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# STEPHEN KING

## Apt Pupil

Now a major motion  
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Based on "Apt Pupil," A Novella in

# Different Seasons



# **Apt Pupil**

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Taken from the title "Different Seasons".

## APT PUPIL

He looked like the total all-American kid as he pedalled his twenty-six-inch Schwinn with the ape-hanger handlebars up the residential suburban street, and that's just what he was: Todd Bowden, thirteen years old, five-foot-eight and a healthy one hundred and forty pounds, hair the colour of ripe corn, blue eyes, white even teeth, lightly tanned skin marred by not even the first shadow of adolescent acne.

He was smiling a summer vacation smile as he pedalled through the sun and shade three blocks from his own house. He looked like the kind of kid who might have a paper route, and as a matter of fact, he did - he delivered the Santa Donato Clarion. He also looked like the kind of kid who might sell greeting cards for premiums, and he had done that, too. They were the kind that come with your name printed inside - JACK AND MARY BURKE, or DON AND SALLY, or THE MURCHISONS. He looked like the sort of boy who might whistle while he worked, and he often did so. He whistled quite prettily, in fact. His dad was an architectural engineer who made \$40,000 a year. His mom was a housewife and a secretarial school graduate (she had met Todd's father one day when he needed a secretary from the pool) who typed manuscripts in her spare time. She had kept all of Todd's old school report cards in a folder. Her favourite was his final fourth-grade card, on which Mrs Upshaw had scratched: 'Todd is an extremely apt pupil.' He was, too. Straight As and Bs all the way up the line. If he'd done any better - straight As, for example - his friends might have begun to think he was weird.

Now he brought his bike to a halt in front of 963 Claremont Street and stepped off it. The house was a small bungalow set discreetly back on its lot. It was white with green shutters and green trim. A hedge ran around the front. The hedge was well-watered and well-clipped.

Todd brushed his blond hair out of his eyes and walked the Schwinn up the cement path to the steps. He was still smiling, and his smile was open and expectant and beautiful, a marvel of modern dentistry and fluoridated water. He pushed down the bike's kickstand with the toe of one Nike

running-shoe and then picked the folded newspaper off the bottom step. It wasn't the Clarion; it was the LA Times. He put it under his arm and mounted the steps. At the top was a heavy wooden door with no window inside of a latched screen door. There was a doorbell on the right-hand doorframe, and below the bell were two small signs, each neatly screwed into the wood and covered with protective plastic so they wouldn't yellow or waterspot. German efficiency, Todd thought, and his smile widened a little. It was an adult thought, and he always mentally congratulated himself when he had one of those.

The top sign said ARTHUR DENKER.

The bottom one said NO SOLICITORS, NO PEDDLERS, NO SALESMEN.

Smiling still, Todd rang the bell.

He could barely hear its muted burring, somewhere far off inside the small house. He took his finger off the bell and cocked his head a little, listening for footsteps. There were none. He looked at his Timex watch (one of the premiums he had gotten for selling personalized greeting cards) and saw that it was twelve past ten. The guy should be up by now. Todd himself was always up by seven-thirty at the latest, even during summer vacation. The early bird catches the worm.

He listened for another thirty seconds and when the house remained silent he leaned on the bell, watching the sweep second hand on his Timex as he did so. He had been pressing the doorbell for exactly seventy-one seconds when he finally heard shuffling footsteps. Slippers, he deduced from the soft wish-wish sound. Todd was into deductions. His current ambition was to become a private detective when he grew up.

'All right! All right!' the man who was pretending to be Arthur Denker called querulously. 'I'm coming! Let it go! I'm coming!'

Todd stopped pushing the doorbell button. He looked at the tip of his forefinger. There was a small red circle there.

A chain and bolt rattled on the far side of the windowless inner door. Then it was pulled open.

An old man, hunched inside a bathrobe, stood looking out through the screen. A cigarette smouldered between his fingers. Todd thought the man looked like a cross between Albert Einstein and Boris Karloff. His hair was long and white but beginning to yellow in an unpleasant way that was 'more nicotine than ivory. His face was wrinkled and pouched and puffy

with sleep, and Todd saw with some distaste that he hadn't bothered shaving for the last couple of days. Todd's father was fond of saying, 'A shave puts a shine on the morning.' Todd's father shaved every day, whether he had to work or not.

The eyes looking out at Todd were watchful but deeply sunken, laced with snaps of red. Todd felt an instant of deep disappointment. The guy did look a little bit like Albert Einstein, and he did look a little bit like Boris Karloff, but what he looked like more than anything else was one of the seedy old winos that hung around down by the railroad yard.

But of course, Todd reminded himself, the man had just gotten up. Todd had seen Denker many times before today (although he had been very careful to make sure that Denker hadn't seen him, no way, Jose), and on his public occasions, Denker looked very natty, every inch an officer in retirement, you might say, even though he was seventy-six if the articles Todd had read at the library had his birth-date right. On the days when Todd had shadowed him to the Shoprite where Denker did his shopping or to one of the three movie theatres on the bus line - Denker had no car - he was always dressed in one of four neatly kept suits, no matter how warm the weather. If the weather looked threatening he carried a furled umbrella under one arm like a swagger stick. He sometimes wore a trilby hat. And on -the occasions when Denker went out, he was always neatly shaved and his white moustache (worn to conceal an imperfectly corrected harelip) was carefully trimmed.

'A boy,' he said now. His voice was thick and sleepy. Todd saw with hew disappointment that his robe was faded and tacky. One rounded collar point stood up at a drunken angle to poke at his wattled neck. There was a splotch of something that might have been chili or possibly A-1 Steak Sauce on the left lapel, and he smelled of cigarettes and stale booze.

'A boy,' he repeated. 'I don't need anything, boy. Read the sign. You can read, can't you? Of course you can. All American boys can read. Don't be a nuisance, boy. Good day.'

The door began to close.

He might have dropped it right there, Todd thought much later on one of the nights when sleep was hard to find. His disappointment at seeing the man for the first time at close range, seeing him with his street-face put away - hanging in the closet, you might say, along with his umbrella and his trilby — might have done it. It could have ended in that moment, the tiny,

unimportant snicking sound of the latch cutting off everything that happened later as neatly as a pair of shears. But, as the man himself had observed, he was an American boy, and he had been taught that persistence is a virtue.

'Don't forget your paper, Mr Dussander,' Todd said, holding the Times out politely.

The door stopped dead in its swing still inches from the jamb. A tight and watchful expression flitted across Kurt Dussander's face and was gone at once. There might have been fear in that expression. It was good, the way he had made that expression disappear, but Todd was disappointed for the third time. He hadn't expected Dussander to be good; he had expected Dussander to be great.

Boy, Todd thought with real disgust Boy oh boy.

He pulled the door open again. One hand, bunched with arthritis, unlatched the screen door. The hand pushed the screen door open just enough to wriggle through like a spider and close over the edge of the paper Todd was holding out. The boy saw with distaste that the old man's fingernails were long and yellow and horny. It was a hand that had spent most of its waking hours holding one cigarette after another. Todd thought smoking was a filthy dangerous habit, one he himself would never take up. It really was a wonder that Dussander had lived as long as he had.

The old man tugged. 'Give me my paper.'

'Sure thing, Mr Dussander.' Todd released his hold on the paper. The spider-hand yanked it inside. The screen closed.

'My name is Denker,' the old man said. 'Not this Doo-Zander. Apparently you cannot read. What a pity. Good day.'

The door started to close again. Todd spoke rapidly into ' the narrowing gap. 'Bergen-Belsen, January 1943 to June 1943, Auschwitz, June 1943 to June of 1944, Unterkommandant. Patin -'

The door stopped again. The old man's pouched and pallid face hung in the gap like a wrinkled, half-deflated balloon. Todd smiled.

'You left Patin just ahead of the Russians. You got to Buenos Aires. Some people say you got rich there, investing the gold you took out of Germany in the drug trade. Whatever, you were in Mexico City from 1950 to 1952. Then -'

'Boy, you are crazy like a cuckoo bird.' One of the arthritic fingers twirled circles around a misshapen ear. But the toothless mouth was

quivering in an infirm, panicky way..

'From 1952 until 1958, I don't know,' Todd said, smiling more widely still. 'No one does, I guess, or at least they're not telling. But an Israeli agent spotted you in Cuba, working as the concierge in a big hotel just before Castro took over. They lost you when the rebels came into Havana. You popped up in West Berlin in 1965. They almost got you.' He pronounced the last two words as one: gotcha. At the same time he squeezed all of his fingers together into one large, wriggling fist. Dussander's eyes dropped to those well-made and well-nourished American hands, hands that were made for building soapbox racers and Aurora models. Todd had done both. In fact, the year before, he and his dad had built a model of the Titanic. It had taken almost four months, and Todd's father kept it in his office.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' Dussander said.

Without his false teeth, his words had a mushy sound Todd didn't like. It didn't sound ... well, authentic. Colonel Klink on Hogan's Heroes sounded more like a Nazi than Dussander did. But in his time he must have been a real whiz. In an article on the death-camps in Men's Action, the writer had called him The Blood-Fiend of Patin. 'Get out of here, boy. Before I call the police.'

'Gee, I guess you better call them, Mr Dussander. Or Heir Dussander, if you like that better.' He continued to smile, showing perfect teeth that had been fluoridated since the beginning of his life and bathed thrice a day in Crest toothpaste for almost as long. 'After 1965, no one saw you again ... until I did, two months ago, on the downtown bus.' 'You're insane.'

'So if you want to call the police,' Todd said, smiling, 'you go right ahead. I'll wait on the stoop. But if you don't want to call them right away, why don't I come in? We'll talk.'

There was a long moment while the old man looked at the smiling boy. Birds twitted in the trees. On the next block a power mower was running, and far off, on busier streets, horns honked out their own rhythm of life and commerce.

In spite of everything, Todd felt the onset of doubt. He couldn't be wrong, could he? Was there some mistake on his part? He didn't think so, but this was no schoolroom exercise. It was real life. So he felt a surge of relief (mild relief, he assured himself later) when Dussander said: 'You may come in for a moment, if you like. But only because I do not wish to make trouble for you, you understand?'

'Sure, Mr Dussander,' Todd said. He opened the screen and came into the hall. Dussander closed the door behind them, shutting off the morning.

The house smelted stale and slightly malty. It smelted the way Todd's own house smelted sometimes the morning after his folks had thrown a party and before his mother had had a chance to air it out. But this smell was worse. It was lived-in and ground-in. It was liquor, fried food, sweat, old clothes, and some stinky medicinal smell like Vicks or Mentholatum. It was dark in the hallway, and Dussander was standing too close, his head hunched into the collar of his robe like the head of a vulture waiting for some hurt animal to give up the ghost. In that instant, despite the stubble and the loosely hanging flesh, Todd could see the man who had stood inside the black SS uniform more clearly than he had ever seen him on the street. And he felt a sudden lancet of fear slide into his belly. Mild fear, he amended later.

'I should tell you "that if anything happens to me -' he began, and then Dussander shuffled past him and into the living room, his slippers wish-wishing on the floor. He flapped a contemptuous hand at Todd, and Todd felt a flush of hot blood mount into his throat and cheeks.

Todd followed him, his smile wavering for the first time. He had not pictured it happening quite like this. But it would work out. Things would come into focus. Of course they would. Things always did. He began to smile again as he stepped into the living room.

It was another disappointment - and how! - but one he supposed he should have been prepared for. There was of course no oil portrait of Hitler with his forelock dangling and eyes that followed you. No medals in cases, no ceremonial sword mounted on the wall, no Luger or PPK Walther on the mantle (there was, in fact, no mantle). Of course, Todd told himself, the guy would have to be crazy to put any of those things out where people could see them. Still, it was hard to put everything you saw in the movies or on TV out of your head. It looked like the living room of any old man living alone on a slightly frayed pension. The fake fireplace was faced with fake bricks. A Westclox hung over it. There was a black and white Motorola TV on a stand; the tips of the rabbit ears had been wrapped in aluminium foil to improve reception. The floor was covered with a grey rug; its nap was balding. The magazine rack by the sofa held copies of National Geographic, Reader's Digest, and the LA Times. Instead of Hitler or a ceremonial sword hung on the wall, there was a framed certificate of citizenship and a picture

of a woman in a funny hat. Dussander later told him that sort of hat was called a cloche, and they had been popular in the twenties and thirties.

'My wife,' Dussander said sentimentally. 'She died in 1955 of a lung disease. At that time I was a draughtsman at the Menschler Motor Works in Essen. I was heartbroken.'

Todd continued to smile. He crossed the room as if to get a better look at the woman in the picture. Instead of looking at the picture, he fingered the shade on a small table-lamp.

'Stop that? Dussander barked harshly. Todd jumped back a little.

That was good,' he said sincerely. 'Really commanding. It was Use Koch who had the lampshades made out of human skin, wasn't it? And she was the one who had the trick with the little glass tubes.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Dussander said. There was a package of Kools, the kind with no filter, on top of the TV. He offered them to Todd. 'Cigarette?' he asked, and grinned. His grin was hideous.

'No. They give you lung cancer. My dad used to smoke, but he gave it up. He went to SmokeEnders.'

'Did he?' Dussander produced a wooden match from the pocket of his robe and scratched it indifferently on the plastic case of the Motorola. Puffing, he said: 'Can you give me one reason why I shouldn't call the police and tell them of the monstrous accusations you've just made? One reason? Speak quickly, boy. The telephone is just down the hall. Your father would spank you, I think. You would sit for dinner on a cushion for a week or so, eh?'

'My parents don't believe in spanking. Corporal punishment causes more problems than it cures.' Todd's eyes suddenly gleamed. 'Did you spank any of them? The women? Did you take off their clothes and -'

With a muffled exclamation, Dussander started for the phone.

Todd said coldly: 'You better not do that.'

Dussander turned. In measured tones that were spoiled only slightly by the fact that his false teeth were not in, he said: 'I tell you this once, boy, and once only. My name is Arthur Denker. It has never been anything else; it has not even been Americanized. I was in fact named Arthur by my father, who greatly admired the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, It has never been Doo-Zander, nor Himmler, nor Father Christmas. I was a reserve lieutenant in the war. I never joined the Nazi party. In the battle of Berlin I fought for three years. I will admit that in the late thirties, when I was first

married, I supported Hitler. He ended the depression and returned some of the pride we had lost in the aftermath of the sickening and unfair Treaty of Versailles. I suppose I supported him mostly because I got a job and there was tobacco again, and I didn't need to hunt through the gutters when I needed to smoke. I thought, in the late thirties, that he was a great man. In his own way, perhaps he was. But at the end he was mad, directing phantom armies at the whim of an astrologer. He even gave Blondi, his dog, a death-capsule. The act of a madman; by the end they were all madmen, singing the Horst Wessel Song as they fed poison to their children. On 2 May 1945, my regiment gave up to the Americans. I remember that a private soldier named Hackermeyer gave me a chocolate bar. I wept. There was no reason to fight on; the war was over, and really had been since February. I was interned at Essen and was treated very well. We listened to the Nuremberg trials on the radio and when Goering committed suicide, I traded fourteen American cigarettes for half a bottle of schnapps and got drunk. I was released in January of 1946. At the Essen Motor Works I put wheels on cars until 1963, when I retired and emigrated to the United States. To come here was a lifelong ambition. In 1967 I became a citizen. I am an American. I vote. No Buenos Aires. No drug dealing. No Berlin. No Cuba.' He pronounced it Koo-ba. 'And now, unless you leave, I make my telephone call.'

He watched Todd do nothing. Then he went down the hall and picked up the telephone. Still Todd stood in the living room, beside the table with the small lamp on it.

Dussander began to dial. Todd watched him, his heart speeding up until it was drumming in his chest. After the fourth number, Dussander turned and looked at him. His shoulders sagged. He put the phone down.

'A boy,' he breathed. 'A boy:

Todd smiled widely but rather modestly.

'How did you find out?'

'One piece of luck and a lot of hard work,' Todd said 'There's this friend of mine, Harold Pegler his name is, only all the kids call him Foxy. He plays second base for our team. And his dad's got all these magazines out in his garage. Great big stacks of them. War magazines. They're old. I looked for some new ones, but the guy who runs the newsstand across from the school says most of them went out of business. In most of them there's pictures of Krauts - German soldiers, I mean - and Japs torturing these