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Books by James Yaffe

POOR COUSIN EVELYN

THE GOOD-FOR-NOTHING

WHAT'S THE BIG HURRY?

NOTHING BUT THE NIGHT

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Nothing but the Night

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Nothing but the Night

JAMES YAFFE

An Atlantic Monthly Press Book

Little, Brown and Company

BOSTON TORONTO

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TO

Fred Dannay

With friendship and gratitude

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Oh never fear, man, nought's to dread,
Look not left nor right:
In all the endless road you tread
There's nothing but the night.

— From a poem by A. E. Housman

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Part One

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. . . Throughout these proceedings we have heard a good deal about the so-called "fateful encounter," the meeting which took place between the two defendants in the spring, when they were sixteen years old. The defense has argued that this meeting — which occurred during the so-called "Teen-Agers' Frolic" at the Spreading Chestnut Country Club in Mamaroneck — is an example of the "circumstances beyond their control" which brought about the tragedy in which the defendants now find themselves involved. Suppose Barry Morris had gone to a concert that night, as he originally intended to do. Suppose the girl that Paul King was to accompany that night had not come down with the measles. So many different things could have intervened to prevent the "fateful encounter" from happening. Does it not almost seem as if these two boys were caught in the grip of a malicious destiny against which it was hopeless to struggle? Might we not almost say that they were being moved all through their first sixteen years, step by step, inexorably, towards that country club dance?

The prosecution has argued that this entire question is irrelevant and immaterial. . . .

— From Judge Henry De Vane's decision,
The People vs. *Barry Morris and Paul King*

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I

BARRY MORRIS was nine. He didn't much like getting up in the morning. For as long as he could, after the maid knocked on his door, he would lie back on the pillow with his eyes shut tight, trying to go on with his dream. But it never did any good. Pretty soon he would start to worry about dinnertime. And as soon as he did that, he just couldn't sleep any more.

So he got up, dawdled through his dressing, wet his toothbrush under the faucet, and shifted the position of the soap. Then he went into the dining room for his breakfast. There was nothing to worry about at breakfast. Mother never showed up for breakfast, she slept late in the morning. Dad was at the table ahead of him, reading his newspaper. He looked up and smiled when Barry kissed him on the cheek. This was the biggest smile that Dad gave all day. He smiled at night too, when Barry saw him again. But that was dinnertime, and his smile was different. Sort of thin and wobbling. Everything was different at dinnertime.

"Well now," Dad said, "I hope you're feeling tip-top this morning."

That's what Dad said to him every morning at breakfast. Barry didn't have to give much of an answer. Just a nod and a mumble.

"Sit down," Dad would say, still smiling. "There's your orange juice, it'll give you muscles."

Barry sat down and sipped his orange juice a little and fingered the glass a lot.

Dad usually had one more thing to say. "Well now, what's the

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program? Off to school, are you? Are they planning to teach you anything special today?"

Barry's regular answer was, "Just the usual stuff."

Dad would nod his head hard. "Yes. That's good. Yes indeed." Then, bit by bit, the smile would leave his face and he would go back to the newspaper. For the rest of the meal Barry could forget Dad was there. He could touch his silverware and poke at his cereal without being interrupted.

After breakfast Dad and he rode down in the elevator together. This was one of the nicest times of the day. Dad was different somehow, as soon as he put on his hat and picked up his black bag. He was a doctor. When people that you met – other kids, that is – asked you, "What does your father do?" it was always a good thing to answer, "He's a doctor." People looked serious and nodded their heads when they heard that. It was something you didn't have to be nervous about.

They got out of the elevator and walked across the long marble lobby. Barry switched to Dad's left side so that the elevator boy and the doorman would have a clear view of the black bag.

In front of the building, under the long green awning, Dad tried another smile. "Well, well, my boy – off to work now, see you later." He turned and hurried down the street to his office. Dad's office was right on the corner, on the ground floor of the building. Barry stayed and waited for the car – Dad's big black car and his chauffeur, they picked him up every morning and drove him to school.

He hoped the wait wouldn't be too long. There was nobody around him but strangers. The doorman, the elevator boy, people coming out, delivery men coming in. Barry didn't like strangers much. He didn't know what to say to them. If they talked to him and asked him questions, he got scared and could only mumble and blush. But if they just talked by themselves and paid no attention to him, it was even worse. He would shift on his feet and

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feel about ten times fatter than he was. He would wonder if they weren't ignoring him purposely. If they suddenly burst out laughing, he was sure it was because somebody had said something funny about him.

The doorman was Irish. He had a big red face, and he kept talking about how cold the weather was.

What a relief when Dad's car finally pulled up to the awning.

On the way to school he didn't have to be nervous. The chauffeur was colored, and he never said anything except hello and good-by. The ride took about fifteen minutes — school was on the West Side, a private school in a three-story building all its own. The only bad thing was when the car stopped for a light, and Barry got the feeling that people on the street were staring at him through the window. He knew how funny he must look to them, a small boy sitting alone in such a long black car, with a uniformed chauffeur all for himself. Little rich sissy.

And then he got to school. The car pulled up to the long stone steps. He looked around, hoping that none of the kids from his class would see him. Then he pushed open the door and scooted up the steps as quick as he could, without a single look back.

There was a school bus, and some of the fellows even came to school by themselves, on the subway. But Mother wouldn't listen to Barry when he tried to bring this up. "Now let's discuss this reasonably, darling," she said. "Why on earth should we spend money on a bus? What else have we got a beautiful car of our own for? Go to school by yourself? On the streets all by yourself, with the stories in the papers nowadays? Certainly not! Now what are you sniffling about? In our family we don't sniffle, we talk things over reasonably."

After a while Barry stopped mentioning the subject to Mother.

So he was in school now. School was all right, except for some things. Some of the teachers were nice, and some of them Barry

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was scared of. Miss Everett, arithmetic, was nice. She talked very fast and wore glasses with a string on them. She had a special way of saying, "That's *very* good, Barry Morris." Mr. Bullfinch, music appreciation, was terrible. He had a little black mustache and a worn-out disgusted way of talking. In the middle of choral singing one day, he stopped everybody else and made Barry sing the first two lines all by himself: "Oh 'twas the month of May, and the birds did merrily sing." Then he sighed and shook his head and said in front of everybody, "From now on, Morris, suppose you just move your mouth to the music but don't let any sound come out."

The last period of school was always the worst. That was gym. Sometimes it was touch football or basketball, and sometimes it was exercises or chinning yourself. Barry never stopped squirming. Stripped to the waist, with flapping shorts and sneakers, he knew that the whole world was laughing at his thick legs, his stomach, his round shoulders, his glasses. And Mr. Anderson, the gym coach, used to come up behind him and run his hand down his spine and bellow out, "Posture, fellow! Posture!"

He had three or four close friends. He was with them all the time. He listened to their conversations, he laughed at their jokes, sometimes he even passed notes and funny drawings during class — though he wasn't as brave about this as some of the others. It hadn't been easy making these friends, when he first started at school. But that was a long time ago, back in first grade. He was in fifth grade now, and he'd been with this same bunch all the way through, and they were used to him by now.

School was over at five o'clock. Another bad time on the front steps. Everybody piling into the buses, or little groups of two or three walking to the subway, and Barry had to stand there waiting for the car to pick him up. Once, he had even worked up enough courage to ask the chauffeur if he wouldn't park the car a block away, around the corner, so that Barry could pretend *he*

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was walking to the subway too. But the chauffeur didn't understand, he just grinned and said, "Don't you worry about that, Mistuh Barry, just as easy for me to come right up to the front, no cause for you to go walking."

The drive home was nice. Especially in the winter, when it got dark early and people on street corners couldn't see into the car so easy. It wasn't until he was actually riding up in the elevator, getting closer and closer to the penthouse, counting the floors as they zipped by, that his regular worry about dinnertime started up again.

Mother would be waiting for him in the living room. She would kiss him. Then he would go to his room, put away his books, wash up slowly. But he couldn't wash up forever. Eventually he had to come out of his room and go back to Mother and Dad. Then dinner began.

Always in the same way. "Now then," Mother announced, bright and clear, "what did everybody do with themselves today? Has it been an enjoyable day for all of us?"

The first one she turned to was Dad. He wiped his mouth with his napkin. The napkin fell out of his hand, and he had to bend down and pick it up. "Well, well — nothing of great importance. A rather interesting case at the clinic this afternoon."

"Yes, I happened to call up your office while you were out," Mother said. "I notice you still have that peculiar woman as your receptionist."

"What did you call about, dear? Something about your health?"

"Nothing important. I was in the Men's Shop at Saks, and I couldn't remember your shirt size. It came back to me after I hung up. You know, you did say you were going to replace that peculiar woman."

"Now she isn't so bad, Muriel dear. Miss Finn has been with me for twenty years."

"I appreciate that fact, Henry." Mother gave her sweet little

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smile. "You know what a high value I place on the qualities of loyalty and generosity and consideration for others. But circumstances have changed in twenty years — now be honest about it, haven't they? You're not located in that dreary hotel on the West Side any more. You're a medical man of some importance now, you have a position to maintain. And you know, poor Miss Finn isn't getting any younger. There's no point in evading reality, she's an old woman now. The way she acts around the office — calling you 'Doc' right in front of your patients, and telling those obscene jokes of hers, and calling me 'Dearie' over the phone."

"She means well. It's just that she's known me ever since I was practically a boy, and she takes a certain motherly attitude towards me."

"Exactly the point. You see, Henry, I felt sure we were basically in agreement on the matter. That motherly attitude was lovely and touching twenty years ago, but nowadays it simply isn't fair to you. Of course she doesn't really know any better, poor thing, but that's exactly *why* — You understand, dear, I'm just trying to give you my personal opinion, in an objective way. In the end, you must make your own decision."

Mother went on and on, while Dad sipped water and stirred up his fruit cup and dropped his napkin again.

In the middle of the roast beef, Mother got to Barry.

"Did you have a nice day in school today? Anything exciting happen?"

Barry managed to make some sort of answer. Mother listened to it, nodding, her smile fixed on her face. Before long she cut him off. "And of course, you spoke to your homeroom teacher about that little matter I mentioned to you?"

The "little matter" might have been almost anything. Every week or so there was some new "little matter" that she wanted him to talk to his teacher about, some queer thing she wanted him to ask for. Usually it was something to do with one of her "causes"

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or her "projects." Mother was always having causes or projects. The winter he was eight, for instance, she was a vegetarian. Vegetables were all they had for dinner at night, and Mother kept telling him to let the school know that he should get only vegetable plates for lunch. Three or four nights a week she was after him about this, and he gave her a different excuse every time, and it always ended up with her saying she would call up the school herself the next morning. It would have killed Barry — he was sure of it, he would have died of it right on the spot — everybody else eating meat and him getting vegetable plates, and when people asked him why, having to say, "My mother's a vegetarian."

But Mother never *did* call up the school herself. She just told him she would, every few nights, so that the next day at lunch he would hold his breath while he waited for the first course.

Sometimes, in the middle of this discussion of the "little matter," Dad would speak up. "Muriel dear," he would say, after clearing his throat, "don't you think the school authorities might hold it against the boy if you asked them to change the rules on his account?"

Mother would turn her smile on Dad and answer him without raising her voice, "Do you mean, Henry, that some arbitrary rule is more important, in your opinion, than your son's health? No, I can't believe you were really saying a thing like *that*. I misunderstood your remark, didn't I?"

Dad would lower his head quickly and go back to his food.

Then Mother's smile would return to Barry, and she would start in again, quiet and calm and reasonable. And Barry would try his hardest to block out the sound of her voice by concentrating on his food, his silverware, the spots on the tablecloth.

Dinner was finally over. He could jump up from the table and blurt out, "I've got homework," and rush off to his own room. Mother never tried to hold him back, she never insisted on continuing the discussion. Somehow, with the end of dessert, her in-

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terest in the "little matter" went away. For the rest of the evening she was happy to listen to the radio or read her *Atlantic Monthly* or play solitaire. Whatever went on in the privacy of Barry's bedroom, the little world he stepped into when the door shut behind him, wasn't even known to her. It was one of the secrets that he had been hiding from Mother and Dad for years and years now, for as long as he could remember.

S S S

Henry Morris was in his last year of interneship when he met Muriel Herbert. In June, less than a week after his interneship was completed, he married her. "They're so suited to each other," everybody said. "Both of them so serious-minded and intellectual, interested in classical music and good books and the finer things of life. And if Muriel isn't really the *prettiest* girl in the world, she more than makes up for it in charm and intelligence and a generally magnetic personality. What's more, there's always been a touch of dreaminess and impracticality about Henry, as if he didn't quite live on this planet of ours. And it's so important for a doctor to have a sense of social obligation and the ability to get along with the right people, as *well* as a good medical mind. Well, that's where Muriel can be such a big help to him. Idealistic as she is, Muriel has a good strong *efficient* side to her. When she sets out to do a thing, she gets it done. In short, they're really the ideal couple."

There was one person, however, who kept quiet on the subject. This was Henry's friend Charlie Clifford, who had gone through four years of medical school and two years of interneship with him.

As long as Henry had known him, Charlie had indulged in cynical wisecracks about marriage – kidding, but also not quite kidding. Henry used to laugh and murmur, "Yes, yes, you're probably right." Not so much because he agreed with Charlie – actu-

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ally he neither agreed nor disagreed – but because Charlie was such a good talker, it would have been a shame to discourage him from talking.

After Henry met Muriel, Charlie's talk about marriage grew more cynical and pointed, and less kidding, than ever. He took advantage of every opportunity, it seemed, to come out with remarks like, "With all the troubles a doctor has to face in this world, it's beyond me why any sane one should saddle himself with a wife. . . . Sweet bachelorhood – that's the only life for a doctor, they ought to put it in the Hippocratic oath." And when Henry answered mildly with words like "comfort" and "consolation" and "helpmate," Charlie just waved his arm impatiently. "The comfort and consolation of being spied on, nagged at, and having your money spent twice as fast as you can make it – God spare me from such comfort and consolation!" Once or twice Henry even felt a little annoyed at Charlie for this attitude. But Henry was too good-natured to stay annoyed at anyone for long – especially Charlie, who was like a brother to him.

In March, when the engagement was announced, Charlie's harangues about marriage came to a stop. From that moment right up to the time of the wedding, Charlie never said another word against the married state. Henry was grateful to him for the delicacy of his silence. And he knew it wasn't Charlie's fault if his face revealed his true feelings more clearly than his words could ever have done. Charlie just happened to have that sort of face.

So Henry excused his friend and attributed his attitude, with an indulgent smile, to his views on marriage in general. It never occurred to him for a moment how much Charlie's attitude had to do with his views on Muriel in particular.

It occurred to Muriel. Within three years after the wedding, Charlie and Henry were seeing each other only once a week or less, at the West Side Chess and Checkers Club. Into these few hours they squeezed as much fondness as they could, but neither

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of them was ever tempted to pursue the friendship any further.

Just as people had predicted, Henry's career flourished with Muriel to help him. His rise in the world was even a little bewildering to himself. That was because he spent so much of his time rushing to places — from cocktail parties to week-end visits to conventions to evenings of bridge. And when he wasn't rushing, he was listening to instructions from Muriel — how to eat his soup at Medical Association dinners, what sort of neckties to wear for his wealthy female patients, what pattern of wallpaper to use in his new office. As the years went by, he moved three times to a slightly bigger office, at a slightly better address.

Only once in all this time did he put up any opposition to the plans that were made for him. That was when Muriel decided he was holding himself back by being just an ordinary general practitioner. In modern times, she said, the truly successful doctor must be some sort of specialist. When he pointed out to her that becoming a specialist means going to school for two or three years, she smiled and said she had been looking into the situation. He would become a consulting diagnostician. He wouldn't have to waste time at any specialist's school, he would simply specialize in what he knew already. He would diagnose cases for other doctors who called him in and leave the treatments to somebody else. In one stroke he would be relieved of the tedium of visiting hours, small children with runny noses, self-indulgent old ladies who wanted their hands held, exhausting routine with no prestige to it whatsoever.

Henry himself wasn't really sure why he objected so violently to this plan. He brought out one reason after another, each of which Muriel demolished with no trouble at all. He couldn't afford to be a consulting diagnostician, he said, he would lose most of his practice. He would gain a bigger, more lucrative practice, she answered; she had already broached the idea to several important doctors of their acquaintance, and they were all enthusi-

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astic about it and willing to lend their personal support. He wouldn't be very good as a diagnostician, he said, he really didn't think his talents extended in that direction. Nonsense, she said, he spent half his time diagnosing illnesses as it was, didn't he? So why shouldn't he receive a specialist's fees and prestige for it? But it wasn't exactly very honest, he said, to give people the impression that you've had special training when, in fact, you haven't. Honest! she cried. How could he lecture her about honesty? Didn't he know by now how high were her standards of honesty? It was just *because* of her sense of honesty and justice that she felt he no longer had any right to hide his light under a bushel —

For almost a week Henry kept up the struggle. His confidence crumbled under the pounding of Muriel's logic. His stomach fluttered at one of her reasonable looks. He would have given anything for a little peace and quiet — and yet, in spite of himself, he held out.

The truth was, none of the reasons he gave to Muriel was his real reason for hating her plan so intensely. The real reason was that this ordinary routine of a general practitioner, this tedious round of runny noses, stomach-aches, and visiting hours, was more congenial to him than he realized himself. He thrived on his daily turnover of kids and old ladies, rich and not so rich, familiar faces that he had known for years. He enjoyed the bustle, the exchange of warmed-over jokes, the steady stream of gossip. But now, as a consulting diagnostician, he would have to give up all that. He would see only the people that other doctors, with whom he had made some previous arrangement, wanted him to see. There would be no such thing any more as a regular patient, no second family which he could look forward to visiting when he started off for his office every morning. Only a cold mechanical appointment book and a ritual of medical bowing and scraping between his colleagues and himself.

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He fought hard to hold on to the life he loved, but in the end he gave in, as he knew he would from the start. And a good thing he gave in too. Because by the time he reached his fortieth birthday, he was a rich man with a Park Avenue office. Muriel had turned out to be absolutely right.

She always turned out to be right. She was the ideal wife, just as people had told him before he married her. As the years went on, her manner grew brighter, her mind more forceful. Even her looks improved. Everybody said that success had turned Muriel into a positively handsome woman. What's more, she was devoted to him, no taint of unfaithfulness ever crept into his married life as it had into the lives of so many of his friends and his patients. Under the circumstances, what reason could he possibly have to feel the least bit unhappy or dissatisfied? Why should these vague little yearnings for heaven knows what ever come over him? Why should he lapse more and more into fits of absent-mindedness when nothing at all seemed to go through his mind? There was no reason at all for these things, he told himself, and so these things didn't exist, they were simply the result of an overactive imagination, probably because he had been working too hard.

For a long time he thought that his imagination would stop being overactive if Muriel and he could have children. And then, rather late in their lives — Henry was forty-one, and Muriel was thirty-eight — Barry was born. Very soon he showed himself to be the perfect son for a man like Henry. He was shy and sweet-tempered, unsure of himself but quickly fond of people who were fond of him. A lot like *I* was as a child, Henry often thought. Physically too — the same heavy lumbering figure, the tendency to plumpness, the untidy black hair and soft chubby features, the nearsightedness that caused a pair of thick glasses to be perched on the boy's nose before he was seven.

The presence in his home of such a son should certainly have snapped Henry right out of this strange lethargy which had been

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growing on him through the years. He was full of love and concern for the boy. He did all he could to protect the boy from the shocks and strains around him, and to comfort him and cheer him up when the protection failed. He even had heart-to-heart talks with the boy — always beginning very earnestly, with the greatest good will and affection on both sides. And yet — why did the heart-to-heart talks seem to peter out in the middle, why did the spark seem to die away inside of Henry before it had a chance to work up into a self-respecting warmth? If he had been burdened with a wild uncontrollable type of son, like that King boy people were always talking about at the country club — he wasn't much older than Barry, but already he had got into all sorts of scrapes, and he had run away from home twice, people said — But Henry didn't have a boy like that. He had a fine, intelligent, well-mannered boy that a man could be proud of. Why should he have any trouble talking to a boy like that?

He shouldn't. And he didn't either. It was that imagination of his again —

On Thursday night, nearly every week, Henry saw Charlie Clifford at the Chess and Checkers Club. At least once in the course of this night Charlie was sure to drawl out his favorite question, "How's married life these days? Tell me the truth now." And Henry never had the slightest difficulty about looking his old friend straight in the eye and answering in a steady voice, "It's the only life in the world. It's still not too late for you to try it, you know." And when he started for home in the early hours of the morning, the same pitying little thought always crossed his mind: Poor Charlie, with all his success as a heart man, what good does it do him, how can he enjoy it, living all by himself in some depressing hotel room?

And so passed the first twenty-two years of marriage for Henry Morris. As for Muriel, she had no doubts about these twenty-two years. They were good, successful years. She had set out to get

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certain things, and by and large she had got them. If there was still a restless little something inside of her, pushing her on from one project to the next, from socialism to Christian Science to vegetarianism, it was certainly no larger or more important than a cinder in the eye. She could forget about it in an instant by reminding herself of the tremendous distance she had traveled since the days before her marriage, when she was still one of Professor Herbert's girls living in genteel poverty on the edge of Washington Heights. No doubt about it, she often told herself, she had achieved her ideals. And in the years to come she planned to achieve even greater and finer ideals, for the sake of the two people she cared about most on this earth, her husband and her son.

S S S

Barry shut the door behind him. He was alone in his room now. Pretty soon the moment would come.

It didn't take much to get ready for the moment. Nothing was hidden under the bed or behind the dresser or inside his chemistry set in the closet. If his secret had depended on anything silly like that, it would have been found out a long time ago. He knew that Mother went through his room while he was at school. His secret was so much simpler and more wonderful, and Mother couldn't have spied it out in a million years, not even if she burst into his room while he was in the middle of it.

All he had to do was stretch out on his back and shut his eyes. He did it now, forcing himself not to hurry, holding in his excitement purposely, so that he could enjoy it more later on. Almost ready now. Get into a comfortable position. Head back on the pillow. Slowly, softly let the darkness pour in. One second more —

He was walking down the road again. Or maybe he was on the boat, in the middle of the storm. No, he felt more like the road tonight. He was walking down the road. It was out in the country somewhere. On either side of him tall trees were stretching up to

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the sky, the way they did at that hotel in Connecticut where Mother and Dad took him for Easter vacation last year. The sun was shining. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

Then he heard the shout for help. It was faint and far away, it sounded as if somebody was in pain. He began to run. He ran faster and faster. The shout was growing nearer. But it was growing more desperate too. He turned a curve in the road, and there they were. There were four men — big heavy-set men, with dirty clothes and brutal faces — and they were bending over somebody. Barry couldn't see the somebody, but he could see that the four men were beating him terribly. One of them was kicking him in the side. Another one was sitting on his chest and slapping his face. Another one was twisting his arms back over his head. And the fourth one, the worst of all, wasn't doing anything really, he was just standing and watching the whole thing with a cruel evil grin on his face.

Barry stopped short. His first thought was to turn and run away in the opposite direction. And then he saw who it was that the men were beating. He saw the fine purple garments, the yellow sash, the ruffles at the sleeves, the thin pale face with the light blond hair. It was the Prince, of course. Barry recognized him, not from having seen him before, but from his own hopes and dreams. Right away everything else went out of his head. He knew only one thing — the Prince was being murdered by villains, and *he* had arrived in time to save his life.

He plunged forward. He grabbed an arm. He pulled, kicked, flailed around with his fists. Fists were pummeling back at him. But he hardly felt the blows against his cheeks and his body, they were dull thuds that seemed to be happening to somebody else off in the distance. Then he was face to face with that fourth man, the leader of the group. That evil grin was right before his eyes. The thick lips curled a little in pleasure and contempt, the hands lifted and started to close around his throat. He pulled his arm

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back, made a fist, and smashed it into that grin as hard as he could. Anyway, that's what he must have done, though for him there was only the noise, the blood, the countryside whirling around him, because the grin got soft and wet under his fist, and the huge creature crumpled to the ground.

The other three, seeing this, stopped plucking at Barry's back, turned away from the victim at their feet, and scampered down the road. They soon disappeared, and their leader had disappeared too, though Barry couldn't remember having seen him get up. He was left alone now with the Prince.

His courage went right out of him as the Prince rose to his feet. The Prince dusted himself off, wiped the blood from his nose, then faced his rescuer. He was Barry's own age, maybe a few months older, but so much calmer and more confident, handsome and aristocratic and royal-looking, with easy graceful gestures and no babyish chubbiness in his face. Barry began to tremble. He trembled a lot harder now than when he had first caught sight of those four men.

The Prince made no effort to smile or put him at his ease. His expression was aloof, his voice was cold. And this, Barry felt, was just as it should be. "You have saved my life," the Prince said. "Ask any favor, and I will grant it to you."

The words echoed in Barry's head even before the Prince had spoken them. He was so familiar with these words from his dreams. His answer was all ready. How many times had he rehearsed it to himself, alone in his own room! But his trembling kept him from coming out with it right away. "I — I'd like — " He stammered, took a breath, then blurted it out, "I want to be your slave! I want to wait on you, I want to do your commands, I want my life to be your own!" He threw himself down at the Prince's feet and clutched his knees, the way the suppliants do in the King Arthur stories.

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He waited awhile, breathing hard, not daring to look up. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. The hand was gentle, but when he looked up, the face was just as cold and royal as ever. "Very well. I hereby grant your favor. From now on you are my personal slave and your life is completely and absolutely in my hands."

This was the moment. Everything so far had been building up to this moment. He kissed the Prince's hand – that was in the King Arthur stories too – and cried out, "Thank you! Oh, thank you, my Prince! Thank you!"

"Rise, slave," the Prince said, drawing his hand away. "We will go to the palace, and find a proper uniform for you, and then I have exploits for which I need your assistance – "

"What on earth are you doing here in the dark?"

A flood of light. Barry sat up, blinking. It took a few seconds for Mother's face to come into focus.

"It's not your bedtime yet," she said. "Have you done your homework for tomorrow?"

"I've only got my chapter to read in history," he said.

"Well, don't you think you ought to read it, dear? You know, the sooner you start, the sooner it will be over with and off your mind. That's only sensible, isn't it?"

He mumbled something.

"Well then, where's your book," she said. "Is this it here? All right now, I'll open it up to the right page. Now don't you turn off the light again, because I'll be sticking my head out from the living room every once in a while, and I'll be able to see if it's shining under the door." She patted his cheek and laughed, and then she was shutting the door behind her.

He lay on his back again. He shut his eyes and tried to get back into it. The Prince would take him to the place now. The people there, the beautiful ladies and the fine gentlemen, would snub

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him and sneer at him, but the Prince would protect him from their scorn. And then, when he was fitted out in a green tunic with baggy knees and tight stockings, he would set off with the Prince on all sorts of adventures, obeying the Prince's orders without question or hesitation, risking his life at the Prince's slightest whim.

He shut his eyes tighter than ever. But he could still feel the light against his eyeballs. The pillow was crumpled up under his neck, and the bedspread had grown itchy. He tried for a long time more, but it just wouldn't happen again, it was over for tonight.

The history book was open on his desk. He went over to it, let the words pass before his eyes. It was the history of New York City, with Peter Stuyvesant, and the Indians, and pictures of old Dutch houses. The chapter was short. Pretty soon he had finished it. He closed up the book. Nothing of what he had read stayed in his head.

His thoughts strayed back to the Prince and the four men. It was good today, he told himself. It was just as good as ever. It was even better than ever.

Only it wasn't, he told himself. What was wrong with it these days anyway? Why wasn't it like it used to be?

Before he could stop it, the question came into his head, the question which he didn't like to think about because it always made him feel so funny. Could it ever really come true? Was there any chance at all that there really was a prince somewhere, a young prince with his thin face and his royal look? Thinking about him was all right, but suppose there was actually a way of finding him —

What about God? he wondered. Maybe, if he prayed to God as hard as he could — maybe God would reach down and produce the one he was hoping for out of thin air, like the magician at his birthday party. No! he broke off with a sharp shake of his head.

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You can't ask God for terrible things like that. Something terrible would happen to you.

A lump rose to Barry's throat. Dope, what a dope, he was going to start crying.

II

WHEN Paul King was born, in November 1932, his father was so pleased that he was almost able to ignore the great national disaster which took place on the same night — the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President of the United States. A disaster like that is a big thing to a man in the brokerage business, but not as big as having a son after fifteen years of marriage and three daughters.

The news came to him at three o'clock in the morning. For hours he had been pacing the floor of the oak-paneled den in his three-story brownstone off Fifth Avenue, while the radio blared at him with swing music and election returns. His wife was having trouble. The doctors had expected it. Her health was delicate even when Arthur married her, and it had been getting more and more delicate through the years. Her nerves had never been very good. Ellen's birth four years ago had given her a pretty bad time. Some of the doctors had advised her not to have any more children after that. But doctors are a lot of damn fools generally — it's their business to pull long faces and make gloomy predictions. Arthur still didn't have a son. So he and Harriet talked it over, and they agreed that one more try wouldn't do any harm.

When the hospital called him up and told him that it was all over, Arthur asked three questions: Was it a boy? Was he going to be all right? How was the mother doing?

The answers couldn't have been better. It was a boy. He was

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strong and healthy. The mother was weak, but she would pull through. Arthur swigged down a double Scotch, then he went to bed and slept more soundly than he had slept for weeks.

He called the hospital as soon as he woke up the next morning. They told him that his wife and son couldn't have any visitors till after lunch. That was all right with Arthur. He could spend the first half of the day down at his office and his club. He was looking forward to telling people the news.

Down at his office the reaction was just exactly right. The secretaries sighed and clasped their hands sentimentally. The junior clerks had a big competition to see who could shake his hand most sincerely and congratulate him most warmly. Arthur knew damn well why they were being so warm and sincere. Once upon a time he himself had been a young man trying to get ahead on the Street. Butter up the boss, push yourself to the front, grab every chance you get — well, that was okay with Arthur, his knowledge of their motives didn't for one minute spoil his enjoyment of their flattery. As a matter of fact, it *added* to his enjoyment. It was a nice feeling, to be on the receiving end of the butter and to know that that's how it would always be for his son.

He got a special kick out of announcing the news to old Vincent Connors, his partner. "Well, I've got a son and heir, Vincent," he said. "We don't have to worry any more, it looks like we'll have somebody to take over the business."

The old man blinked and smiled sort of vaguely. Then he got to his feet in his slow shaky way and held out his hand. The hand was trembling, of course. There wasn't much left of the loud, energetic old tyrant who had been running things when Arthur first came to work for the firm. This feeble old man who stood across the desk from Arthur used to be able to deliver a down-to-earth, old-fashioned, rip-roaring bawling out that would reduce the cockiest young clerk to jelly. Arthur still remembered the first time such a bawling out had been delivered to him. It was right

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afterwards that he had made up his mind to take over this business someday.

"I'm happy for you, Arthur," the old man was saying now. "I couldn't be happier for you."

"That's kind of you, Vincent," Arthur said. "Why don't you come into my office, and we'll have a drink on it."

"No, no — thank you," the old man's eyes grew even vaguer than usual, "but I really shouldn't — so much work to clear up — "

Arthur couldn't help laughing. Old Vincent Connors and his work! Actually it was over ten years since the old man had done any work in the firm except dozing behind his desk in a sitting position. Arthur kept his name on the door and let him have this little room to himself mainly for old times' sake — and because the firm still had some clients who weren't quite reconciled to Arthur's fast modern methods, who got a feeling of reassurance from the stiff wing collar and respectable wrinkles of old Vincent Connors.

"Okay, you get back to work," Arthur said. He laughed again and walked out of the room.

The rest of the morning was pretty busy. Clients in and out every half hour. And Sam Russo kept calling him on the phone, pestering him about those aluminum shares. Arthur put off Sam with a few soothing words and a new joke about two Irishmen who go into the salami business. He was carrying on his own private manipulations with those aluminum shares, and by the end of the week Sam would be out of it for good and he'd never know what hit him. In the meantime, why not keep him happy?

Busy as he was, though, Arthur found time to tell his big news to everybody he saw and to offer them a drink on it. At twelve-thirty he set off for lunch, warm and tingling from the whiskey, hardly able to wait until he was with the boys at the club.

He was proud of his membership in the Cosmopolis Club, so proud that he went all the way uptown two or three times a week

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to have lunch there. When he was a kid, starting off on the Street, he used to hear the big shots talk about "the club." He used to pass the imposing gray building in the East Fifties every once in a while, and he would see dignified men in conservative suits marching out or driving up in their long cars. He was a young nobody in those days, the son of a Stock Exchange clerk who had dipped his nose in ink for fifty years without putting a penny in the bank. It was quite a trick for the grubby old clerk's son to push himself up from the sidewalk through those heavy gray doors. Even after he was a partner with Vincent Connors, and known as one of the coming young men, he hadn't been able to get into the Cosmopolis Club — mainly because old Paul Franklyn, the banker, had been chairman of the Admissions Board. He had been forced to wait nearly five years, making his plans all the time, until he had got together enough pressure to put on old Paul Franklyn. Well, that was a long time ago. Everybody in the club called him by his first name now. He was up for the chairmanship of the House Committee. On Tuesday nights he sat in on the biggest poker game, with two bank presidents and a newspaper tycoon, and he didn't have to worry for one minute about the stakes.

He had lunch today with two of his closest pals, Jerry Phillips the insurance man, and Walt Harmon the lawyer. They were about Arthur's own age, and pretty well fixed, both of them, but of course they weren't self-made men, like he was. The firm of Harmon, Harmon, and Harmon had been successful corporation lawyers in the time of Walt's grandfather, and Jerry Phillips had been born with money even before he had married it. Not that Arthur didn't like Walt and Jerry. They were the greatest guys in the world — he had never felt it more strongly than he did at this moment.

When he came out with the news, Jerry started kidding him about it right away. Jerry had a reputation for being a big kidder

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— wisecracks, practical jokes, life of the party. A lot of these funny-looking little fellows were like that. "So you finally did it, Artie," Jerry said. "Believe me, I'm proud of you. Three out of four tries, and all you could get was a mere baby. But now you finally hit the jackpot, you finally managed to produce a junior partner!"

"Junior partner, hell!" Arthur said. "This kid is going to be such a business brain that I won't be able to keep up with him. One of these days he's going to drive me out of my job and make me *his* junior partner." Arthur guessed that he knew how to keep up with Jerry's kidding when he had to.

"He's a lucky boy," Walt said, in his solemn tone of voice. Walt did everything solemnly, and with a little sigh, as if he took it for granted that things would go wrong somehow. He was thirty-six, but he looked like fifty. "There aren't many boys who come into the world in such ideal circumstances. Money, a loving family, a wonderful career all ready to step into."

"And why not?" Arthur said. "What's wrong with that, for Christ's sake?" There was something about Walt Harmon's mildest, most offhand remarks that always seemed to put you on the defensive. "Why shouldn't a kid start off with all the advantages? I wish to hell my father had been able to give *me* the advantages. Well, I can afford to give them to *my* kid, I don't mind telling you, so I'm damn well going to do it."

"Certainly, certainly," Walt said. "I never meant to imply there was anything wrong with it." And he gave one of his softest sighs.

"And I don't mean that I'm going to spoil this kid either," Arthur said, just as if Walt had accused him of it. "He's got a rich father, and a business all ready for him, like you say — and that's nothing to be ashamed about, by God. But at the same time, there's something I had to learn when I was a kid, and *my* kid is going to learn it too."

"Where to find a good cheap lay," Jerry said.

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Arthur laughed quickly, then pushed on, "This is no joke, though. What he has to learn is, it's a hard world. And a man has to be hard if he's going to get anywhere in it. All my life I had to fight for what I got, and I tell you right now, my son's going to be a fighter too." He came to a stop with a sharp satisfied nod.

Walt Harmon frowned down at the tablecloth. "You're right, of course, it *is* a hard world. But after all, there are other things in life too. Love, and friendship, and charity — "

"And a good cheap lay," Jerry said.

Arthur shot him a hard look. Sometimes Jerry's sense of humor got to be a goddamned nuisance. There are times when people ought to know when to stop joking. "Where the hell are those drinks?" Arthur said. "I want to make a toast to my son."

The drinks finally came, and there was another round with the food. Pretty soon Arthur was back in his best humor again. And it wasn't just the liquor either. The time was getting close when he could see his son, and the excitement was beginning to grow inside of him. When he finally said so long to Walt and Jerry in front of the club, he couldn't hide that he was excited, a little anxious even.

"Take it easy, Artie," Jerry said. "It can't possibly have more than two heads."

"I'm sure it's a fine-looking boy," Walt said, in his gloomiest voice.

Arthur told the cab driver to hurry and asked him several times during the trip why the hell he was going out of his way to get snarled up in the traffic. Later, all the way up in the hospital elevator, he tapped his foot impatiently. Finally he was in the room with Harriet.

She was looking terribly small and scrawny. Her face was pasty, and her lips were blue. Her hair hung down to her shoulders listlessly. She smiled up at him weakly, and he had to strain to catch her words. "It's all right, Arthur. There was some pain —

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it wasn't bad at all really. Those doctors were just being foolish, just like you said."

He sat down next to her on the bed and took the hand she held out to him. "Sure they were," he said. "Didn't I tell you? Nothing at all to worry about."

He looked at her in silence, and for a moment he thought of the breathless, bright-eyed little girl he had married. Little Harriet Sheldon from Memphis. The biggest catch in her set – pretty, smart, money in the family. He had met her when she came North on a trip with her parents – her father was a friend of old Vincent Connors. A few months later he had visited the family down in Memphis, he had seen the boys hanging around her, mooning over her – boys from the best families in town. He had danced with her that night, and she had done all the talking, chattering away about parties and dresses, and how bored she got with her life sometimes, how silly and empty it seemed, how much she admired and envied people who were useful and vigorous and independent. She had enchanted him then – actually enchanted him. What had become of her anyway? Where did that bright rosy complexion go? When did that scared-rabbit look creep into her eyes? What had happened to her in fifteen years that made her change so completely? This wasn't the first time he'd asked himself that question, but he still wasn't able to answer it.

He let go of her hand. "Well, where is he, Harriet? Don't they let a father look at his own son around here?"

So the bell was rung, and a few minutes later the nurse appeared with the baby. He was placed next to Harriet on the bed, and Arthur stood over him uncertainly.

It was just a baby. Small, red, and wrinkled, like every other baby he had ever seen. The mouth opened, and loud steady squeals burst out of it. Weak and helpless, Arthur thought. That's how they all begin, all just as weak and helpless. And suddenly

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his feeling of disappointment went away, and a feeling of determination filled him. It was just *because* they began so weak and helpless that you had to be especially careful with them, you had to start toughening them up as soon as possible. That was a father's job, to make his son into the kind of man the world would look up to –

The baby's screams grew louder. Harriet drew him closer to her. "Now hush," she said. "Now it's all right. Mother's here, and everything's all right."

"You don't have to whine over him," Arthur said. "He looks strong and healthy enough. I think the nurse better take him back now."

"It's only been a few minutes, Arthur."

"That's all right, she better take him anyway. We've got some things to talk about."

The baby was taken away. Arthur paced up and down a moment, then stopped and faced Harriet. "What are we going to name him?"

"I haven't thought about it," she said, blinking up at him. "We could name him after you. Arthur, Junior."

It was an idea. Arthur liked it at first, but then he shook his head. He didn't want people calling his kid "Junior." It was a sissy's name. He paced a little more, then stopped again. "What about Paul? I always liked that name. We'll call him Paul." After a pause, he looked at her. "Do you want to call him Paul?"

"Paul –" Her lips trembled. "Yes – it's a beautiful name."

So it was settled. A few minutes later Arthur left the hospital.

During dinner that night, back at Fifth Avenue, his daughters were full of questions about the new baby. Joan and Martha, who were twelve and fourteen years old, wanted to know about his size, his measurements, his feeding habits, the hospital routine. Ellen, who was only four, wanted to know when he could come home, so she could start playing with him.

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After dinner Arthur kissed his daughters good night and went back to the club. It wasn't his regular poker game, but he hated to spend a night alone.

His cards weren't bad, but he was a heavy loser anyway. Actually his mind wasn't on the game. He kept thinking about that squealing red-faced little creature on the bed. Then he would push away that image and put in its place a tall, handsome young man with a briefcase in his hand. A thick brown leather briefcase with his initials on it. The same kind of briefcase that Arthur himself carried down to his office every morning. And the secretaries would look at him with wide eyes, the junior clerks would scurry to obey his orders. People would see that Arthur King could make a success out of his son, just as he had made a success out of every other important thing in his life.

S S S

In November 1942, late in the afternoon of his tenth birthday, Paul King stood outside the door of his father's study and listened. He could hear the voices from inside. The high angry one must be Mrs. Riddell's. The thin one that faded in and out was his mother's. He couldn't hear his father's voice at all. He could imagine his father just sitting there, staring at Mrs. Riddell hard, taking it all in but giving nobody any idea which way he was going to jump. "Never let them know how you're going to jump —" That's what his father had said to him plenty of times. "Keep them talking and keep them hoping. Let them think they're getting somewhere with you. Then forget about them, and do what you please. That's the only smart way to handle people."

That sneaky Dickie Riddell! thought Paul. Running and crying to his mother, and after Paul gave him his mumblety-peg knife and told him he could be a member of the secret club! And it was all an accident anyway. Paul hadn't meant anything by it. That sneaky Dickie Riddell knew it too.

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Paul began to have the shakes again. Why was he doing that anyway? He tried to make his legs be still. What was there to get scared about anyway? It was only little sissies like Dickie Riddell that got scared over a thing like this. It was just nothing at all for somebody like him, he guessed. He was having a little fun, and there was an accident. His father would understand *that*. . . .

It had happened just that morning, Saturday morning. He had gone to the park after lunch to show his birthday present, his new watch, to Teddy Miller. Teddy was in the secret club with him. The secret club was Paul's own invention. He was the Grand Mogul, and he was the one who picked out the Assistant Grand Mogul. Some weeks it was Teddy Miller, and some weeks it was Eddie Seymour or Doug French or Larry Cookson or somebody else that he played with in the park on week ends. Whoever Paul wanted it to be. He didn't much care who, but he liked to keep switching around, he got tired of one Assistant Grand Mogul for too long. And he liked the way the fellows were always after him to pick them, always taking him aside and promising him things if only he'd kick out the one who was Assistant Grand Mogul right then.

Once the Assistant Grand Mogul was picked, then he and Paul would go off from the others and attend to "the secret business" of the club. They would get into a huddle and make up passwords and code signals and all, and they wouldn't tell the other fellows what these were, they would only drop a few hints. Sometimes they would play catch together or go to the zoo or look at the people on the park benches or climb the rocks. Then, when they got back to the other fellows, they would put on mysterious faces and talk about their "adventures," but they wouldn't say what those adventures had been, because that was against "the solemn oath" of the club.

Once, Eddie Seymour tried to start a secret club of his own, with Paul left out. But that didn't last very long. After a few

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hours, both Eddie himself and Larry Cookson, who had been picked as his Assistant Grand Mogul, came to Paul on the side and asked to join up with him and desert the other fellow.

But the one person who never got to be a member of the secret club, no matter what, was Dickie Riddell. Because he was such a crybaby, and so funny-looking with his big glasses, and whenever the least little thing happened to him he went bawling to the grownups. So nobody wanted to have anything to do with Dickie Riddell, except that when he was around you could have a lot of fun playing jokes on him.

Well, Paul went out to the park this morning and showed his watch to Teddy Miller. But after a while they got tired of looking at the watch and wondering what time it was in all different parts of the world, and none of the other fellows were around, and then all of a sudden Dickie came along.

Paul winked at Teddy and said, "Let's have a little fun with him."

Teddy started nodding, all excited. He was small and skinny, with messy red hair. It was the easiest thing in the world to get him excited about something. "What'll we do to him, Paul?"

"You just keep quiet and leave it to me."

Dickie was almost up to them now. Paul looked up and pretended to see him for the first time. "Hey!" he called out. Dickie stopped and flinched a little, as if somebody was starting to hit him. This kid was scared to death of him, Paul thought. Just the same, he kept hanging around, he couldn't seem to stay away. Some people are so dumb they ask for what they get.

Paul smiled. He used his charming smile. People were always saying, when they thought he couldn't hear them, what a charming smile he had. "That boy has personality," people used to say, especially his aunts and his older sisters and his mother's lady friends. "With that smile of his, it's just impossible to refuse him anything."

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So he smiled at Dickie now. And Dickie blushed a little and looked sort of dazed, as if he just couldn't believe in his good luck.

"Come over here," Paul said. "You're just the one we've been looking for."

"Me?" Dickie's voice was high and quivery. "You've been looking for me?"

"Well, of course we have. My gosh, Dickie, you know what I think of *you*. As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Dickie's eyes got very big. Teddy Miller forced back a splutter, and the smirk on his face would have been enough to give the whole joke away to anybody else. But that dumb Dickie Riddell wasn't looking anywhere except at Paul.

"We've been thinking," Paul went on, "it's about time we got another member into the secret club. And we've decided you're the perfect one."

The color went right out of Dickie's face. His mouth and his eyes showed all sorts of feelings, all the way from being afraid to being amazed to being happy and back again. Paul could hardly stop himself from laughing out loud. He had no patience with these little dopes who couldn't keep their feelings from showing on their faces. That was one thing Paul had always been good at, as long as he could remember, ever since he was a kid. He could make his face show whatever he wanted people to think he was feeling. He fooled them every time.

"Of course," Paul said, "you'll have to take the initiation."

"I didn't know there was — What's the initiation?"

"Well, it's pretty hard," Paul said. "I wouldn't want to fool you about that. It's probably the hardest initiation any club ever had. I'd like to forget about it just in your case — because I want you in the club so bad — but I can't do it. Teddy and me, we both took the initiation, so it wouldn't be fair to let you off."

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Dickie wet his lips. Paul could see him getting worried. He let him worry awhile, then he said, "Of course, if you don't want to belong to the club – If it doesn't matter to you that you'll be somebody special from now on, and all the fellows will want to be friends with you, but you'll be able to stick up your nose at them, because you'll have me and Teddy. Just the three of us, better than the whole bunch of them."

Sure enough, the worried look on Dickie's face was changing slowly. It was changing to an excited, eager sort of look – and sort of greedy too. This was Paul's favorite game of all, working on people like this, telling himself beforehand what he was going to make them do, and then watching them while he made them do it. It was an especially good game when there was somebody like Teddy Miller around, to watch him with admiration, the way Teddy was doing now.

"All right, I'll take the initiation," Dickie said in a small voice. "What do I do? It isn't too bad, is it?"

"It's very simple," Paul said. The idea had been in his mind for quite a while now, and he didn't have to work out any more of the details. "First we blindfold you – " With Teddy's help, he took off Dickie's glasses and tied a crumpled handkerchief over his eyes. Dickie complained all the way. They should be careful not to break his glasses. Did they have to use such a dirty handkerchief, didn't they know how allergic he was? They weren't going to do anything *sudden* to him while he was blindfolded, were they? The one thing he couldn't stand was sudden surprises.

They whirled him around and around until he was good and dizzy. "Please – that's enough. Please – my stomach."

"Okay, now we're taking you to the lake," Paul said.

"The lake? You're not going to throw me in the lake or anything, are you? I can't swim."

"Quiet, dog!" Paul said. "You are a lowly, miserable creature, and talking is not allowed during the initiation."

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"But Paul —"

"Quiet! And from this moment on, you will address me as Grand Mogul." He winked at Teddy. "And you will address my companion as Honored Assistant Grand Mogul."

They each took Dickie by an arm and hustled him across the grass towards the lake. A few people sat on benches in the distance, but Paul and Teddy flanked Dickie so closely on either side that these people couldn't see what was happening.

At the lake there was nobody at all. "Before you, dog, is the sacred water," Paul said. "There are three stones. The first is a small stone, in shallow water. The second is bigger, and the water is deeper. The third is a tall rock, you can see only a little bit of it above the water. Around this rock the lake is very deep, way over your head, much too deep for you to stand up. The Assistant Grand Mogul and I will now take you out to this rock."

"Out to the deep water — ?"

"Quiet!" Paul said, digging his fingers hard into Dickie's arm. He could feel the wince of pain under his fingers. But Dickie was quiet.

With Paul and Teddy steadying him, Dickie was made to go out onto the first stone. Then, the two of them calling at him from the bank, he went out to the second stone. There he stood while Paul ordered him to lift his foot and take the big step out to the third stone. Dickie didn't move. Paul's voice shouted away — loud and angry, not letting up for a second. Being nice to Dickie had done all it was going to do. Now he had to be scared into moving.

And pretty soon they saw Dickie stick out his foot, hold it in the air a moment, then step out to that third stone.

"Now watch out," Dickie was crying. "Don't do anything to me. Remember, I can't swim."

Paul's head was throbbing. The joke was almost more than he could bear — because the truth was, of course, the water around

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that third stone was no deeper than around the first two. It was just about up to Dickie's waist, and no more than that.

"Now we're going to take away those first two stones," Paul said, "so there's no way for you to get back to shore."

Paul and Teddy splashed the water with their hands and made grunting noises.

"All gone now," Paul said. "That's the initiation. You just stand out there awhile. And don't take off the blindfold, because if you do, you won't get into the club, and we'll drown you in revenge. The Assistant Mogul and me are going away now, but we'll be back in six or seven hours. Well, good-by."

It was perfect, it couldn't have worked better. There was Dickie, huddled up on that stone a few feet from the shore, his face almost as white as his blindfold. And there were Paul and Teddy, being very quiet, holding in their giggles. And then, in a little while, just as Paul had planned, Dickie began to get panicky. Uncertain little cries at first. "Paul? Teddy? Are you there?" Then the cries got louder. And then Dickie's arms were waving around. "Help! Somebody help me! I can't swim!" With his arms waving and his head bobbing, he reminded Paul of one of those funny-looking dolls in a Punch and Judy show. Any moment, it seemed, another doll would pop up and whack him over the head with a stick.

Teddy was nudging Paul. "He's pretty scared now. Maybe we better stop it."

Paul hardly heard him. He was staring at that stupid helpless Dickie Riddell. He was hoarse now from his yelling, and his words were just loud sobs. But he still hadn't taken off the blindfold. It was loose, and at one side it was beginning to slip down his cheek, but that little dope was still too scared of Paul to take it off.

All of a sudden his screams stopped. They could see him shud-

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dering. He was shuddering all over, but silently, not a word. Then they saw him lift his foot, hold it up as if he was searching for some place to put it, sway a little. A moment later he had lost his balance, he toppled into the water. His head went under.

Teddy gave Paul a look.

"Take it easy," Paul said. "That water isn't even up to his waist."

"Yes, but he's not coming up."

"He'll come up."

"He's just lying there. It's funny."

Paul could see for himself that it wasn't right. He could see the limp figure doubled up under the shallow water. He could almost feel it himself, the breath going out of him, the water rushing into his lungs. He had always wondered what it would be like to see a dead body.

A terrific shouting and splashing broke into his thoughts. Teddy was plunging into the water, clothes and all. He was bending down, scooping up the limp figure, half pulling and half carrying it back to the shore.

Dickie Riddell was on the ground now. High wild sobs were breaking out of him. His fists were clenched, his face was red and wrinkled like a little baby's.

"Sissy," Paul was muttering. "Little crybaby." But suddenly he was scared. What would happen to him if that little dope should die or something? He found himself pushing forward, kneeling down next to Dickie. "Okay, you're okay," he said. "Stop it. It was only a joke. We didn't mean anything by it. Stop it, will you."

He heard Teddy Miller behind his back. "I have to be going home, Paul—" He saw Teddy moving away quickly down the path. He started to call after him, "Wait a minute! If you leave now, you're out of the secret club!" A fresh burst of sobs from Dickie made him forget about Teddy.

For ten minutes he knelt down by the little crybaby, talking

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away as fast as he knew how. He promised him everything he could think of, his mumblety-peg knife, his new baseball mitt, membership in the secret club. He apologized as hard as he could, gave him back his glasses, picked up the money that had dropped out of his pockets. Finally, dripping wet and all worn out from crying, Dickie got to his feet, gave Paul one quick stare, then hurried away without a word.

And now, a few hours later, Paul was standing outside the door of his father's study. And he knew from the voices inside that something bad would happen to him. Unless he thought of a way to keep it from happening –

His mind began to work. Gradually his trembling went away. Don't sit around and weep, *do* something – that's what his father was always telling him.

He knocked on the door. A moment later he entered the room, his head down, his step slow, a touching look of repentance on his face.

It went a lot better with Mrs. Riddell than he thought it would. It was funny how things had a way of turning out good, as long as he kept his nerve and bluffed them through.

Mrs. Riddell was a big fat woman with lots of furs and a loud voice. She yelled at him for a long time. She told him he was a little monster and he ought to be sent away to an institution. And of course she had the story all wrong. The way she told it, he had thrown her precious little Dickie into the lake and held his head under the water. Well, Paul would get that little liar for that one of these days.

But he didn't let his annoyance show on his face. He listened to Mrs. Riddell's noise earnestly, with real shame in his eyes. At exactly the right moment, he allowed his lip to quiver a little, and he cried out how sorry he was, what a wonderful kid Dickie

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was, how he just didn't know what had come over him. When his outburst was over, he treated Mrs. Riddell to one of his smiles, the slow shy hesitating one, as if he wanted so much to be friends with her but he was scared she might not like him.

She grunted a little. Paul could see that she was beginning to soften up.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Riddell," his father said. "I'll take care of the boy. He'll get what he deserves." Then his father stood up, showing that the interview was over.

Paul had seen his father pull this standing-up maneuver before. "It's my will power against the other fellow's will power," his father used to say. Well, stronger will powers than Mrs. Riddell's had given in to this maneuver. She still bristled a little, but she moved to the door. "All right," she said, "I'll accept your promise, Mr. King. He does seem to be genuinely sorry." She paused in the doorway and looked straight at Paul. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt this time —"

She was gone. Underneath the grateful look that Paul sent after her, he was laughing to himself.

He was alone now with his father and mother. Mother was clasping and unclasping her hands. "Paul — darling — I just don't understand. How could you do such a thing? And the boy is so much smaller than you —"

"I told you, I didn't mean any harm." Paul relaxed his repentant look and let some of his irritation show in his voice. He didn't have to be so careful with his mother. It wasn't his mother's opinion that counted.

"But darling, it was wrong." She came up to him and touched him softly on the arm. "You do know that it was a bad thing to do, don't you?"

He wriggled away from her. "I know it, I already said so." He turned, a little less sure of himself, to face his father. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry I did it."

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His father's expression was calm, almost indifferent. He still wasn't showing which way he intended to jump.

Mother rushed forward. "Don't be *too* hard on him, Arthur. He's already suffered a lot for what he did."

His father didn't say anything for a second. Then he gave an amused little smile. "Go away, Harriet, me and Paul want to talk things over man to man."

Paul's heart gave a little jump. It was going to be all right. Dad didn't sound at all mad. He sounded in a better mood than usual even.

"But Arthur —" Mother was blinking her eyes in that bewildered way of hers. "What are you going to do?"

"Never mind what I'm going to do. Go away, Harriet."

Mother started clasping and unclasping her hands again. "Yes — I'll talk to the cook about dinner —" She moved to the door, then stopped and turned. For a moment she looked as if she was going to say something more. But she gave a shake of her head and left the room quickly.

Paul faced his father's smile.

"Sit down, boy," said his father, waving at a chair.

Paul took a seat. He settled back in it, trying not to show how nervous he was. Because after all, he knew there was nothing to be nervous about, didn't he?

His father settled back too. "Well, boy, the women are out of it now. Just you and me." He waited a moment, then his smile went away. "Now what kind of crazy stunt were you trying to pull anyway?"

Paul took a breath and brought out the whole routine again, how he was only playing a game, he didn't mean any harm, it was just an accident —

"Okay, you can skip all that," his father said. "That stuff is all right for your mother and the other women, but don't try it with me."

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There was no mistaking it, the anger in his father's voice. Paul lowered his head, a little dazed.

"Now *I'll* tell *you* what happened," his father went on. "You thought you'd have a little fun with this Riddell kid. You knew damn well what you were doing, but you lost control of yourself, you let yourself get carried away by your big joke. So what happened? You got into a mess, just like you might've known you would. And you dragged *me* into it too. You made me look like a damn fool who can't control his own son. In front of that Riddell woman — " His father stopped. His face was red. When he started again, his voice was louder. "You were dumb! You acted like a dumb kid! If there's one thing I'm not going to stand for, it's dumbness! You get me?"

Paul could feel his cheeks burning as he nodded his head. He didn't trust himself to say anything.

"Now here's the way things are going to be from now on," his father said. "You're going to learn a little self-control. Don't pull that wide-eyed act with me, you're not too young to know what I'm talking about. Go out and have your fun, make people do what *you* want or otherwise they'll make you do what *they* want — but use your head, don't do dumb things that you're bound to get caught at. Now is that pretty clear?"

Paul managed a fairly steady "Yes, Dad."

"It better be. Because if you ever get into this kind of mess again, I'll give you a lot worse than I'm going to give you now."

"You're going to punish me now — ?"

"Did you think you could do something like this to me and get clear away with it? Damn right I'm going to punish you. Go upstairs and stay there till I tell you to come down again."

"But I can come down for dinner, can't I? For my birthday party?"

"You're not having any birthday party, boy. What the hell do you think I've been talking about?" And Dad stood up, the way

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he had with Mrs. Riddell, to show that the discussion was over.

"But Dad —" Paul put as much of the repentance into his voice as he could, and tried to keep tears from coming to his eyes. He *had* to go to his birthday party. He had been looking forward to it for weeks. He always had such a wonderful time, with his sisters and their husbands fussing over him, laughing at his funny remarks, whispering compliments about him which he wasn't supposed to hear. All except his sister Ellen, but she was only four years older than he was, she was still a kid herself really. It wasn't fair to make him give up all this. Just because one sniffling little brat couldn't take a joke! "Dad, please!" he said.

"Stop that whining!" Dad said, very sharp. "Whiners make me sick!"

So Paul went up to his room. He threw himself on the bed, and for a long time he kept himself mad. What had happened, what had gone wrong? His respectful repentant look had always worked before, hadn't it? The time he ran away from home, for instance — he was only nine then — because they wouldn't let him go to the circus with a cold. He stayed away almost all night, losing himself among the crowds at Times Square, picturing his mother's sobs, his father's curses. Finally he got bored with running away from home, and he went back, and there was going to be a punishment. But he put on the respectful repentant look, and Dad took him into the den for a "man-to-man talk," and he ended up by going to the circus. Dad had no right not being convinced by it this time! Dad had no right —

Maybe he would run away from home again. No, on second thought he wouldn't. There was no fun in that any more. The fun usually went out of things after you did them once or twice.

The evening went by slowly. His sisters knocked on his door and wished him happy birthday, but they didn't come in — Dad wasn't letting them. Mother brought up his supper on a tray. She had a worried look on her face. "I'm sorry, dear," she said.

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"Why?" he snapped back at her. "I'm all right!"

He was just about over being mad after that. He started thinking hard. Don't waste your time getting excited, you get a lot more in the end by thinking. Why had Dad come down on him so hard tonight? Why had he acted so different from usual? After a while Paul began to understand why. Because people had found out about Dickie Riddell, and they had come complaining to Dad, and Dad didn't like to look bad in front of people.

So Paul made a resolution then and there. A night like this would never happen to him again. From now on nobody's going to complain to Dad. Because nobody's ever going to find out a thing.

At nine o'clock Dad came into the room. "You can come down for half an hour and blow out the candles on your cake," he said. "Providing you've learned your lesson."

"I have, Dad, honestly."

"We'll see if you have. Why did I punish you?"

Paul answered without any hesitation. "Because I was dumb. And I made you ashamed of me."

Dad relaxed. He laughed – his old easygoing laugh, Paul was glad to see. "Good enough, boy. Come on now."

So I was right, Paul thought as he followed Dad downstairs. It had turned out to be a pretty good evening after all, even without the birthday party. Because he had found out how to handle things in the future.

In the living room his sisters made a fuss over him, their husbands laughed at his imitations of the teachers at school, and he blew out all the candles in one puff. There was only one thing to keep his pleasure from being perfect. Out of the corner of his eye he could see his sister Ellen, a tall pale girl, sitting up very stiff, never giving him a smile or a word. What was eating her anyway? Why did she have to be such a sourpuss, spoiling his party and all?

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After half an hour on the dot, Dad told him to go upstairs again. He went without any complaining. But he couldn't get to sleep right away. He lay in bed, waiting. For what? He didn't know, exactly. Then he heard footsteps from Ellen's room, which was right next to his. He waited some more. The footsteps had stopped.

He slipped out of bed and knocked softly on the connecting door. A moment later he heard Ellen's voice, and he turned the doorknob. She was sitting up in bed, looking at him steadily, without any expression. Suddenly he felt something that was almost shyness. It took him a few seconds to get back his confidence. "Aren't you coming in to tell me good night?"

"I said good night to you downstairs."

"Yes, but *you* know —" His voice trailed off. He waited for her answer. When it didn't come, he raised his voice a little. "I don't know why you're mad at me. I didn't mean to hurt the kid. I apologized, and I took my punishment, didn't I? I'm sorry for what I did, aren't I?"

"Are you?" she said, very quietly. "Then I haven't got any reason to be mad at you."

He felt the blood coming into his face. "Oh what do you know about it?" he said. "You're only a dopey girl!" He went back to his room, slamming the door behind him.

In the morning he was feeling good again. It was Sunday, and the day was bright and crisp, just the kind of day he enjoyed playing in. When he came running down to breakfast, Ellen was waiting for him with a smile. She let him kiss her, and told him to "stop acting like a wild animal." Just the same as any other morning.

As he gobbled down his cereal, he remembered yesterday afternoon. He saw that silly Punch and Judy doll with the handkerchief over his eyes. He saw the pudgy figure lying in the water. He remembered how he had shuddered and got scared. He wasn't

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shuddering now. Being scared wasn't even a tiny part of what he was feeling. He had got away with it! Paul King, Boy Criminal, strikes again! His father, his mother — even Ellen, who thought she knew so much about him — he had fooled them all!

He jumped to his feet. What was he going to do today? Which one of his friends would he see? He remembered how that scaredy-cat Teddy Miller ran away yesterday. He was through with Teddy Miller, he would get a new Assistant Grand Mogul. Or maybe he wouldn't, maybe he'd belong to the secret club all by himself from now on, and wouldn't let anybody tag along with him.

No, he couldn't do that. He had to have somebody else. There was never much fun in it somehow, unless he had somebody else.

III

IT WAS spring, and Barry Morris was just sixteen.

His mother watched him sharply across the table as he ate his breakfast. He was a tall boy. All of a sudden, in the last year, he had sprung up amazingly. He was broad around the shoulders and arms, and a lot of the pudginess was hardening into muscle. Not all of it, though. There was still plenty of smooth baby flesh on his face and neck. And he was going through the pimply stage just now.

Muriel sighed. In many ways, she knew, he was a highly satisfactory son. His manner was sweet and gentle. He was polite to older people. And he was a brilliant intellectual boy. Watching him at home, you wouldn't be able to guess it — he hardly ever opened his mouth at home — but Muriel knew it was true, because his teachers said so. He was the best mathematics student in the junior class, and he spent a great deal of time arranging,

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sorting, and compiling notes about that rock collection of his. Muriel had looked through his notes once, while he was at school, and she had been astonished by the technical phrases and the Latin words. In fact, she hadn't been able to make head or tail out of any of it. He had mentioned once that he would like to make a career out of the study of rocks. That was all childish nonsense, of course – he would become a doctor like his father, or go into business with one of his uncles – but still, it was a sign of how bright he was.

He was artistically inclined too. His head was always buried in some book or other, and he had a great love of music. Sometimes he would hide away in his room for hours, listening to some opera or string quartet on his phonograph. Naturally this pleased Muriel very much. She considered herself to be quite artistic too. Only, with her committees and so on, she didn't get nearly as much time for art as she would have liked.

A very satisfactory boy, in short. When people told her so, she always gave a modest little laugh and said, "Well, we've tried to do our best for him." Just the same, she wasn't completely satisfied.

There was something lacking in him. Several years ago, shortly after her disillusionment with the Socialist Party, she had discovered modern psychology. And maybe because she was getting on in years and feeling that the time had come for her to settle down, it really looked as if modern psychology was going to be her permanent interest in life. One of the first things it had taught her was what was wrong with her son. He wasn't aggressive enough. He had an inferiority complex which prevented him from sufficiently asserting his ego.

Once this idea was in her head, Muriel found new evidence for it every time she looked at her son. When he had his friends up to the apartment for dinner, for instance. Which wasn't often, as a matter of fact. Muriel was always asking him why and telling

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him in a joking way, "Really, if I didn't know better, I might almost think you were ashamed of your own parents." Anyway, when he did have his friends up, Muriel couldn't help noticing that he was never the leader among them. He did more listening than talking. He laughed at their jokes, but he hardly ever made any jokes of his own. When they started bragging about the expensive cars their fathers just bought — well, God knows Muriel wasn't the materialistic type — far from it — but why couldn't her son do a little bragging about *his* father's expensive new car once in a while?

For the last two or three years she made every effort to cure him of this inferiority complex. She spoke to him about it frequently. In a sweet friendly voice, of course. That was one of the basic tenets of modern psychology. You mustn't arouse the antagonism of your subject. "Darling," she would say, "don't you think it would be a nice idea if you went out to the club this afternoon with your father and me instead of sitting around in this stuffy room listening to your records? . . . I met the loveliest, most intelligent girl the other day. Little Phyllis Green, you know her mother, Nettie Green. Well, she's a real music lover, just like you, I'm sure you'd love to meet her. . . . Dear, I don't want to criticize, you know we don't criticize in this family, but don't you think, if you held up your head a little higher and improved your posture —"

And sometimes, if these offhand little remarks didn't work, because he did have the most exasperating way of lowering his eyes and shutting his mouth and letting your words roll right off him, she would have to take more drastic measures. She might have to actually walk right into his room and shut off the phonograph. Or, if she thought it was necessary for his own good, she might call up the young girl's mother and arrange the date for him.

A certain matter in connection with Barry's welfare was on her

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mind now, as she watched him across the breakfast table. She had mentioned it to him last night, but he had allowed his attention to slip a million miles away. And so she was breaking one of her long-standing rules, she had got up early this morning especially to talk to him before he went to school.

"Well, darling, what about it?" she said. "I've got the ticket right here, and I happen to know you're not busy tonight."

It took only a split second for him to lower those eyes and set that jaw stubbornly. "I *am* busy tonight. I told you, I'm going to a concert."

"But that's so unreasonable, dear. You can go to a concert any time. I mean, you know how pleased I am that you take an interest in music —"

"I can't go to *this* concert any time. It's the Budapest Quartet, and they're playing only this once."

"I appreciate that. But the Teen-Agers' Frolic at the club comes only once a year too. And that's just the sort of thing it's very important for you to go to. Sometimes you have to weigh one pleasure against another, and make up your mind that you can't have everything. That's maturity."

"Well, I've made up my mind. The Teen-Agers' Frolic won't be a pleasure, so I'll go to the concert."

"What do you mean, it won't be a pleasure? All the young people will be there. There'll be dancing and refreshments, and the nicest girls. A boy your age *should* get pleasure from things like that. Life isn't all concerts and operas. You should go out and enjoy yourself and make friends."

She saw the faint flush rise to his cheek. "I've got lots of friends."

She pressed her advantage in a slightly louder voice. "Of course you do. But they're mostly as shy and retiring as you are. Don't misunderstand me, they're very nice boys, your friends. But I

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want you to broaden your outlook a little, meet different kinds of people. Later on in life, you know, you'll have to mingle with all types. Isn't that right, Henry?"

Henry looked up from his newspaper. "Yes. By all means." He went back to his newspaper quickly.

But Muriel had got what she wanted from him. She turned again to Barry. "You see? Your father has a great deal of experience, and he bears me out. Now you'll go to the dance tonight. I've got your ticket right here, it would be a shame to let it go to waste."

She saw immediately that she had made a mistake, she had given him an opening. "I've got my ticket for the concert too," he said. "Why should I let *it* go to waste?"

Muriel peered at him. "You've got your ticket? Let me see it."

"Well —" He fidgeted. "I don't have it on me. I called up the ticket agent and ordered it." After a pause, he added, "Dad told me I could call up the ticket agent any time."

Henry emerged from his newspaper. "That's very true, Muriel. I gave him my permission."

"Of course you did," she said. "Nobody's objecting to that. However, as long as the ticket was ordered from the agent, it's a simple matter to cancel it. If you'll call him up, Barry —"

His face was getting red. "But I can't. I'm not going to the concert alone."

She peered at him still harder. "You ordered more than one ticket?"

"Well, no. But I'm meeting some people there, they'll be expecting me."

Looking him straight in the eye, Muriel knew perfectly well he was lying. "Who are these people?"

"Just some friends of mine."

"What are their names?"

"It's nobody you know."

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She was silent for a few seconds, smiling at him. Then she said, "Well, it's no great problem really. All you have to do is call up these people, whoever they are, and tell them not to expect you. It isn't as if you'll be leaving them in the lurch. They'll still be going to the concert with one another, won't they?"

This seemed to stun him into silence at last. He gave one look — a quick, pleading sort of look that gave Muriel a moment of uneasiness — then he muttered, "I'm not going to that dance tonight." Before another word could be said, he was up from the table and out of the room.

Muriel didn't call after him. She had won the battle and would clinch her victory when he came home from school this evening. She already had a plan for doing so. Until then, it was only common sense to let him sulk a little. Remember how important pride and self-respect are to the adolescent. Muriel sipped her coffee. She didn't allow herself to take any notice when she heard the front door slam.

Several minutes later she became aware that Henry wasn't hiding behind his paper any more. His eyes were on her. He was looking at her in that timid worried way which always infuriated her so. All through her married life that look of Henry's had been a plague to her. It filled her with a sharp sense of injury, of anger even. And anger was unbecoming to a sensible adult person.

"The boy has to be handled firmly on occasion," she said, in answer to no remark from Henry. "He's too withdrawn and introspective for his own good. He has to be made more outgoing, before it's too late."

"He's still so young," Henry said, more as if he were asking a question than making an assertion. "Boys his age are always a little shy. He'll grow out of it, I'm sure. If you let him alone — "

"Let him alone?" She gave a strained little laugh. "There you have the old-fashioned, lazy attitude. These are the crucial years

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for a child. If his own parents 'let him alone,' as you put it, who *is* going to take an interest in him?"

Henry said nothing, but there was still something unconvinced about his expression. It made her raise her voice still more. "Well, this is typical of you after all, isn't it? You leave all the hard work to me — then you criticize me because you don't like the way I'm doing it. Typical. I don't know why I should be surprised." Quietly and with dignity she patted her lips with her napkin, pushed back her chair, and walked out of the room.

In her own room she had a great many letters to write. But she found it difficult to concentrate on them. She saw again the look Barry had given her just before he backed down in the argument. A look of pain almost. Was she really giving pain to her own son? It wasn't fair of him to feel that way. Everything she did had only one aim, to make him happier in the end. If she occasionally spoke to him in a nagging voice — But no, she rejected this idea firmly. Nagging was the one thing she was always careful not to do. She had watched with disgust while other mothers screeched and clawed at their poor children. She knew for a fact how much more intelligent and understanding she was than those mothers.

She broke off her thoughts with a sigh. Why should she be surprised at all this, anyway? There was very little gratitude or justice in the world, she had found *that* out a long time ago. So she went back to her letter writing.

S S S

Barry went to school by himself now, without the embarrassment of the car and chauffeur. The exclusive little elementary school on Central Park West had given way to a private high school of progressive tendencies up in Riverdale. At the time this change took place, three years ago, Barry had put up a positive stand against Mother. To his surprise he had won the point. Of

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course, he had made concessions in other directions. For instance, he had agreed to submit to the questioning of this psychologist with a beard, Dr. Veronsky, who came up to the apartment once a week in those days for a session with Mother. But he did win his point. Every morning since then he had been taking the subway up to school.

The ride lasted forty-five minutes. If he wanted to go into the first car of the train, he could always find half a dozen people from his own class to pass the time with. But he didn't feel like company this morning. He took a seat in one of the middle cars, where nobody from school ever went. He gave himself up to his thoughts.

Why did she always have to keep after him like that? he thought. Why couldn't she let him alone? Saying things to him that brought tears to his eyes almost. If he hadn't fought against them as hard as he could and finally kept himself from crying. It was the shame of his life, this trick he had of bursting into tears at the slightest thing, just as if he was still a little baby. He had to be on guard against it all the time. He wasn't going to let people see it. It would have killed him for people to know what a coward and weakling he was.

Killed him. There he went again, always thinking about himself in such a silly exaggerated way. And getting into a sweat over things that anybody else wouldn't even pay attention to. Why did he have to act so crazy anyway?

Maybe that was the answer. He was crazy. That was the reason for all his troubles. And all these peculiar feelings of his. He belonged in an insane asylum. If he concentrated hard enough, he could almost *feel* himself losing his mind. He could feel his head pounding, his throat turning dry, his eyes stinging. Could he *really* be going crazy, though? The chief symptom of madness, he had read somewhere once, is the absolute conviction that you're completely sane. So if he *thought* he was insane, then he was re-

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ally sane, wasn't he? But on the other hand, didn't he actually believe, deep down, that he *wasn't* insane? Which proved —

He pushed the whole puzzle out of his mind. It was too much for him, he had to think about something else. His rock collection. He had a lot of work to do on it. All those specimens he had picked up with Johnnie Dykeman last Saturday up in Westchester. He had to sort them all out and get them properly marked and mounted. For three days he'd been putting it off. Laziness, pure and simple. These moods came over him, when he guessed he was the laziest person who ever lived, when he just couldn't bring himself to make any sort of effort. No matter how badly things had to be done. No matter how bored he might be at doing nothing.

Generally, there was only one way to get through a mood like this. His bed would fade into that country road. Or that ship in the middle of a storm. A faint cry for help would sound in his ears, and he would be running down the road or plunging into the water, and pretty soon he would catch sight of that sensitive aristocratic face — He was doing it again! Sitting right here in the subway, in front of a dozen people! He had to make himself stop it. It was bad for him. There was no future in it, no happiness in it. Will power, that's the only way to get rid of bad habits.

An idea came to him. Why shouldn't I do it today? he asked himself. Speak to Johnnie Dykeman today. The first chance I have to be alone with him. I can't just go on beating around the bush, holding myself in and keeping myself in suspense. I have to take the plunge eventually, find out if there's any sort of hope for me. So it might as well be today. It *will* be today.

It wasn't a new idea, but he couldn't remember when he had felt so positive about it. Would it really be today? Was he really going to stick to his resolution, in spite of the way it might turn out? Or would he back down again, as he had all the other times?

The subway jerked to a stop. End of the line. Out in the plat-

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form he joined up with a group of fellows from the first car. They asked him why he'd been hiding himself away. He answered that he was finishing up his French homework for his first class this morning. He could feel himself reddening as he said this. He had always been a terrible liar. He had so little confidence in his own lies that he was sure everybody saw through them even before they were out of his mouth.

With the rest of the fellows he walked up the hill to school. They straggled along, joking, wrestling a little, kidding around as usual. It was hard for him to hold his pace down to theirs. He wanted to run all the way. If he could see Johnnie before school began, so that he wouldn't have this suspense on his mind all day.

When they finally arrived at school — a sprawling two-story building in gray stone, with turrets and moats and little gargoyles, and trees and lawns all around — there were only ten minutes to class. Barry put his books away in the locker room and looked around for Johnnie, but there was no sign of him. Suppose he was sick or something and wasn't coming to school today. The idea would have to wait till tomorrow then. But how could he wait another day? If he had to wait any longer, it would absolutely kill —

Well, he couldn't hang around the lockers any more. He went off to French class. Johnnie would be in German across the hall. If Barry got out of the room quick enough at the end of the period, he could catch Johnnie in the hall.

The buzzer rang, and Barry was already halfway to his feet.

"Monsieur Barry Morris," said Mademoiselle Fontaine, "will you come to the desk, if you please. I wish to speak to you."

Barry shuffled up to the desk and stood before Mademoiselle Fontaine.

"I will keep you only one moment, Monsieur Morris." She rapped out the words, very businesslike. She was the most businesslike woman Barry had ever known, with her trim sensible

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suits, her grayish hair in a tight bun at the back of her head, her square rimless eyeglasses. "Last night I have read your essay on *Le Tartuffe* of Molière. I compliment you, Monsieur Morris. You have done very well. You have the ideas in your head. And you have the sense of humor. Your comparison of the pompous old father to certain types that one finds in the classrooms of the American high school, this has pleased me extremely." Her sharp brownish face puckered up in a smile. Businesslike as always, but still a smile.

Barry smiled back and said, "Thank you, Mademoiselle." He darted a glance at the door.

"Also, the essay is very well organized. *Très bien organisé*. I am not in accord with your remark about the similarity of the comedy of Molière to your American Marx Brothers. This, it seems to me, is perhaps a little too clever, too facile. It is, as you say, a little bit of the 'wise guy.' But it is lively at any rate, and this one appreciates."

She went on and on. At any other time Barry would have been swelling with pride and blushing with modesty. But now he was listening to the big clock on the wall ticking away the minutes.

"In conclusion, I must give you one small word of caution. You have the excellent taste and intelligence, most remarkable in one of your years, but you must be more careful with the French. The grammar and spelling which you employ — *épouvantable!* And my friend, the French word *patrie* is feminine, not masculine. *La patrie. La. La.*"

"Yes, I'll remember." Barry took a step away from the desk.

"*Eh bien*, you have your next class. I am most pleased with you." She gave a brisk nod. "Now you go."

He was across the room and out to the hall in a couple of seconds. But the German classroom was deserted. And there was no time to go looking for Johnnie, because he had only a few min-

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utes to get to math. He would have to wait till lunch, he would talk to Johnnie in the free period after lunch.

He got through the morning, and at twelve-thirty he was in the dining room. From his regular place he peered around. Johnnie's place at the D-through-F table was empty. He *was* absent from school today. Another whole day of this waiting —

His heart gave a jump. Johnnie was coming into the dining room. He was out of breath and grinning sheepishly, as if the whole school was watching his late arrival. But the grin was only partly embarrassment. The other part was good-natured amusement at his own expense. Johnnie was such a good-natured, easy-going person. He got along with everybody because he liked everybody, and nothing particularly bothered him or upset him. It was his interest in rocks and science that made him a good friend of Barry. But where Barry sometimes felt that this interest was the only thing in his own life, Johnnie had lots of other interests too.

As he dashed by Barry's table, Johnnie gave him a quick wave and a smile. "I'll see you after lunch," Barry called out to him, and Johnnie had just time to nod.

Barry gulped down his food. He gave only half of his attention to the conversation going on around him. Everybody was excited about a robbery which had happened in the school last night. Somebody had forced one of the doors and gone right up to Mr. Thorley's office, Mr. Thorley was the principal, and broken in. The funniest part was what they had stolen. Mr. Thorley was a great pipe smoker. Whenever you saw him walking through the halls, or standing up before assembly — or if, by some bad luck, you had to visit him in his office — he was always puffing away on a pipe, and a different pipe every time. He had a whole collection of them, over a dozen of them, up in his office. And it was this collection of pipes that the thief had stolen.

Everybody thought it was a wonderful joke. The girls at Bar-

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ry's table giggled over it. The boys outlined their solutions to the mystery. One thing everybody agreed about. The thief had to be somebody who wasn't interested in ordinary robbery — because how much money could you get for a dozen old pipes? — but who just thought it would be a great trick to play on old Thorley. It all pointed to somebody in the school, one of the students probably. Maybe somebody at the table right now.

"Come clean, Barry," cried Victor Loving, who had a reputation for being very sarcastic. "You're guilty as hell, so you might as well stop holding out on us."

Everybody laughed, so Barry laughed too.

After lunch he went out to the hall to wait for Johnnie. The seconds seemed to last longer than all the hours of the morning.

Suddenly a hand came down hard on his shoulder. "I want to talk to you."

Barry whirled around. He was facing his cousin Jonathan. Big, heavy-set, with a crewcut and small narrow eyes. Barry had read somewhere that wide eyes were a sign of intelligence and imagination while small narrow eyes were a sign of brute stupidity. He believed it too, because of his cousin Jonathan. Only one thing he hadn't been able to decide yet, whether his own eyes were wide or narrow. He had spent many hours in front of his bedroom mirror, puzzling this out.

"I'm busy now, I'll talk to you later," that's what Barry wanted to say to Jonathan. He was afraid to, though. But why? His cousin was big and strong all right, and he was a senior, a year older than him. But Barry was pretty big himself, and he was stronger than he used to think. He had found this out one day during gym when Billy Rodgers tackled him from behind as a joke, and Barry suddenly got madder than he had ever got in his whole life, and he jumped on top of Billy and started pounding him with his fists until Billy's yells brought him, dazed and weeping, to his senses. What's more, his cousin Jonathan didn't really bully him. He was

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hearty and cheerful with him, slapped him on the back a lot, called him "my little cousin" in a friendly way.

Just the same, there was something frightening about him, and about all his friends, and people like him in the world. They were all so sure of themselves. They starred in football games. They went out with any girl they wanted to. They never seemed to worry for a minute that the girl would turn them down when they asked her for a date. And Barry could imagine what they thought about people like him. He could hear them snickering among themselves when they caught sight of him.

"How's my little cousin today?" Jonathan was saying. "Looking a little pale. Why don't you get out in the sun, get a little exercise once in a while?"

"I'm all right. I'm sort of in a hurry just now."

Jonathan laughed and tightened his grip on Barry's shoulder. "Big hurry. You were just standing here, mooning about something. Dreaming about a beautiful sexy rock, I'll bet."

Jonathan laughed loudly at his own joke. Behind his back Barry could see three of Jonathan's friends waiting for him. There was Mike Fuller, the fullback on the football team. Tall and lumbering, always needing a shave and a haircut. He was supposed to be a big lady-killer. An ugly guy like him. Sometimes Barry wondered if he'd ever be able to figure out what the world wanted of you. And there was Norman Blackstone, the president of the Student Council. He was tall too, and he wore black horn-rimmed glasses, but somehow they didn't make him look mousey and studious. And in between those two, with a big grin on his face, was Paul King. Shorter than the others, thin, fair hair, a smooth face, a contrast to the big burly athletes around him. He was an athlete too, though, he was the first junior who had ever been made captain of the basketball team. And he was a big shot in the Dramatics Club, and everybody said he was bound to be elected president of the Student Council next year. He was in Barry's class,

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but he went with the older fellows. He even took out some of the older girls.

Barry didn't have any doubts about the reason for that grin on Paul King's face. And on the other faces too. They had heard Jonathan's last remark, they were getting a big kick out of it.

"Look at him, he's embarrassed," Jonathan said. "Take it easy, kid, I'm not trying to embarrass you. I've really got something to talk to you about."

"Well, what is it?"

"I want to make sure you're ready when I pick you up tonight. I'll be around at eight-thirty, and I want to find you waiting in the lobby."

"Pick me up for what?"

"The dance. The Teen-Agers' Frolic, up at the Spreading Chestnut Club. Didn't your mother tell you?"

"My mother — ?"

"Sure. Aunt Muriel called me up this morning. She knew I was going stag, so she asked me if I wouldn't mind dropping by and giving you a lift to Mamaroneck. I just got my license, you know."

"Mother told you I was going to the dance tonight?"

"Positively. And I told her it was no trouble for me. Glad to oblige my little cousin. The only thing is, just in case I happen to connect with some doll at the dance, you might have to take a cab going home."

It just isn't fair, Barry thought. It was so clear what Mother had done. She had done the same thing to him before. Drag his cousin Jonathan into the situation, drag as many people into it as possible, make it so public that it would humiliate him *not* to go to the dance.

"On the other hand," Jonathan said, "if my doll has a little friend, I might be able to fix you up too, and you can save the price of that cab."

"Listen," Barry said. "I may not be going to the dance."

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"What do you mean, not going? Aunt Muriel said you were going."

"Well, I may have something else on. I mean — I'll call you after I get home tonight."

Jonathan shrugged. "Okay, suit yourself. Only don't forget to let me know." He moved back to his three friends, and the four of them ambled down the hall together. Barry distinctly heard loud laughter break out of them.

Then, suddenly, it rushed back to him, the reason he was standing here like this. He turned quickly to the dining room door. The dining room was empty. Johnnie Dykeman was gone, and Barry hadn't even noticed him go.

For the next half hour he made the rounds of all the places where Johnnie might be during free period. He went to the lawn in back, where groups of fellows and girls were sitting on the grass laughing and arguing. He went to the baseball field, behind the gym. He went up to the library and down to the machine shop. Johnnie might be finishing up the new case for his rock collection. But he wasn't in any of those places. The warning bell sounded for the end of free period. Now he wouldn't be seeing Johnnie again till gym, the last period of the day. And by that time Johnnie might have arranged to ride home in the subway with somebody, and Barry wouldn't be able to get him alone.

And then, as he was walking down the hall to English, Johnnie suddenly appeared around the corner, right in front of him.

"I've been looking all over for you," Barry practically shouted.

"I've been around," Johnnie said.

"Do you want to go home with me after school? There's something I'd like to tell you."

"Sure," Johnnie said, cheerfully, without any curiosity. "Meet you at your locker after gym. Got to hurry now."

He was gone, around another corner.

Barry stood still for a moment. He wondered how he was ever

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going to make it till after gym. He really thought the suspense would kill him.

S S S

They walked down the hill together. Barry had purposely delayed in leaving school so that nobody would be around to interfere with their talk.

The day was bright, and the hill was green and smelled of new grass. All around were faint soothing noises — kids laughing, birds chirping, the tinkle of the Good Humor man's bell. It was the kind of day that usually lifted Barry's spirits.

Johnnie broke off a thin green branch from a bush, stripped it, and used it as a switch to snap away the tops of dandelions. But he gave only part of his mind to this. Most of his mind was devoted to his favorite occupation, chattering.

He chattered about Herr Eisenschloss, his German teacher. Whenever somebody conjugated a verb badly, Herr Eisenschloss would throw up his arms and shout, "*Himmel!* This makes not the German! This the pig Latin makes!" He chattered about the school dietician, Mrs. Mayberry, who planned all the lunches. He wanted to know why Mrs. Mayberry couldn't get any other idea into her head except Spanish omelette and brown betty. He chattered about the baseball team's chances for winning the game on Monday.

Barry interrupted him finally. "There isn't anything in school that you can't do, is there?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean — most people, if they know about sports and things, then they're not so good in their classes. And if they're pretty good in their classes, like me, for instance, they're just a mess when it comes to sports. They can't play anything. They can't even throw a ball right."

"You'd be all right at sports if you made up your mind to it.

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Actually you've got more muscles than some of the fellows on the football team."

"No, I don't. I've got fat not muscles. Besides, I'm scared. When it comes to standing in front of somebody and tackling him — But that's what I mean. *You're* good at just about everything. And everybody likes you. Girls too. You can talk to people without any trouble."

"What's so wonderful about talking to people?"

"I've never been able to do it myself. I was reading about it in this book my mother has. There are two kinds of people, extroverts and introverts. An introvert is like me, he's more comfortable by himself, he has trouble getting along with other people. And an extrovert is like you. You can get along with anybody. Even with introverts."

Johnnie made an offhand slash at a bush. "I can think of people I can't get along with. Like that old Mr. Eisenschloss."

Barry let a moment go by. Then he went on, "The thing about extroverts and introverts, they sort of depend on each other. I mean, there are things extroverts can't get from other extroverts, they can only get them from introverts. Do you see? It's like — a prince and his slave, for instance."

They were halfway down the hill now, and they had to stop for a traffic light. A stretch of road cut through the park here, and the cars always came whizzing through at top speed.

"I don't get you," Johnnie said. "What's it have to do with princes and slaves?"

"Don't you see? You take a prince. He wouldn't really feel like a prince if he didn't have a slave to bow down before him, and do his bidding, and depend on him for protection, and — be his slave and all."

The traffic light changed, and they hurried across the road. Johnnie laughed. "I don't think it would be much fun for the slave."

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Barry didn't laugh. "That's where you're wrong, though. You take the slave. There's nothing he wants more than to do what the prince tells him to and devote himself to the prince. And if the prince is in trouble, the slave is ready to save his life, and even risk his own life doing it, because it's all for the prince."

"What's so good about that? I'd still rather be the prince than the slave any day."

"Well, you could be," Barry said. "If you wanted to see what it's like, for instance, to be a prince — like a game, for instance — well, I'd be willing to play it with you. I mean, I'd take the part of the slave."

The switch in Johnnie's hand scraped against the sidewalk. "It sounds like a kid's game to me."

"It doesn't have to be. We could think up dialogue. As if we were in a play. Things for the prince to say, and things for the slave to say."

"I was never very good at dramatics," Johnnie said.

"Come on, why not?" Barry's hand was on Johnnie's arm, they had stopped walking. "It'll be fun, we'll try it now."

"No, I don't want to, Barry," Johnnie said, looking down at the sidewalk. "It's kind of crazy." Abruptly he started walking again.

Barry walked too. He could feel his face turning red and his heart beating faster. Had he given himself away? Was his secret out now, so that he would never be able to look anybody in the face again? No, he mustn't get into a panic, he mustn't let Johnnie see him like that. He began to laugh and talk fast. "Yes, it *is* a crazy game, isn't it? The reason I brought it up, it's in this book I'm reading, this novel that my mother has. There's this bunch of kids in it who like to play this game, and when I read it I said to myself, Why would anybody get any fun out of *this*? So I wanted to see if somebody else felt the same as me. Listen, talking about

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books, did you finish the second act of *Macbeth* yet? I heard Mr. Lefcourt was going to give us a quiz on it tomorrow —"

This was a subject that always got a reaction from Johnnie — how hard it was to read poetry, and what was the good of it anyway? With relief Barry watched him react to it now, just as eagerly as ever. Then they reached the subway station, and half a dozen fellows were waiting for the train, so Barry didn't have to keep talking any more.

The train came, and Barry piled into it with the others, and all the way downtown the clatter of its wheels kept pace with his thoughts. Crazy, that's just what it was. He knew that it was. Why should he take such risks for such a crazy thing? For a habit, nothing but a habit, something left over from when he was a kid. It didn't make sense, working himself up, getting himself all excited and unhappy, over something that couldn't ever happen to him anyway, because there wasn't anybody else in the world as crazy as he was.

When he stepped into the apartment later on, Mother was waiting for him. She started in before he could say a word. "Did Jonathan speak to you at school today? I hope you've decided to be sensible and behave like a normal boy. I called up the agent and canceled your concert ticket, so there's nothing to keep you from that dance. You're sixteen years old now, and you have to start acting like a normal —"

Barry broke in on her, not caring about the tears in his eyes. "I'm going to the dance, you don't have to talk any more! And you know why I'm going? Because I'll hate it! Because I'll have an awful time! And I don't care, do you know that? It doesn't matter *what* I do!"

While she stared after him, he rushed off to his room.

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IV

WHEN SHE finally heard the front door open, Ellen King switched on her bed light and looked at her watch. Almost three o'clock in the morning. All she hoped was that he wouldn't make any noise going up the stairs. It would be a fine thing if he woke up Mother!

He was quiet enough, though. Probably he had taken off his shoes. He seemed to know all the tricks. As if he had a great deal of experience at this sort of thing.

She heard him tiptoeing past the door of her room. Then she heard the handle turning softly on his own door. A moment later, a slight squeaking sound told her that he had stretched out on his bed. Without even bothering to change into his pajamas. What could it be that left him so exhausted?

She wondered if she ought to talk to him about it. This was the third time it had happened since she had been home on her spring vacation from college. Each time she had felt the same impulse to march into his room and ask him point-blank what he was up to. But the idea made her shudder a little. It was just the sort of thing that she couldn't bear for people to do to *her*. All her life, ever since she was a little girl, she just couldn't stand it when people tried to cross-examine her about her personal affairs.

And yet — there had been things before now with Paul. He was only nine years old when he ran away from home. He was only ten years old when he played that terrible trick on that boy in the park. Nothing since then, of course. That anybody knew about, that is.

Immediately she felt ashamed of herself for this thought. He

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was her kid brother. There had always been a kind of special closeness between them. Maybe because there were so many years separating them from their older sisters. And here she was, going out of her way to think the worst of him. She wouldn't even give him the benefit of the doubt.

Only, even the latest movies don't stay open till three o'clock in the morning. And the papers were full of stories about teen-age boys who wander the streets looking for excitement.

She got out of bed, slipped a robe around her, and started for the door that connected her room to his. No more excuses or rationalizations, she told herself. Something was the matter with him, and someone had to do something about it. Dad would just laugh and dismiss the whole thing, and Mother would sigh a little and end up by agreeing with him, so obviously it was up to her.

She reached the door, her hand was on the knob. Again she felt the shudder inside of her. She lowered her hand. No, you can't butt into a person's privacy. The world was full of well-meaning busybodies trying to run your life for you. People should leave other people alone.

She went back to her bed, moving on tiptoe, making as little noise as possible.

When she got down to breakfast next morning, he was gone already. It was Friday, and he had school. She dawdled over her coffee, until Mother and Dad came to the table.

They were in the middle of a small argument, and they continued it through the orange juice. It had to do with some party that they had been invited to, and Mother had accepted the invitation, and now Dad refused to go, because somebody named Iris Palmer was going to be there. This upset Mother a good deal. "Just because Iris said something you didn't like at a dinner party ten years ago. She was only joking, she didn't mean anything by it, but you have to hold a grudge. And I'm the one who suffers the humiliation for it!"

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Dad gave a laugh, but there was an edge of irritation to it. "You know what I think of that Palmer female. You should've made sure she wasn't going to be there before you said we'd go. Now I'm getting pretty damn sick of this whole discussion. You can go to that party alone if you want to, but once and for all I'm not going with you." He finished off his orange juice in one gulp.

"I don't know why you have to hold so many grudges," Mother said. "I just can't keep track of them all any more." After a few more sighs and murmurs, she stopped talking.

Ellen sat through this without a word. She had long ago learned the trick of deadening herself to these arguments. She didn't let them upset her and hurt her any more as they used to do when she was younger. She waited a few seconds now, then spoke the words she had been planning all morning.

"There's something I wanted to ask you. Would you look up a minute, it's very important."

They both looked up at her.

Right away she was sorry she had begun so solemnly. She didn't want to alarm them. She was only testing out her feelings on them, trying to find out if this was all in her mind or not. She smiled and made her voice more cheerful. "Well, maybe it isn't so important. I just thought I ought to ask you, and if I'm wrong, I'll be relieved to know it. It's Paul."

Mother leaned forward. "What about Paul?"

"Well, I don't know really. The last few years, I get to see so little of him. But you see him all the time, so that's why I'm asking you."

"Asking us what?" Dad said. "You know, I haven't got all morning, I've got a business to get to."

She spoke faster. "Well, I've been watching him all week, and it seems to me — wouldn't you say he's been acting sort of funny lately?"

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Mother widened her eyes. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"I don't know, it's nothing I can put my finger on, it's just a feeling. He isn't in some sort of trouble, is he?"

"Trouble!" Mother cried. "What trouble? Arthur, are you hiding something from me? Is our baby in trouble?"

Already Ellen was beginning to wish she had kept her mouth shut. "I didn't say he was in trouble, Mother. All I said was, the way he's been acting lately, I was wondering —"

"Yes! Yes, he *has* been acting funny lately," Mother said. "So quiet and secretive. He never tells us anything any more. He used to be so close to us, but now it's as if he's a stranger. Arthur, he *is* in trouble, that *must* be what it is!"

"For God's sake, Harriet," Dad said, very sharp.

Mother broke off, turning her head uncertainly.

Dad turned to Ellen. "I don't have time to talk to you now, I'll be late for the office. So I'll just tell you one thing, and I'll leave it at that."

His eyes were steady, with a hardness to them which had never failed to put her down when she was a little girl. In spite of herself, she could feel some of those old tremblings coming back to her now.

"You're talking a lot of damn foolishness," Dad said. "Paul isn't acting funny. He isn't acting any different than he's ever acted. He's a smart kid, and he knows how to stay out of trouble — you can take my word on that."

He stopped talking. He laughed. One of his genial smiles broke through, but it was gone a moment later. His voice got a little louder. "That wildness of his is over with. It was over with years ago. It was never as bad as some people made out, anyway. So I'd like to know why the hell you're bringing it up again now. Are you jealous of him or something?"

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Ellen sat still. She knew what she ought to be telling them now. She ought to be telling them, clear and unafraid, how he had sneaked into the house at three o'clock this morning, how it wasn't the first time either.

Dad was laughing at last. "I'm going now." On his way out he paused to give Ellen a pat on the cheek. "Sorry I had to talk to you that way, baby. Suppose we forget the whole thing."

He was gone, and now Mother was talking. "I'm sure your father's right, dear. He knows Paul so much better than any of us. I'm sure there can't be anything wrong." She shook her head back and forth, then she began to eat her eggs slowly.

It isn't worth it, Ellen told herself. There's nothing the matter really. Normal boyish restlessness. What good would it do to make a big thing out of it?

She stood up. "Excuse me. I'm not hungry any more."

She hurried out of the dining room. It's his life, she told herself. I've got no right to interfere. I've got my own problems, anyway.

S S S

Paul King was driven up to school every morning by his father's chauffeur. "Why the hell not?" his father used to say. "A taxi gets me down to my office in ten minutes, so it's no trouble for me. And it won't hurt him if those young snobs up there get the idea that his father isn't some piker who can't afford a decent car. At night, when taxis are hard to find, the car and chauffeur pick me up, and the kid goes home from school in the subway. That's a good experience for him too."

All summer Paul had worked on Dad to get this concession out of him. He was passionately fond of driving a car. It was one of the few things that completely satisfied him — the feel of his hands gripping the wheel, his foot pressing down on the gas, the breeze slapping against his face. It was especially good if he was able to get up a little speed. There was something about speed

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that lifted him out of things, straight up to the top of the world. But he couldn't get his driver's license till next year, so his only chance to take over the car was during these morning rides up to school.

As soon as they were out of the midtown traffic, into the wide roads up in the Riverdale section, he would ask Carl, the chauffeur, to give him the wheel. Carl was a stiff frozen-faced German who could get pretty stubborn and antagonistic underneath his politeness. Almost always he raised objections. Paul was not of age, it was against the law, the policeman would say that Carl was responsible. Well, Paul guessed that he knew how to handle any dumb German chauffeur. He had an answer to every one of the objections — he was a better driver than plenty of people who *were* of age, nothing was against the law until they caught you at it, and even if a policeman did show up, Dad could fix it so that Carl wouldn't get into trouble. Sometimes Carl was in a particularly stubborn mood, and would shake his head and mutter, "If your father finds out what I do, I lose my job." Then Paul simply smiled and remarked in an offhand voice, "There's more than one way of losing a job, you know. For instance, suppose my father found out about that bottle of bourbon you keep in the glove compartment — " Carl would tighten his lips and narrow his eyes, but his objections usually stopped.

And so, on this Friday morning in spring, Paul was behind the wheel of the big black Chrysler. They had turned off the street with its trolley tracks and El pillars, they were starting up the wide empty driveway that wound its way to the top of the hill. Paul put his foot down harder on the gas. The car spurted ahead, way over the speed limit. There was a grunt from Carl at Paul's side. But Paul just ignored it, what did he care? The car was in his hands, nobody was going to spoil it for him now. Especially now, especially today, when he was still dizzy because of last night.

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Last night! Last night had been wonderful, but it was even better this morning. Last night he was right in the middle of it, his mind was all keyed up to listening for telltale noises, moving softly on his feet, keeping a steady hand. The tension had been so great that there was hardly time to notice the thrill and the joy of it. Not till now, after a few hours of sleep, and all the danger behind him.

He laughed out loud.

Carl turned and gave him a look.

Paul didn't bother to explain. His success, that's what was making him laugh. God knows it had taken him long enough to work up the courage for that success. How many nights did he tell himself it was now or never, and sneak out of the house, and take the subway uptown — and just wait around, staring at the windows, until he suddenly turned on his heel and went home? What a coward he'd been! And then, when he finally took a deep breath and went ahead and did it, what a cinch it had turned out to be! Nothing to it at all, you only needed a little guts and a little brains. And now it was over with, and everybody was fooled. He could hardly wait till he got to school, so he could hear what people were saying about it.

"We're there almost," Carl was saying. "You better stop the car now."

"Why not?" Paul stopped the car, and they changed seats. The car started up again. A chuckle burst out of Paul. Carl gave him another look, and this time Paul looked right back at him, and kept looking, cool and steady, until Carl turned his eyes away.

Wouldn't you like to know! thought Paul. Wouldn't it be a stroke of luck for you, if you could find out a thing like this about me! What a charge you'd get out of making trouble for me with the boss! There was a funny sort of pleasure that Paul sometimes got from thinking of all the people who hated him and would have

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jumped at the chance to do him a bad turn. Only they never got the chance. He was always much too smart for them.

In school it started right away, just before Latin, his first class. Mike Fuller slipped into the seat next to him. "Hey, Paul, did you hear about it? Old Thorley's pipes?"

"What about old Thorley's pipes? I must say, Fuller, you're making even less sense than usual."

A tone of contempt was what you had to use with an ox like Mike Fuller. Stupid Mike Fuller, who was taking Latin over again with the juniors because he hadn't been able to get through it the year before. Sloppy Mike Fuller, whose whole position in life depended on his talent for charging through a line of big bruisers like himself, who started packs of idiot girls squealing by getting himself kicked in the face. A perfect example of the adoration which the average moron in the street gives to sheer beef. But intelligence can do what it wants with sheer beef any day.

"Didn't you hear?" Mike said. "They broke into school last night, and took every one of old Thorley's pipes. He hasn't got a pipe to smoke in!" Mike's laugh filled the room, and then sputtered off at a look from Mr. Dingle, who was bringing the class to order.

Paul sneaked in one quick whisper. "Do they know who did it?"

"They don't know a thing," Mike said. "The way I heard it, they think it was somebody in school. But they don't — "

"Excuse *me*, Mr. Fuller," said Mr. Dingle. "Naturally we are all very much interested in what you have to say. Unfortunately, however, I am obliged to interrupt your stimulating discourse and turn to the *dull* subject of Latin, since this is what I am paid to do."

It was the same for the rest of the morning. The corridors were buzzing with talk of "old Thorley's pipes." Every small group that he passed seemed to be whispering and snickering over it. In study hall he sat next to Victor Loving, that tall skinny Victor

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Loving who always looked as if he needed a clean shirt. A real sarcastic tongue in his head too. Nobody liked him or would have much to do with him. But Paul sat next to him purposely, because Victor Loving was up on every bit of school gossip, none of the dirt could be hidden from him.

"What's the story on old Thorley's pipes?" Paul asked in a low voice.

A small smile curled Victor Loving's lips. "It's wonderful what a popular sought-after young man I am all of a sudden. I guess it must be my new spray deodorant."

Sarcasm or no sarcasm, Victor Loving wasn't going to give up the pleasure of telling his story. So pretty soon Paul was filled in on all sorts of vivid details. He heard about old Thorley's loud indignation when he discovered that his office door had been forced; his solemn declaration that "the culprits were obviously after my Coleridge first editions!"; his embarrassment in front of the secretaries when he saw that nothing was missing but his collection of mangy old pipes. A particularly nice touch was the giggle that broke out of dignified little Miss Pepper, the principal's private secretary, and the dirty look which he gave her.

But the best time of all was at lunch. With no teacher's lectures or study hall rules to check the flow of conversation, it was nothing but Thorley's pipes from the tomato juice to the raspberry Jell-o. The big question, of course, was, Who did it? Paul asked the question too and joined in on the speculations and analyses of clues. He came up with two or three theories of his own. Very logical and convincing, if he did say so himself. And all the time he was thinking, If *they* knew what *he* knew, what would they say? How would they look at him? What cries of amazement and admiration there would be! It was a real temptation, to blurt it all out in front of them, to give himself that one terrific moment and to hell with what happened after that.

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Only that was stupid, of course. He wasn't going to do anything as stupid as that.

After lunch, he joined up with some of his friends who were seniors. There was Mike Fuller, and Jonathan Herbert, who was almost as big and dumb as Mike. Gargantua and Bushman was what Paul called them to himself. And a little later they ran into Norman Blackstone, who was president of the Student Council. A smart guy, as far as marks and classwork went. But even the smartest guys have a dumb streak in them somewhere, Paul had found that out a long time ago. Something in them that you can take hold of and make use of, if you're smart enough yourself to see it. With Norman Blackstone it was the way he thought of himself as some sort of young Abe Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt, and Jesus Christ, all rolled into one. The speeches he made at Student Council meetings! And the solemn frown that came over his face if you asked him to give you his "serious opinion" of some important question. It didn't matter what the important question was — the world political situation, or the smoking problem among the seniors — Norman Blackstone was ready to give his serious opinion at the drop of a hat. So if you happened to be the one who dropped the hat for him, and if there happened to be something you wanted out of him in return for the favor —

They spent the free period wandering around, discussing the baseball team's prospects, making wisecracks at the girls, and returning over and over again to the favorite subject of the day. As they talked about it, Paul wondered for a moment if it would be safe to tell his secret to these friends of his. After all, they were his kind of person, Mike and Jonathan and Norman. They were popular, sure of themselves, riding on top of things, not a collection of shakes and shivers like most of the little weaklings in his own class. They would appreciate what he had done.

The moment passed. Paul felt a little annoyed at himself. What

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was he using for brains anyway? Of all the people to tell his secret to! Mike and Jonathan couldn't keep anything to themselves no matter how hard they tried. And Norman Blackstone would start thinking immediately what he could make out of the thing personally. He would see himself addressing the Student Council on the subject of Rowdyism in the Student Body, he would do almost anything to get a benevolent smile out of old Thorley. In the end he would come to Paul and announce that he was sorry, there was nothing personal about this, but he felt it was his "duty" —

Paul smiled. That was a close one, he told himself. Caught yourself in time, though. Still using your head, thank God.

They had come to the entrance of the dining room. "Wait a second, will you," Jonathan said. "There's my cousin Barry, I have to tell him something." Paul gave a casual glance at the heavy dark kid who was fidgeting in the doorway. He looked away again immediately. Jonathan's cousin was of no interest to him, just another nobody that he saw around and never talked to. Why did he have that look on his face, as if he was sick or something?

" — basically it's a question of rowdyism," Norman was saying. "In my opinion we should call a special meeting of the Student Council."

Jonathan rejoined them. "What's Norm getting worked up about? Looking for an excuse for another one of his council meetings?"

"Now this is a serious matter," Norman said, but the other three broke in with loud laughter, and they all ambled down the hall together.

A few minutes later they separated, and Paul started for English. His slight annoyance was gone, he was feeling good again. On the whole, he thought, it's turned out even better than I hoped. There hasn't been such a stir in this place for years. And in the future — He was already beginning to get ideas for the fu-

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ture. Better and better ones too. Ideas that would make this last one look crude and childish.

"Paul King, I've been looking for you."

It was Miss Pepper, the principal's secretary. She came marching up to him with her bright brisk manner. "I was going to leave a note in your box, but now I can save the trouble. Mr. Thorley wants to see you."

"Me — ?"

"Your last class is over at three. Please report to his office at three-five exactly."

"I've got Dramatics Club this afternoon."

"You'll just have to be late for the Dramatics Club."

"Yes, but — " He wanted to ask her what it was all about, why did Mr. Thorley want to see him? Then he thought he'd better not. It wouldn't be smart to show too much curiosity.

"Hurry up now, free period is over," said Miss Pepper, and she went marching off.

§ § §

Well, it's probably nothing at all, Paul told himself all through his next class. Even if old Thorley had his suspicions, how could he possibly prove them? All he could do was hope that Paul would break down and confess. Well, he wasn't dealing with some stupid little baby who started wetting his pants every time a teacher blinked in his direction. Paul wasn't scared of any teacher that lived, especially some dried-up conceited old principal who made less money in a year than his father made in one week.

Still, the afternoon moved awfully slowly. And there was one idea that kept coming into his head. What would it be like if he got caught? Would the police come to arrest him? Would he have a trial in a courtroom? Would they send him to prison or reform

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school or something? He could see his mother crying in a soft bewildered way. He could see the grim angry look on his father's face — "God damn it, how could you be so *dumb!* A son of mine — so dumb!" He could hear his friends and his teachers and the servants whispering behind his back.

But what was prison like? He had seen plenty of movies about juvenile delinquents and boys' reformatories. You went in a poor mixed-up decent kid, and you came out a hardened criminal. There was always some tough young hoodlum there who taught you all sorts of tricks. He talked out of the side of his mouth, and he never got his hair cut. He was always saying things like, "I'm smart, kid, you stick wid me and we'll go places."

To tell the truth, Paul had never believed much in this tough young hoodlum. He supposed that prison would be just like everywhere else. You had to handle people carefully, and use your brains, and make the right sort of impression. If he ever got to prison, he thought, it wouldn't take him long to make things comfortable for himself.

He didn't want to go to prison! People would use it as an excuse to think they were better than he was. He didn't want to see old Thorley at three o'clock.

"Oh, Paul! Paul King!"

He was starting up the stairs to the music room when this high piercing voice made him stop. This girl, this Trudy Dubois, was running up to him. She was a silly girl who went in for tight sweaters, and she had a reputation for being an easy mark on dates. Paul had tested the reputation once or twice and found that she lived up to it, and then he had lost interest.

"What do you want, Trudy?" He hardly bothered to hide his impatience.

"I've got a message for you. From Judy Fox. She tried to get you at your house this morning, but you were gone already. You notice she isn't in school today."

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"All right, what's the message?" As a matter of fact he had been too busy to notice that Judy Fox wasn't in school today.

"Well, she wants me to tell you that she's terribly sorry, but she was feeling bad last night, and this morning the doctor came, and he says she's got the measles. So she can't go with you to the Teen-Agers' Frolic at the club tonight. She asked me to say how awfully sorry she is, she's just brokenhearted, she's been looking forward to it for weeks."

He wasn't the least bit annoyed about Judy Fox's measles. A year ago he might have been, when he was rushing her hard, and she was being all coy and proper. She was considered to be the prettiest girl in her class, it was a real triumph for him when he started being seen with her regularly. Especially since she was older than he was. But that was a year ago. With girls it was the same as with everything else. It was all right for a while, then you had to find something new. For the last two months he had been trying to figure out some way to break up with her.

So he made his voice angry. "She was feeling bad last night, but she couldn't get in touch with me then, could she? While there was still time for me to make other plans."

"She thought she'd be all right in the morning."

"That's okay. I'm not going to pine away, I guess. Tell her I'm sorry she has the measles, and I hope she gets better soon." He turned and started up the stairs. He could hear Trudy calling after him, but he didn't slow up.

He was feeling a little better now. It was a good thing to let off steam, when you had something on your mind. He scowled through music, made up nasty couplets about his teachers, snapped at people when they spoke to him. He kept his anger going right on into math, his final class. Then the bell rang, it was three o'clock.

Well, he wasn't going to crawl into Thorley's office like a jellyfish. Whatever might be going on inside of him, he wasn't going

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to let that old bastard see it. They could yell at him, they could torture him, they could throw him into dungeons.

He entered the outer office. For Miss Pepper's benefit he put on his most charming, most ingratiating smile. "Well, I'm here."

"So I see," she said, in her dry tone. She was a cool old girl all right, pretty sure of her ability to handle any of these insignificant little students. But Paul could have twisted her around his little finger if he had wanted to take the trouble. There weren't many people who didn't like him if he wanted them to. One big smile at the right moment.

"You just go right in," Miss Pepper said. "He's waiting for you."

Why not? he thought. And he flashed the big smile at her right now. "Thank you, Miss Pepper."

"You're quite welcome," she said. Still putting on that dry, unimpressed act. But he could tell that she was purring underneath her dignity. He could tell that she had a soft spot for him already.

He walked past her into Thorley's office. As Thorley looked up at him, Paul instantly changed his manner. He became humble, subdued, deferential. Every line on his face spoke of the deep respect he felt for his principal. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Ah yes — King — sit down, this won't take a minute."

Thorley's voice didn't tell him a thing. Thorley invited people to sit down with that good-humored, important voice no matter what he wanted to say to them. A bawling out or a pat on the back, there was always the same official-welcoming-committee manner. "King —" Thorley leaned back and folded his hands together — "I have a very grave matter to discuss with you."

Paul's face took on a suitably grave expression.

"It concerns — without beating around the bush — this disgraceful act of vandalism which was committed here in my office last night."

Paul said, "Yes, sir." But he didn't like the sound of his voice,

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there was too much of a quaver in it. Why the hell couldn't he keep himself under control?

"King—" And suddenly Thorley's manner seemed to melt, a note of weariness came into his voice. "Paul—you've heard what happened here, haven't you?"

Paul wasn't ready for this. If this wasn't a bawling out, what was it anyway? He brought out another "Yes, sir," while he readjusted his ideas.

"Disgraceful," Thorley said, resuming his angry tone. "I am determined to find the young ruffian responsible. We believe in progressive education here, as you know. Young people should be allowed to express themselves, free and unhampered. But there are limits to everything. Discipline is important too. You follow me, King?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'll find the young ruffian. We'll find him, I assure you. That's why I asked you to drop in this afternoon. I believe you can be of help."

"Help, sir?"

"I am calling on certain students from each class to help me. I have chosen the most outstanding individuals, those like yourself who have already demonstrated their ability to take on responsibility. Leaders of the class, you understand, with a certain influence. You know Norman Blackstone—our Student Council president—he was quite concerned over the matter."

"What is it I'm supposed to do, sir?"

"Ah yes. Well now, what I'm *not* asking you to do, King, is be any sort of spy or informer or anything like that. We don't encourage that type of thing here, you know that. I simply want you to—talk to your classmates in an informal way, and if you *should* happen to form an opinion as to the identity of the disgraceful vandal who—well, you understand me, King, you're to use all your influence with this individual to make him see the ne-

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cessity of facing the consequences of his action. If he refuses to follow your suggestion, then you would certainly be justified in coming to me with the name. Having carried out your own responsibility in the matter, you could with a clear conscience leave us on the faculty to deal — But I'm sure you follow my meaning."

"Yes, sir, I follow it perfectly," said Paul, without the trace of a smile. "I'll certainly cooperate with you the same as everyone else."

Thorley beamed. "Thank you, King. I was sure you'd feel that way. Now then, I have several more appointments, I'll be talking to you again."

They both got to their feet, and old Thorley actually came around the desk and led Paul to the door. "Oh, one more thing. You understand, of course, that this little talk of ours — we'll both keep it in the strictest confidence, of course."

"Of course, sir."

"Of course." Thorley had a hand on Paul's shoulder, he held him back another moment. "I dare say, King, this disgraceful incident has given rise to considerable — merriment at my expense?" He gave Paul no time to answer but went on with a quick laugh, "Well, that's only to be expected. Being in charge of a complex community such as ours, with the necessity for maintaining a certain dignity and remoteness — Well, I can certainly enjoy a good joke with the next man. Yes. Good afternoon, King. Is my three-fifteen appointment here, Miss Pepper?"

For the last ten minutes Paul had been holding it in. But now, running down the stairs, hurrying along the hall to the Dramatics Club, he let it come bursting out of him. He was free! Free, unsuspected, nobody guessed a thing! Read all about it, another brilliant success for the sinister Boy Burglar of Riverdale! Who is he, this daring ruthless figure, the mystery man of four continents? Wouldn't they all like to know!

The Dramatics Club was trying to decide on the big spring

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play, but his jokes nearly broke up the meeting several times. And then, when that homely Carol Fleming, the chairman, tried to get them back to serious business, he was ten times more serious than anybody else. And in the end, just to amuse himself, just for the hell of it, he forced through Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* against everybody's opposition.

Going home in the subway that night he started a friendly fight with Mike Fuller. They wrestled on the floor of the car for ten minutes. And when it was over, he was hardly tired out at all.

Then he was alone on the crosstown bus. It was twilight. The shop windows were blinking on, people were rushing along the streets. He stared out of the bus, gobbling up every sight, and still there wasn't enough for him to see.

Then he was home. He tossed his books across his room from the doorway. A perfect shot, right on the bed. A big hug and kiss for Mother, till she gasped and laughed, "Darling, my permanent!" A funny look on Ellen's face. What did he care? He kept up a running chatter all through dinner. What happened at school, the robbery, his talk with old Thorley. All sorts of funny details about the way old Thorley clasped his hands and cleared his throat. Dad roared at them, and came out with some of his favorite remarks about the incompetence and impracticality of people who went in for teaching.

The coffee was brought in. Paul took a sip, opened his mouth to start another story — and suddenly discovered that all the energy, all the elation had gone out of him. Just a flat empty feeling in their place. It always happened this way, he thought. In the twinkling of an eye — just when he was starting to enjoy himself.

"What's wrong with the coffee tonight?" he said. "Why does the coffee in this house always have to taste like dishwater?"

"Tastes pretty good to me, boy," Dad said.

"I don't notice it, dear," Mother said. "Maybe you're right, though. Come to think of it — "

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"Lousy coffee," Paul said. "Lousy food. Dull! Why does everything have to be so goddamned dull?" He jumped up from his chair and walked out of the room. In his own room he threw himself down on his bed. He tightened his fists, as if he was getting ready for something. For what? What did he want? Did he want to cry? Did he want to yell and pound the pillow? What the hell did he want?

He wanted things to be good again. Like the good old days, when he had the secret club. He wanted the Assistant Grand Mogul again, somebody you could tell things to, somebody you could enjoy things with.

"What's the matter with you anyway?"

He whirled around and sat up on the bed.

Ellen was in the room, looking down at him. "Why are you acting this way? Going into tantrums like a little baby."

With anybody else he would have snapped back immediately, Mind your own business! Who's the baby, I'd like to know, making a big deal out of nothing? But Ellen's cold look took the fight out of him. Suddenly all he wanted was to drive that cold look off her face. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just — I had a tough test in school today."

"You were feeling pretty good when you first came in."

"Well, the strain caught up with me. You know how it is."

She didn't answer this. After a while she said, "What is it, Paul? What's on your mind lately?"

"Adolescence, I guess. You know what all the books say about — "

"Never mind the jokes. You don't have to make jokes with me. If you don't want to talk to me, all you have to do is say so."

They stared at each other for what seemed like a long time. It was as if there was something they both wanted to say — the same thing — but neither of them could find the way to say it.

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He broke the silence at last, with a smile. "Listen, sister dear. I'm fine. I've never been better in my life. I'm going out to a dance tonight, and I'll have a wonderful time. I'm touched by your concern —" he was on his feet now, he went over to her and put an arm around her shoulder — "but believe me, you don't have to worry."

He could feel her slowly relaxing. And then she looked up at him and managed to smile too. "All right, brother dear, you go out and enjoy yourself with the rest of the juvenile delinquents. But before you leave this house you apologize to Mother and Dad. Otherwise sister dear is going to give you a walloping, the way she used to do when you were a lot smaller, though certainly not more childish, than you are today."

"I'll apologize," Paul said, giving her a kiss on the cheek, "if you promise to give me the walloping anyway."

An hour later he left the house, and climbed into the car next to Carl. They drove in silence up to Mamaroneck. He didn't even ask to take the wheel. He was calmer now, his anger was gone. But he was still feeling restless, he still had that vague sense of moving in the wrong direction, of going real fast without getting any closer to what he wanted.

Well, maybe he would find some nice sweet innocent little thing at the dance tonight, and she would help him forget his troubles. The sweeter and more innocent, the better.

V

THE Spreading Chestnut Country Club was located in Mamaroneck, among those flowing hills and long vistas which seem to have been created by God for the express purpose of providing mankind with golf courses. The club building was white and

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sprawling, with impressive colonial pillars in front and a view of the eighteenth hole from the screened-in dining room in back. On sunny days this view was a glittering picture postcard, in all shades of green and white. At night the colors softened, became misty and melancholy to suit the gentle spring breezes.

The club had just built a new open-air dance floor behind the dining room. It had been paid for by five years of extra assessments on the membership, and the inevitable questions were already being asked: How the devil had the House Committee managed to expend so much time and money with such comparatively insignificant results? Five years, thousands of dollars, and was *this* all they could show for it? But no trace of this bitterness infected the annual Teen-Agers' Frolic. It was the first important social event to make use of the new dance floor, and everybody was determined to be gay. Under a canopy of orange light, confetti streamers, Japanese lanterns bobbing in the air, the dancers moved, slow and solemn, or fast and frantic. The girls were dressed in fluffy low-cut evening gowns, the boys were holding their heads up stiffly over bow ties, shirt studs, and their fathers' cuff links.

Around the square of light the spectators stood, their faces partially shadowed — the intent calculating faces of the stag line, the beaming indulgent faces of a handful of proud parents. And still further from the center, shadowy figures, gray and purple, strolled among the trees, two by two, with one head tilted down earnestly toward the other head. Occasionally one of these shadow-couples would come to a stop, and the heads would merge for a moment.

Off at the corner of the club building, in a small lighted circle of its own, was the bar. Three colored men in white jackets stood behind it, pouring, stirring, measuring, wielding shakers, slapping down one order and moving right on without a break to the next one. There was a steady crush of people, mostly boys, pushing up to the counter, shouting till they got what they wanted, then being

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elbowed away by the next in line. At the extreme corner Barry Morris had taken over one small area for himself. There he had planted himself, heavy and immovable, for almost an hour. Nobody tried to challenge him for his place.

He was starting on his fourth rye and ginger ale. How he hated the stuff! He choked a little at every swallow. And the taste of the ginger ale wasn't even covering up the taste of the whiskey any more. But he forced himself to gulp down another mouthful. He was going to do it no matter how much it disgusted him. He would keep on drinking all night, until he was too sick to think, until the whole world was whirling around him.

It was beginning to whirl right now. What he needed was more air. Clear himself up a little, then he could make a fresh start. He turned from the bar, and still holding his glass he started to push through the crowd. It was no effort at all, they seemed to melt away in front of him. Then he was out on the lawn, he was steadying himself against a tree. His stomach felt funny. Not used to this. Going to be very sick. All right, fine, what could be better?

"What could be better?" His voice sounded funny. Thick. He tried it again, louder. "What could be better? Get sick. That'll show them." Just as funny. Seemed to put off the sickness, though. Only temporary. The sickness was coming back, nothing could stop it. Maybe if he shouted loud enough. "That'll show them! Normal! I *am* normal!" Girl over there, staring at him. Then she was gone, boy friend pulled her away. Why was his head going around so fast? Not just one direction, every direction all at once. He felt himself falling, then something hard under his arm. Tree again? No, it wasn't.

"Take it easy, kid."

He looked up. Face, swinging back and forth in front of his eyes. Like those awful Japanese lanterns. Familiar face, strong hand under his arm. Light hair, thin lips, eyes laughing at him. A shiver went through him, his head was almost clear for a second.

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Could it really be? After all his waiting? No, no, wasn't that at all, things were whirling again, all mixed up again.

"Come on, we better get you to the john. Now hold it in just a little longer, for God's sake."

Hand on his arm, helping him along. "Yes — I'm holding it in — just a little longer — "

Lights blinking, plush chairs, long corridor. How much longer, how much longer? King. That was who it was. Paul King. Never said five words to me before. Goes around with the seniors. No longer, just can't do it.

"Just can't do it — "

"Sure you can. We're almost there now."

"Yes, I can. If you say so. Anything you tell me — "

In the bar of the West Side Chess and Checkers Club, Henry Morris and Charlie Clifford sat at a corner table and drank highballs. Henry was still nursing along his first one while Charlie was finishing up his third. Charlie's drinking had increased lately, and Henry couldn't help wondering if this was such a good thing for a doctor. It didn't seem to bother Charlie, though. His mind seemed to be as clear as ever. He was never at a loss for cynical wisecracks. His reputation as a heart man was growing all the time.

"Patients!" Charlie was saying. "Why is it that they always have to do things backwards? A hundred times a day my time is wasted by hysterical females whose hearts are as sound as the U.S. Treasury, every one of them insisting she's a bundle of murmurs and thromboses, and she's going to drop dead on the street if I don't load her up with pills. And meanwhile, what about her husband? He's got a heart that *is* liable to run down at a moment's notice. Who wouldn't, after thirty years with that woman? But will he

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take my advice and give himself a good long vacation for once in his life? Oh no, that would be too easy! He just grunts and makes insulting remarks about doctors, and early next morning he's down at his office again, driving himself into his grave. He just can't wait to pop off so that his widow can collect his insurance money and spend it annoying half the expensive specialists in the country until she passes away peacefully in her bed at the age of ninety-three!" He signaled the waiter for another drink. "Tell me, Henry, don't *you* ever get sick and tired of this world full of Mongoloid idiots?"

"Well, I see what you mean, Charlie. Only — there's something else I'd like to talk to you about just now. Sort of serious."

"Shoot. You know there's nothing I like better than giving free advice. As long as it isn't about your heart, of course. In that case, I'll have to charge my usual fee."

"No, it's nothing to do with my health. I couldn't be healthier. It's — well, it's about my boy. I'm worried about him."

"Why are you worried? He's a good kid, from all you've told me. Gets good marks at school. Doesn't make a lot of racket. If you ask me, these modern kids have a lot more brains than we had when we were their age. Now if someone would only teach them to use them — "

"Yes, he's a fine boy, there's no doubt of that, I don't have any complaints about him. What it is — Charlie, I think maybe the boy isn't very happy at home."

"Now why shouldn't he be happy at home? Where do you get some of these ideas of yours? You give him everything he wants, don't you? And if you've still got that same cook you had five years ago, at your anniversary party — well, any time your boy wants to move into my hotel, and let me take his place at your dinner table — "

"Yes, but it's not that, Henry. We give him things — but it's the

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way he acts sometimes. He looks so worried and tired sometimes. He looks as if he's carrying the whole weight of the world on his shoulders."

"So what's wrong with that? All kids that age are the same. Big idealists. They think they can personally cure all the troubles of the world. Time enough later on for them to find out how wrong they are."

"Yes, but — you see, I've been wondering if it really *is* the same with Barry as it is with other boys his age. I mean — there's his mother, you see. I mean, she knows so much about psychology and adolescence and so on. But sometimes I wonder if I don't leave things up to her too much — "

"Waiter!" Charlie said. "I'm finished with this an hour ago, how about a refill? Now you're talking a lot of nonsense, Henry. Naturally a mother spends more time over her kid than a father does. He's out winning the bread, don't forget. But that doesn't mean you don't exercise a great influence on the boy. I've known plenty of fathers in my day, and believe me, if you think *you're* one of the bad ones — "

"Yes, but — You're *sure* about this, Charlie? You're sure the boy is happy, and there's nothing for me to worry about?"

"I'm positive of it. At the age of sixteen every kid thinks he's got problems. By the time he's seventeen he's forgotten all about them, he's busy with a whole new set."

"You're not just trying to put me in a good mood or something?"

"Would *I* go out of my way to put *anybody* in a good mood? You've got nothing to worry about, I give you my personal guarantee."

Henry looked at his friend hard, but Charlie was busy with his glass, his eyes were turned away. After a moment Henry sighed and took a sip from his own glass.

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"Are you feeling better now?" Paul asked.

A faint "Yes" came from the figure kneeling in front of the toilet bowl.

"Well, there's no hurry. Don't get up till you're sure it's all right." Paul took a step back and lit a cigarette. That was funny, he was usually pretty careful who saw him smoking. His father didn't want him to do it, so Paul did it only in privacy or in front of his closest friends.

He took a slow puff and began to study the new acquaintance at his feet. A fairly miserable-looking acquaintance at the moment. Face slightly green, teeth chattering, shoulders shaking. Nobody looks his best, God knows, when he's on his knees on a bathroom floor, vomiting into the toilet. Especially a big awkward kid like this.

And Paul couldn't help smiling a little. Now why was he playing the Good Samaritan like this anyway? It wasn't exactly the kind of entertainment he had planned for this evening. He had been at the dance for a couple of hours, and time hadn't been hanging heavy on his hands. There was a wide choice of unaccompanied girls, who had come with parents or older in-laws. And he had done a lot of cutting in on girls with dates. He had been amusing himself with one of his favorite casual party pastimes, trying to talk them into deserting their escorts and slipping off with him for the rest of the night. Once or twice he had come pretty close to success. He could tell from the brightening of the girl's eyes, the slight parting of her lips. All he had to do was press his advantage a little further. But tonight he hadn't cared to go any further. And pretty soon he had got tired of the game.

Then he saw this kid leaning against a tree, in the shadows around the dance floor. He saw him swaying, and he came up to break his fall. Just another kid. Jonathan Herbert's cousin. Paul wasn't even sure of his name. Barry or Larry something. He had

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