them how deep reds and blues will become almost black, while the light tones of skin, pale pinks and yellows will appear gray or almost white.

Midway through he puts his hand up to ask a question.

"Also, some people are color-blind," he says.

"Yes," responds the teacher.

"And animals only see black and white."

"Yes."

"So how do we know what the real color is?"

The teacher doesn't understand the question.

"Well, we might see the sky as blue and a cat might see it as gray, but really it might be green," he says.

"I don't think so," she responds, and she makes her way down the aisle of desks.

He puts his hand up again. But the teacher does not respond or pretends not to see. Eventually, desperate, he calls out: “But we don’t know. What if the animals are right? What if everything is only gray?”

The girl sat in front of him tells him to shut up, before covering her work with a hand. Maybe she thinks he is showing off.

“I don’t believe, if everything were only gray, we would be able to see all the other colors,” the teacher tells him, crossing her arms across her breast. “If we can see all the colors—all the extra colors—then they must be there. While the animals can only see two colors—black and white, and the two mixed together as shades of gray.”

The boy thinks again.

“Maybe there are lots of other colors,” he begins. “Other colors we can’t see. Maybe the grass is blue and the sky is green. What if—”

“Look,” the teacher finally says. “I don’t think any of this is very helpful. You’ve been given the exercise and you are to get on with it. Everyone else is getting on with it, why can’t you?”

“But what if—”

“I’ve told you what the colors are,” she snaps. “You know what the task is. Everyone else is getting on quietly. Now I advise you to do the same.”

He becomes quiet. One boy turns and glowers at him. But he worries about his cat. He would like his cat to see in color. He feels sorry for his cat if she cannot. At home, he lies on his front, across the carpet, and stares into her yellow eyes, hoping she might reveal the truth.

He hopes Mrs. Walters is wrong. He hopes only some animals cannot see colors. But above all he wants to know what color things *truly* are. He worries. He does not know what the teacher means by green; it may mean something different when he sees it to when his mother sees it. What if green for him is blue for his mother? What if no one sees the same thing? What then? And why does no one care?

He has had discussions like this with his mother. He will demand answers from her that she either does not know or refuses to give. Chief among them is the question of why he must go to school. He has never wanted to go to school. He knows that everyone must go, but this does not seem a sufficient reason. He does not know why he can't do what he likes. There was a time when he stayed at home all day with his mother. He cannot see why this should have changed. He can't understand what would force a child to leave his parents and their home. He recognizes school as a first step, the first in a series of moves he does not wish to make.

His mother reprimands him, "Soon, Daniel, you will realize there are things you simply have to accept. You cannot just will things different because you don't like them as they are. Some things you just have to get on with."

If he were Jesus then he would never have to go to school. The subject of his being Jesus has come up before. When he was younger his mother would come and sit on the end of his bed and talk or sing to him while stroking the hair from his forehead. She would run a finger around his palm, before trailing it up to the crook of his elbow, and then back down again. She would wait until he fell asleep and then he would wake to find her gone, his arm cold above the duvet.

On one of these nights, as his mother sits and tries to brush the frown from his brow, he challenges her, "Why do I have to go to school?"

"Because everyone goes to school," she replies.

"But I don't have to."

"Yes, you do, everyone has to."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way it is."

This does not satisfy him as an answer.

"But why?"

"Well, you need to go to school so you can learn things and get a job."

"But I don't want a job."

She laughs.

“Most people don’t want a job,” she tells him.

He finds this answer silly. If no one wants a job, then surely no one should have one. As far as he can see, the point of being an adult is that you no longer have to do things you don’t want to do. That is the only good thing about it.

Being grown up means an end to play and he wants to keep playing. Why do you have to become anything, instead of just playing at it? One day he’d like to be a teacher and the next day a train driver. As an adult this should be possible, but it would seem it is not.

“Why do I have to have one? Why does anyone have one, if no one wants one?”

“So you can earn money to buy food and to be able to look after yourself. And your family,” she adds. She takes her hand away from his forehead and holds it in her lap.

“But I don’t have a family.”

“But you will one day.”

“Why can’t I just stay here? Why can’t I just stay here with you? You can look after me. Then I won’t need a job.”

“But we won’t be around forever.”

His mother has taken to saying this, it seems, whenever she does not know the answer to one of his questions. She summons up a time when he will be on his own. This upsets him, this far-off place that will take away his parents. But in that moment, he does not want to get distracted from the task in hand. He is ready to compromise.

“Well, until then.”

“Until then what?”

“Until then I can stay with you and Daddy. Here. So I won’t need a job and I won’t need to go to school.”

She sighs.

“You still need to go to school,” she begins again.

“But why?”

“So you can meet people and have friends.”

“But I don’t want friends.”

“So you can meet someone and get married and have a family of your own.”

He looks at her. None of this seems very likely. Is that all that is to happen? Are people born, have jobs, have a family, then die? Is this it? He feels she must be holding something back.

“If I were Jesus,” he says, “I could make it so I didn’t have to go to school.”

“If you were Jesus,” his mother tells him, “you would know.”

“Maybe I do know,” he says cryptically. He knows enough to have asked, he reckons, to have had the thought. Jesus cannot have known he was the Son of God. If he did, he would have been an insufferable child, a difficult adolescent. To have told the other children you were the Son of God would demand a certain amount of bullying. He has learned from school that boasting of his father’s status does not endear him to the other children. How much worse would it have been for the carpenter’s son. Jesus cannot have been told, his parents would have been too wise for that.

Jesus must have found the realization of his special nature growing within him. Neither does he believe Mary would have randomly told him one day—how then would Jesus have believed it? What would have happened to his relationship with Joseph? So no, he reckons that, like himself, Jesus must have started simply by asking the question: am I the Son of God? And that, like him, his mother would have told him to stop being so silly, until eventually the inevitable overcame them both.

Maybe, he reasons, his mother, like Mary, has been dreading this day and has had her lies prepared. Or maybe his mother genuinely doesn’t know. Maybe his question has caught her by surprise? Either way, he would like her to have been better pleased.

Chapter 3

His father is sick. His left leg has swollen to twice the size of the right. He can't walk, he can't go into school, he can't even climb the stairs of their house. Instead, he must lie on the sofa in the living room, which it turns out can be pulled out into a makeshift bed. The cat hides under its larger frame and their father curses whenever it jumps on him. This way his father now occupies the living room, depriving him and his sister of access to the television set.

Each morning they will sit on the edge of their father's downstairs-bed and talk with him, while the television is shut away. They pretend that this is fine but secretly they resent that their father has taken over the house.

As he is unable to work, he is now here at all times as well. The children are confined to their bedrooms. The boy does not know how their father has engineered this: in one swift movement he has gone from being absent to a constant presence, from subsidiary to their mother to ordering her about and asking for her help. She now has less time for him and his sister. Even when she takes them to school it is in a hurry before returning home for the doctor.

At the back of his mind, he wonders if his father will die. His father is older than those of other boys. He is twenty years older than their mother. His mother has always told both him and his sister that they should be prepared for their father dying.

"He will die," she says, "before your friends' fathers. He will die when their grandparents die. You should be prepared for this."

A boy in his year, Yanis, has lost his father. Everyone knows this but there is a silent agreement that no one should ever speak of it. Shortly after