

1376



He was a runaway kid. She was sixteen and wise as Eve. They were caught in a cheap and gaudy world they never made.

STEVE FISHER

Giveaway



150
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In his bluejeans and his high-heeled boots, his broad belt and his ducktail, he looked like a tougher kid than he really was. He was seventeen pretending to be nineteen, a runaway from home, broke, in the back streets of Hollywood. And it was there he met a strange, lovely and quite terrifying girl.

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LOS ANGELES HERALD EXPRESS

Giveaway

BY

STEVE FISHER

BANTAM BOOKS



NEW YORK

GIVEAWAY

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To X9 with Love

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I admit I have this habit of noticing dames. When it comes to some gorgeous female I practically have eyes in the back of my head; only usually that's all I do, I just look at them, and the thing is, I thought I *knew* this one. I realize it sounds like a pretty sad excuse, that old crap about "Haven't I met you somewhere?" but I'm not kidding, I was just about positive I knew her, because that's the lousy way I am: I can forget somebody's name or where I met them in a minute flat, but I always remember the face, and hers was familiar as hell. In fact, I thought she might be from back in Gary.

At first glance, she'd seemed like a kid, but she wasn't; she was around sixteen, a year younger than me, and she was a full woman, the way chicks are once they get past thirteen or so. She was wearing a kind of party dress with polka dots. That is, it was no long formal deal, but you didn't exactly wear it to a drug store either, and that's what this was—a drug store. She had muddy blonde hair, down around her shoulders, and a real pert face, although very serious. She was standing by the magazine rack, all alone, reading the *Daily Variety*; she wasn't on the verge of buying it or anything, she was reading it right there.

I wanted to go over and say hello, and let her talk, so I could eventually figure out where I'd met her, only I couldn't right at this second because it was after eleven and I'd just reported in at work five minutes ago. It was my second day on the job and I hadn't done any too hot the day before. In fact, I ended up ten cents in the red. I was shuffling between the counter, booths and kitchen in this corny place. It was on Hollywood Boulevard and always did a big lunch business.

The boss had me on a two-hour shift, eleven to one. If you really have to know, I was a combination bus boy and dishwasher, which I am aware is fairly degrading, but it was only temporary until I could get a few square meals under my belt.

Actually, I was the bus boy, but when the sink got too full I had to give the old lady back there a hand. The boss had agreed to pay me seventy-five cents an hour. Some agreement. It just happened to be the lowest he was allowed to pay under the state law. But that wasn't the worst. He tossed in this joker where I was to eat my lunch here, and he'd deduct thirty-five cents. So I'll tell you what happened yesterday. I worked from eleven to one, and then when it was just about quitting time I slipped on some grease, fell on my ass, and broke the Silex coffee percolator. I am now in a terrific position to state how much a Silex costs. A buck and a quarter. My total pay with that amount deducted, plus thirty-five cents for lunch, came to minus ten cents. So I not only didn't have any dinner but I slept under a bush in DeLongpre Park for the third straight night. I'm not complaining. Being summer and all, sleeping under a bush isn't so bad; what's bad, and what Hollywood ought to do something about, is all the damn dogs that keep trotting back and forth. I mean, *God!*

The little dame over by the magazine rack didn't go away. When she finished *Variety*, she selected *The Hollywood Reporter*, and I fooled around, helping the waitress set up silverware and catsup for the booths; then when there was a slack minute I whipped off this little apron they make me wear, and sauntered beside her, and pretended to be looking at a magazine. I was playing it casual, figuring maybe she'd recognize me first. She hadn't even glanced at me while I was working so she wouldn't have any idea where I'd appeared from.

I also have blonde hair, lighter than hers, worn ducktail, and I put the magazine back and dug my comb out of my pocket and gave it a couple of swipes. I was half a head taller than her which made it just about right. I mean, it'd be *awful* if a dame was taller than you. I was wearing a wide belt with a buckle, and ankle-high boots with slightly built-up heels. Between that and the fact that I sort of needed a shave, I looked a lot older.

Suddenly she glanced up from *The Reporter* and stared right at me. But nothing happened. Her face was absolutely blank. I half smiled, but I was getting kind of nervous. I didn't have all day or anything, and either she had a memory ten times worse than mine, or I really *didn't* know her.

"What's the matter?" She had a nice voice, low and well pitched. "What are you looking at?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"Oh, sure," she said, real sarcastically, "I'm sure I know you."

"No, on the level."

"Oh, wow! What an original approach. So what's my name?"

"I can't seem to remember."

"This gets better," she said. "Please continue."

Man, I about flipped. "Look, I just slightly don't go around picking up girls. Particularly children."

She looked at my wide belt. "Why don't you go climb back on your motorcycle and ride swiftly away?"

I had a fairly sharp answer for that, but I happened to notice the boss headed over here. He's the type you can't help notice, big and red-faced with short-cropped hair. I took off before he reached us, made it to the booth where I'd left my apron and tied it on again. But the big bastard followed me into the kitchen.

"Tell me, punk, what am I paying you for?"

I looked right at him. "Okay, just don't get nasty about it. She was someone I thought I knew."

He put his hands on his hips. "Don't get nasty about it! Fresh goddamn kid!"

He walked away fast, or I would have told him off, because the point is, I wasn't going to take any crap from him. It was bad enough having to work at a job like this without getting pushed around. I could see why he got sore, though; it had probably looked to him like I was just goofing off. I didn't know what had happened to the girl, and I didn't care a hell of a lot. God, you try to be friendly and everybody jumps on you. I was feeling pretty rattled.

Then, just to soothe my frayed nerves even more, the boss came back again about two minutes later, holding my sweater all crumpled up in his hand. He wanted to know if it was mine, and when I said it was and reached for it, he pulled his arm back, still holding it and asked what the hell I meant hanging it out where the customers hung their things, and before I could even answer, he threw it at me.

What I felt like doing was putting it on and walking out the door, and all that stopped me was that I was hungry, and I could smell the food cooking here in the kitchen. So I went over and finally found a place to put it where it wouldn't get ruined by a splash of gravy or something. It was one of those sweaters that buttons up the front, high school senior sweater, although I wasn't any senior. My folks had gotten it for me in advance because I was all puked up about living at home and they figured this'd make me stick around until next term. These sweaters were a pretty big thing in Gary, and since it

was really meant for school, I probably shouldn't have worn it, but the day I ran away it just so happened that I had it on. I cut out kind of suddenly and all the clothes I had was what I was wearing.

I got back to work now, carting things around the kitchen, and then when I came out front again I just about dropped a whole stack of clean dishes. She was sitting at the edge of the counter with a cup of coffee in front of her, and she smiled at me. I turned my back, and began stacking up the dishes.

"Oh, big deal," she said. "Let's be petulant." I swung around, and she pretended she thought I was going to hit her, and held up her hands. "I take it back."

Only I wasn't too amused. "What's with you?"

"I think I know where you saw me."

"Okay, buttercup. Tell me."

"On TV. Beauty and Talent show."

What killed me was that she was right. It came back as soon as she said it, and the truth was, I didn't really know her at all. I'd been sitting in the YMCA the other night and a lot of us were watching TV and when she came on there were all these various comments; so her face was in my memory, and that was all. Boy, it really griped my soul that I was not only wrong, but now she was seeing me as a bus boy. I realized that's pretty stupid, but I guess I'm a half-assed snob or something.

"So what do I do now?" I said. "Ask for your autograph?"

"Mister, I was being friendly. I realized you'd honestly made a mistake, and I wanted to apologize."

"I accept."

"My, how tremendous of you!"

"Only I don't drive a motorcycle."

"Oh, well, I was judging by your Superman costume. The belt and the boots."

"What's the matter with them?"

"Slightly juvenile, don't you think? Or do you participate in those teen-age wars where they use belts to fight with?"

"How old are you, little girl?"

"Sixteen."

"Oh—an old bag!"

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen," I lied. Women her age usually like men at least three years older. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Jane Sutton."

"I'm Eddie Shelton. I'm from Indiana."

"I'm from Arizona."

She was getting so friendly I sort of forgot I was working.

I leaned my elbows on the counter. "You here on a vacation?"
"Sort of. But not exactly. We come to California every summer."

"We?"

"I'm with my mother, naturally."

"Oh."

"Disappointed?" She was ready to get sore.

"No. It figures."

"What I wanted to ask you is, how'd you like the Beauty and Talent show?"

"Fine."

"I'm always interested in getting home audience reaction."

"What do you mean, 'always'? You on it every week or something?"

"No." She smiled. "But I suppose there's no harm in telling you. I'm a pro."

I was so shocked I thought I was going to fall down, and before I could check myself I blurted out: "You mean a whore?"

She lunged over the counter at me, but I ducked back. She was close to tears. "I ought to kill you!"

"God, I'm sorry, but a pro what?"

"A pro is a person who appears on TV shows for the prizes. The regulars who keep making all the different programs."

I heaved a big sigh. For a minute there it'd been pretty exciting. "I apologize."

"Ma's a pro too. She broke me in."

"Is there much dough in it?"

"Sure. You can get rich—if you're lucky enough to hit the right show."

"You rich?"

"Far from it." She paused, looking at me kind of strangely; I couldn't tell what she was thinking. "But of course you have to have talent to be a pro . . . be a sort of actor or actress."

"Eddie," the waitress said. She was standing over by the booth glaring at me. "Eddie, if it isn't too much trouble . . . that is, I don't want to tear you away from anything. . . ."

"Coming up," I said.

All she really had to say was "Eddie" and I'd have started hustling, but that's the way with waitresses, always bouncing some corny ad-lib remark at you. However, it was close to noon now, and people were drifting in pretty fast. I got a move on, and for the next ten minutes I was practically bicycling around the place. Then I noticed that Jane had gotten up and started out. I nailed her by the magazine rack.

"Hey, I'm off at one. Where you going to be later?"

"I'm meeting my mother," she said. "We'll be busy all afternoon."

"What about tonight?"

She looked at me for a minute. "Let's be realistic, shall we? I don't know you very well yet."

"What the hell, we'll just talk."

"About what?"

"How do I know? Look, Jane, suit yourself, forget it."

But she just stood there; then finally she said: "I think we're going to the library. You know, the one on Ivar? About eight o'clock tonight."

"You and your mother?"

She nodded. "But I sometimes wait out front while she's inside. Or go window shopping along the boulevard for a half an hour or so."

I grinned.

2

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She was waiting in front of the library, all right, but for a moment I hardly recognized her. In the first place, she was wearing flat-heeled shoes, which made her quite a bit shorter, and she wasn't so dolled up; she had on a skirt and blouse instead of the polka-dot dress, and her hair was pulled back and tied in a sort of half-assed horse-tail. The truth is, she was a completely different dame. A little younger, and more subdued. The way she looked at me when I walked up you'd have thought I was going to accost her.

"Oh, hello." She said it just about like that, with no emphasis.

"Hi." There was a very awkward silence. I began to fidget a little. Then I said: "What is this, your night to be demure?"

"Pardon?"

I hate it when a babe starts that kind of crap. So distant and all. "Nice night," I said. That's how stupid you begin to

feel. It's awfully sad when you have to resort to a moronic comment like that. She looked at me a little regally.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Not a damn thing!"

"Oh, you're hopeless!" she said. "I suppose you couldn't recognize who I was?"

"Who, for Chris' sake?"

"Katharine Hepburn."

"Oh."

"Oh," she mimicked.

"Well, what do you want me to do—applaud?"

She shook her head. "Let's go. I have to be back inside of half an hour."

We started up Ivar, kind of ambling along. It was early; there were a lot of people on the street and the car and bus traffic was fairly heavy. She glanced over.

"Well, say something."

I tried to think of an interesting subject, but I couldn't, so I went back to the one question that I seem always to work into a conversation when I'm sparring around with some new acquaintance. I don't know why I ask it, unless it's a fetish I have. Somebody asked me that once: "Is that a fetish with you?"

"Hey, Jane, you got an old man?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. All you talked about was your mother, so I just wondered."

"Sure, I have an old man."

"Yeah? Where is he, back in Arizona?"

"No. In Seattle."

"How come?"

"Look, I don't even know him," she said. "He left my mother when I was about two minutes old. So let's drop the subject." I was quiet, and finally she went on. That's the way with people, they tell you to drop something, then they continue it themselves: "He sends us fifty a month. But not of his own free will. Ma had to get about a million lawyers after him."

"She work to support you?"

"Ma? Of course not."

"But you can't live on fifty bucks per."

"I work," she said. "Ushering at the movies. That's when we're back home, I mean. Not out here."

"Don't you go to school?"

"Naturally. The work is at *night*. I'll be a junior next year."

"I'll be a senior," I said. Then I practically gagged because it had slipped out. The truth is, I had no intention of ever

going home or back to school, either one. "I mean—I'd *be* a senior."

We reached Hollywood Boulevard, and started walking in the direction of Highland. It was a hot night with just a taste of breeze in it.

"You mean you're quitting school?"

"Yeah. I'm going to make it out on my own."

She looked over at me, then she said: "You're a runaway, aren't you, Eddie?" From the expression on her face, I figured she probably thought being a runaway was the greatest.

"Yeah," I said. I like to please women. It gives me a kick, watching their reaction. Only she wasn't too intelligent. I'd told her I was nineteen, and if she stopped to think, that'd make me just slightly too old to be running away from home.

"What about your folks?" she asked. "Won't they be worrying about you?"

"Nah. Anyway, they've got their own lives. See? That's the big thing. In fact, I'd be willing to lay you odds that old Harry's secretly glad I pulled out. Boy, what a phony!"

We stopped in front of a movie and looked at the still pictures. Jane was fascinated. "He your father?" She tore herself away from Lana Turner. "This Harry?"

"What's the diff'?"

"My, you're touchy." We began walking once more.

"Well, he doesn't happen to be my father."

"Stepfather?"

"Yeah. My real father was killed. Long time ago." I was walking a little faster, but she kept up. I don't know why I was putting on the speed, I really don't. You'd have thought I was going somewhere. "He was driving on the highway, and there was this wreck. No sense to it, somebody dying in an automobile, it's just—well, sometimes I don't even believe it yet."

She mumbled something about it being tragic. I realize it was boring to her; it just embarrasses people when you talk on a morbid subject, but I think the reason I wanted to see her tonight was that I just felt like talking. I won't be corny and go so far as to say I was *lonely*, because I hate anything as stupidly melodramatic as that, and anyway if I *really* had to talk there were two or three guys at the Y that'd listen. Only a dame is different. She isn't really different, but every once in a while you make yourself think she is.

"I was only six at the time he was killed. Still with me?"

"Of course."

I didn't care whether she was or not. She didn't have to listen if she didn't want to. Nobody *has* to listen to a goddamn

thing. They can tune you out just by putting their mind on something else.

"Mike was only two. He's my kid brother. He's thirteen now. Real good Joe. Hep. You know?"

"He'll miss you, I'll bet."

I shoved my hands in my pants pocket. "Yeah. I guess Mike will." I began to think how I'd taught him damned near everything I knew. The thing is, in the old days, particularly right after my father died, Ma used to tell me quite a bit about people and morals; and she used to read to me after I went to bed. Kipling and like that. But after she met Harry it didn't last much longer, and of course Mike missed the whole thing, so I touted him onto Kipling, and even read to him now and then when he was a real little kid, and later, in my own way, I gave him these lectures Ma had drummed into me, about what people do and don't do, and what a real man is compared to some phony. I'll never understand how *she* went for a complete phony like Harry. But because I'd done all that Mike now thought I was just about *it*. Yeah, he'd miss me, all right.

"Yeah, Mike probably does miss me," I said. "But what could I do, Jane? I couldn't bring him along." I wondered what he'd say if he could see me walking along Hollywood Boulevard with this doll. He'd probably get quite a bang out of it. "He was the only one I said good-bye to."

I was in a very depressed mood, and now I remembered the day I left. Harry called up from the office to find out if I'd reported to summer school the way I was supposed to, being that I was already a week and a half late doing it, and when I refused to go to the phone and talk to him he got in this big sweat and yelled at Ma that he was coming right home to deal with me. He was a Certified Public Accountant and figured the job was the greatest or something, and anything important enough to make him leave it in the middle of the day practically had to be an earthquake at least. So I beat it right then before he could get home. Of course I'd been planning to do it for a long time. But that was the final thing. The reason Harry insisted I go to summer school was I'd flunked out in chemistry. I tried to explain to him I could make it up next year but you couldn't tell that jerk anything.

"Do you have any other brothers and sisters?"

I guess Jane really *was* with it. I began to like her a lot better. We were at the corner of Las Palmas, and turned down, walking on the other side of the street from the big newsstand, straight toward the Las Palmas Theatre.

"Yeah. A half brother. *Their* kid. Harold. A real little slob.

He's always yapping about Harry's *his* father, not ours. He's a *Randall*, not a *Shelton*. And of course he's the baby of the family. You even look at him, and he starts bawling. Between that and Harry pawing over Ma all the time it's enough to make you throw up. Real garbagy situation."

Jane had stopped in front of the Las Palmas. She was kind of excited.

"It's a *legitimate* theatre. Plays. Live actors."

"Look, Jane, I may be from Indiana, but I'm not a moron, you know."

"I've never seen *Mister Roberts*." That's what was playing.

"I don't think I have enough money." That was sort of an understatement. My net salary today with deductions had come to \$1.05 and I'd spent all but a quarter of it on dinner. Eighty cents is a lot to spend on food, but I'd been so hungry I just ordered everything in sight.

"Oh, we don't have time to go in," she said. "In fact, we'd better be starting back." She turned and looked up at me. "Eddie, may I ask you something personal?"

"Sure."

"You won't get mad?" I can't stand it when a dame starts this routine. I was getting mad before she even said what it was.

"No, I won't get mad."

"It's just that . . ." She was watching my face. "Well, do you know what I was thinking while I was talking to you today? There's quite a few TV shows where they use a young fellow now and then."

"Yeah?" It sounded good.

"I mean," she said, "if you ever meet Ma, don't mention I told you this. I'm not going to introduce you to her tonight because—well, if she thought I was walking around the streets with a boy I just picked up she'd go mad."

"Jusk picked up?"

"Well, you know what I mean. . . ."

"Yeah."

"But sometime maybe you can meet her and make the rounds with us and just sort of see how it all works. Would you like to?"

"Sure."

"You wouldn't try out for a show yourself, though, until you caught on. It isn't as easy as it looks. But later maybe you could win a lot of prizes and cash them in. Which is better than working in that drug store."

"Quite so." That's a quaint expression I picked up when I was about ten.

"But what I *started* to say—"

"Yeah, you sort of detoured, didn't you?"

"It's about the wide belt, and . . . and those boots. It's sort of goony. And very juvenile."

"That right?" I felt like socking her, but I didn't, and all of a sudden I couldn't think of anything to cut her down to size. Up to one second ago I'd thought wearing this kind of gear was pretty damned salty. Gave me a charge when I walked down the street and nobody wanted to fool around with me. It *does* make you look kind of Hands Off, Buster—and that's no crap. But now I was so deflated I didn't know my ass from my elbow, or how to answer her or anything else.

We started walking back toward Hollywood Boulevard. "You think it's kid stuff, eh?"

"Isn't it?"

We were at the edge of the alley that runs along the side of the theatre. "Hey, let's cut through here." It was fairly dark, with a lot of back doorways, but when I took her arm and guided her, she came right along.

"*Isn't* it kid stuff?"

I didn't answer right away, not until I saw a narrow aperture that was just about perfect. I steered her over, and into it, then pushed her up against the side of a brick building. She wasn't suspicious, because she was still waiting for me to answer her question.

"So you really think I'm a kid, eh, Jane?"

"No, I didn't say that."

"I'm a kid, and you're a big woman?"

"Eddie, I didn't say—"

I stepped in close, and grabbed her, and she began to struggle, but I pinned her against the wall. "Big woman, huh? Let's see what a big, experienced woman you are. How about peddling a little of it to me, huh? How about it?"

"Eddie, cut it out! Stop it!"

She was fighting real crazy, and I kept shoving against her. I was fumbling around like mad, but I actually didn't know what the hell I was doing. I didn't even have the foggiest notion. I was just wrestling and grabbing. The real truth is, I don't have any experience. No technique. You're really dead without technique.

Suddenly I let go of her, and she was breathing hard, and glaring at me. She slapped my face, then she began to sob, and moved out of the place, and started back up the alley. I felt like a prize dunce. Finally I caught up with her, and pulled on her arm.

"Hey, Jane, I'm sorry. Really."

She looked at me. "You're the worst beast I've ever—"

"I was just sore."

"I didn't even suspect that you were that type!"

"Well, I'm not."

"Then what brought it all on?"

"You insulted me about my clothes, didn't you?"

"I didn't mean to."

"Okay."

"If I insulted you," she said, "I'm sorry."

We started along the alley together. I was thinking that if I had some dough I'd show her I could dress, all right. My old man sure could dress. He always looked neat and clean, always wore a tie. He had a good job with the telephone company. I think he was one of their best men. Didn't have to climb poles or any crap like that. He worked right in the office with the big shots. If I had some dough I could dress up like him and Jane wouldn't recognize me. She'd be so impressed she wouldn't even talk or anything until she was sure it was really me. Who wants to wear boots and a big stupid belt with a shiny buckle, like some motorcycle fiend?

We came out of the alley, and kept walking, not saying a word for blocks. Then we arrived at the corner of Ivar, and she said I should go on from here. Her mother would be waiting in front of the library, and she didn't want her to see me.

"Still mad?" I asked.

"No."

"See you tomorrow?"

She nodded. "In the drug store."

"It's a date."

She hurried off, and I turned and started back up the Boulevard, and for no reason at all I began thinking of old Mike again, wondering how he was. If I ever told him about meeting Jane tonight he'd look real solemn and say, "Zounds, quite an evening!" I laughed out loud just thinking about him saying that. I do that pretty often. I think up whole two-sided conversations, then practically roar just listening to them. I guess the real truth is, I'm probably demented.

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I got to the little park at about eleven, but with these horny couples necking all over the place I began thinking how I'd botched everything with Jane by the way I acted in the alley, and I couldn't get to sleep until one or two A.M.; and so I woke up tired, in a very stinking mood. The trouble with sleeping in a park is that you have to get up so damned early. Practically at the crack of dawn. The reason for that is every once in a while the juvies decide to make an early morning raid to flush out runaway minors. Some guy told me that over two thousand of them flock to California every year, and it takes four full trainloads to ship them back home, costing the state some tremendous amount. The way it works is, one train leaves every three months, four times a year, and if you happen to be caught the day after a departure they stick you in a detention pen to wait for the next one. And since I wasn't in any frame of mind to become a free passenger I always made it a point to roust myself out at about five in the morning.

So I guess you can imagine I was fairly worn out today. I walked over to an all-night drive-in on Sunset and had some coffee, then went on to the Y to wash up. After that I just wandered around a little more. For instance, I went into this magic shop and inspected every damn thing they had, but I was so droopy I couldn't appreciate anything.

I tried not to think of Jane at all, because I felt positive there wasn't a chance she'd show up. The fact that she'd promised to didn't mean a damn thing. Girls have this act they put on after a date, as if everything is just lovely, and then the next day they fluff you off. If you aren't on to that, you're liable to be slightly bewildered. But why they do it is, they're afraid if they tell you how they really feel, you'll put up a big argument, or get nasty and make a scene of some kind that'll embarrass them. Women are pretty tricky people that way.

To be absolutely realistic, I just figured Jane probably wouldn't want to bother with me any more. I always try to be like that: realistic. But sometimes it's depressing; like today, because as far as I was concerned I wouldn't mind having some girl around that I knew and could talk to once in a while.

I arrived at the drug store about ten of eleven, and before I walked in I made up my mind I *wouldn't* keep looking for her every two minutes. I'd just put the whole thing out of my head, and that way I wouldn't be ripe for a big disappointment. But I'm lousy at resolutions. The moment I walked inside the door I began looking everywhere for her. Then when I actually *saw* her I damned near passed out.

She was wearing the same polka-dot cocktail dress, or whatever it was that she had on yesterday, and she was seated in one of the booths with a glass of water in front of her. The waitress hadn't come on duty yet, so I guess she'd carried the water there herself. She was turning the pages of a magazine. I ambled over, my boots clicking across the floor, then stood with my hands on my hips until she looked up. She closed the magazine, which was *Photoplay* or something.

"Hi," she said.

I grinned and slid into the opposite seat. "I see you're all dressed up again."

She nodded. "I have an audition this afternoon. Of course I don't have my make-up on yet. But there was plenty of time, so I thought I'd walk on over."

"How long you been here?"

"Half an hour. I had some idea you came to work much earlier. Finally I asked the counterman and he said you'd be in at eleven."

"It's still only five of." I was pretty happy to see her. "Want anything to eat? It'll be my treat."

"What do you have?"

I got up. "I'll go and see what's cooking."

"Okay," she said, "I'll be putting this magazine back."

The cook was beginning to brew up quite a few different things. "Ask her whether she wants lunch or breakfast."

Back at the booth, Jane said: "Brunch."

"Huh?"

She laughed. "A combination of both breakfast and lunch. I'm just about starved."

"Good. I'll whip you up a banquet."

The boss hadn't showed yet, so the cook and the counterman both helped load up a big blue dish with more food than you'd ever get on ten blue-plate specials. They said it was in the interest of young love. They say pretty funny things

when they're in the mood. Anyway, Jane was going to have mashed potatoes dripping with gravy, a small steak, juicy buttered beets, toast, coffee, and about half a dozen smaller items.

I came out of the kitchen carrying it on a tray, just as the waitress arrived. She stared at me, and then I saw the boss headed through the store, so I snapped it up, practically *slid* over to the booth. But I stopped too quick and the whole damn tray fell and splattered all over Jane. She let out a shriek and almost turned over the table getting up.

The waitress ran for a wet cloth, and the boss made a beeline for me. It would be useless to go into the various unkind things he had to say, but one of them was that I was fired. Meanwhile, the waitress helped Jane the best she could, which wasn't much. The cup of coffee had landed mostly in her lap, half scalding her; but the gravy and beet stains were all over the front of her dress, and she stood there wailing.

"My *audition* dress! The only one I have!" Then she saw me. "Look what you've done to my audition dress! Ma'll kill me! She'll just kill me!"

I can louse myself up with women in more ways than anybody you've ever seen. The boss was saying *I'd* pay to have the dress cleaned.

"But it *can't* be cleaned!" Jane said. "It's ruined!"

"It's the boy's fault. We're not responsible for—"

But he didn't even finish because Jane was crying too hard, and now she turned and almost ran out of the store. The boss started shaking his fist at me, and I took after Jane. I found her outside on the corner, just standing there, still crying.

"You know I didn't mean to do it, don't you?"

"Oh, you clumsy fool! Don't even talk to me!"

Boy, I felt bad, I really did.

"I'm afraid to even go home!"

"Let *me* explain it to your Ma."

"You? What could you explain?"

"I'd just tell her how it happened."

But she walked away. I followed her, though; then I was walking beside her.

"She can't blame you for some accident that's *my* fault."

"Oh, go away."

"No, I won't. I'm responsible, and I'll go home with you and tell her."

"How heroic of you."

She didn't say another word, just kept walking, and I stayed right with her, and in a few minutes we were in the vicinity of TV Row. Out in Hollywood, most of the big radio

and television stations are located on Vine, or Sunset, or somewhere else in the immediate area and, as it turned out, this house Jane lived in was just exactly four blocks from the corner of Sunset and Vine, which of course is the hub. That's where CBS is, and across the street is Music City, about the hottest record store deal in California, and a big hangout for kids. At night they have a disc jockey working right in the window where you can see him selecting records and the whole thing.

Around the hub there are a lot of little ordinary residential streets which aren't any too hot, if you know what I mean. Apartment houses about a thousand years old, bungalow courts that were probably all the rage when Valentino was alive, cruddy little single family houses and all like that.

This place where Jane lived didn't look bad. In fact, if you were just driving past you'd think it was somebody's house. It was big with a white plaster front, and a lawn. Nothing fancy, but not cheap either. There wasn't any sign advertising rooms for rent, so you really couldn't tell what a rat race it was on the inside. The only thing that detracted at all was a house across the street almost like it that had a big sign up, saying "Drama School." I mean, that looked awful and spoiled the whole mood of the residential street that was at least pretending to be halfway decent.

When we arrived at the house, Jane stopped in front of the door and gave me a withering look. I had a feeling she'd been noticing my boots for the last two blocks, and how I walked, with a kind of swagger, but that's the only way you can walk in the damn things without falling down. Now she was standing still and not saying a thing. I unbuckled my wide belt, then held it in my hand and looked at it sadly. I used to call it my lucky belt, which I suppose is childish. But now I heaved it way the hell out to the middle of the street. She pretended as if she hadn't noticed. But it was a pretty big gesture, and she'd noticed all right, only she still didn't say anything. Maybe she was waiting for me to take off my boots and toss them away too. Finally she said:

"I don't know how we're going to explain it. There's no way to! No way at all! I've been trying to think of something . . . but . . ."

"Tell her the truth."

"No. Don't you know anything, Eddie . . . anything about people and how they take things? Listen, let *me* do the talking."

"Okay."

"All right. Come on."

She opened the door, and just then a couple of small

girls with pigtails came roaring out from inside, chasing one another. I ducked back as they zipped past, then followed Jane into a big hallway. Boy, it smelled putrid, and it was so dark you could hardly see! There was a telephone on the wall, with a lot of numbers scribbled around it in pencil, and you could see hand prints, and a wad of gum or two. I tell you, I felt like puking. It may sound funny, but if there's anything I hate it's a filthy house.

Jane walked all the way to the end of the hall, passing what had been the living room when this place was first built. It was shut off with big, half-faded, moth-eaten drapes that looked like they had originally been the curtains in a theatre—probably the first one ever invented. I got a glimpse through an opening and saw two creaky-looking four-poster beds inside, some guy lying on one of them, and a woman at the other end of the room. I didn't get a good view but it looked as if she was cooking on an electric plate. It was real weird, and the stink of old cooked foods was getting worse all the time.

Jane stopped in front of a door, and looked at me again.

"Just a minute . . ."

She went in, and closed the door. There was a moment of silence, then I heard some dame shriek like she'd been shot.

"Jane—*your dress!*" It was probably her mother. "Your *audition dress!*"

"Ma, I know, but listen—"

"We're *ruined!* Do you know that we're ruined? You're supposed to be at Happy Doc Dooley's Cookies or Cash tryout at two-thirty sharp! *Where* have you been? What happened?"

"Ma, please, I have a friend with me."

"A *friend?* At a time like this? A friend?"

Jane opened the door, and when I didn't move, she pulled me in.

4

For a minute I couldn't even believe where I was. This part of the house had been the dressing room and toilet, on the big scale, of course, and now it was converted into a sort of double bedroom, one single bed in each. But there were still mirrors around the walls, like in the Crazy House at Venice, and a vanity table big enough for two elephants to make-up. It had a little clothesline stretched over it with a bra, two pairs of silk panties and a blouse hanging on it.

In the second room—which was really part of the first one, because there were no walls or connecting doors—the john was very crudely disguised by a piece of zebra-striped cloth to look like a chair. The bathtub had been taken out completely and that space was now occupied by the bed, but a big old-fashioned wash basin still lingered on. It was made of black porcelain, I'm not kidding, with gold faucets and fixtures. Anyway, they looked like gold. Must have been quite a dump once. Now it was damned near a pigsty—women's clothes piled all over the place. I suppose there wasn't any closet, but they could have bought a hamper.

Jane's mother was gaping at me about as hard as I was at the surroundings. She was one of these old blondes, her hair all brittle and hard from too much bleach, but whipped back in a sort of horsetail, tied with red ribbons. She was wearing a blue satin bathrobe, and mules that her toes stuck out of. Her toenails were painted up enough to blind you. Her figure wasn't too bad, though, and she had big purple eyes. But the skin of her face was white and flabby, and there were wrinkles on her neck and in and around her eyes. All in all, she looked kind of weak and helpless, as if *she* were the daughter instead of Jane. Anyway, that's the expression she had now, maybe for my benefit.

"Eddie . . . this is Toby."

"Who?" I said. Honest to God, I thought I'd made a mistake . . . that it wasn't her mother, after all.

"My mother . . ."

"Oh."

Toby was over her surprise and by now all set for me. She had that same habit Jane apparently did of being overly friendly with complete strangers, only she was much worse. She smiled in spite of the strain that was on her of seeing Jane's dress so messed up.

"How do you do?" Was she ever acting coy! Like she was trying to come down to my age, and wanted me to think she was real hotsy.

"Hello," I said.

"He came to my rescue," Jane announced. She did it in a ringing, dramatic tone that startled me. Toby was a little brought up by it, too, so much that she forgot to ask what I was doing here. "There was this horrible drunk in the drug store. I was having a cup of coffee, and he kept trying to talk to me, and everything, then he suddenly just grabbed at me, and that was when Eddie rushed over, and they got in this big fight. Right in the middle of it, the waitress came out of the kitchen with a tray of food . . ."

Toby said, "But how did—"

"—Just as Eddie hit him, and he stumbled back against the waitress, and of course the tray spilled all over me. Ma, Eddie was so mad he grabbed the drunk by the back of his coat and *ran* him out of the store. After that he returned and tried to help me. He was so darn sweet that I—well, I *knew* you'd want to thank him in person."

Toby must have been an emotional sponge, because she had tears in her eyes, and she came over and kissed me on the cheek. "I *do* want to thank you! You were most gallant."

She was so overcome with my gallantry she'd almost forgotten Jane's wrecked dress, and Jane picked that moment to say:

"On the way over, I told Eddie about the audition, and in fact I suggested that possibly sometime when he didn't have anything else to do he could go around to the stations with us."

"A wonderful idea," Toby said.

"Maybe today, Ma?"

"Today?" Toby echoed. "Well, I have no objections. Are you going to be busy today, Eddie?"

"No, I'm absolutely free," I said.

Then Toby remembered the dress. "Oh, Jane, what are we going to do about it?"

Jane shrugged. "I guess it's hopeless. Besides, *Eddie's* clothes aren't any too—*new* or anything."

"There's nothing wrong with his clothes," Toby told her. She looked me over. "Although I admit his pants look as if he slept in them." She gazed up at me. "Do you mind my saying that?"

"No. I really don't."

"I could iron them out for you in no time. Your shirt, too, for that matter. The sweater seems all right. Is that a school sweater?"

"Yes, but he's out of school," Jane said quickly.

"Of course he is. He's a big boy. How old are you, *Eddie*?"

"Eighteen," I lied.

"You told *me* nineteen," Jane said.

"Well," I said, "almost . . . soon." God, I'd *just* turned seventeen.

"What does it matter?" said Toby. She was fussing around now, all in a dither. "I do hope *Eddie* doesn't mind our quarters." She looked at me. "It's just temporary. We have a *beautiful* place in Arizona. But we stay here on our vacation. We usually have the—the *big* room. But this trip—it was rented. I wouldn't want you to think Jane came from surroundings like this."

"Oh, I didn't think that."

"We have a little money, but we conserve it in order to afford a longer vacation."

"That's very smart," I said.

"Jane," she went on, "there's some change on the vanity. Call Helene and ask if you can use her dress. Tell her it's just for this afternoon only . . ."

"But, Ma . . . ?"

"Don't call me Ma." The truth was she was conscious of it in front of me. "How many times have I asked you not to call me 'Ma'? It's so—crude. And vulgar." She looked at me for sympathy or a compliment or something, but my throat was stuck and I couldn't talk. "You see, *Eddie*, we—we both work a little in TV—professional people, and in that world—well, one doesn't advertise her age. Very often Jane and I pass as sisters."

Sisters! That really did it! I don't want to sound cruel, but she didn't look like any sister to Jane—unless their mother was about ninety years old and had them forty years apart.

"So I hope that *you*, at least, will call me Toby." She had a catch in her voice that was supposed to make Jane commit suicide or something for being so thoughtless.

"Helene won't lend me a dress."

"Of course she will!"

"But—" Jane shot me a look, then blurted it out. "*This one* was hers! Remember? We borrowed it a long time ago."

"It's not hers." Toby answered. "I *bought* it from her!" You could tell it was a lie. It was a big damned lie all the way.

"Oh—did you, Ma—did you, Toby?"

"You know I did! How can you stand here in front of this young man and *say* a thing like that!"

Jane knew it was a lie, too, but she was going along with it.

"Well, I'll call her then . . ."

"No. No, on second thought, Mrs. Chambers won a dress on the Lost Souls show last night . . ."

"Oh, did Mrs. Chambers *win*?"

"Yes. Mrs. Hales just told me."

"She won? Really won?" Jane's eyes were as alive as a wildcat's that's just gotten a whiff of fresh-killed meat.

"Those dresses are from the Sampling Shop. Young sizes."

"But they don't deliver for at least a week!" Jane knew all about it, evidently. The two of them were talking like I wasn't there.

"She intended to sell it, of course, but—"

"I could go down *there*!" Jane interrupted. "They might let me have it today! If I told them how important it was."

"But it is for Mrs. Chambers. *She's* supposed to pick it up."

"I'll say I'm her niece. That she's giving it to me."

"But how will we pay Mrs. Chambers?"

"Oh, wow! I forgot." Jane sat down on the disguised john. She reached over and began frigging with the gold faucet.

"Maybe she'll trust us," Toby suggested.

"*Her*?"

Toby looked at me, then had a big inspiration. "We'll tell her your cousin Eddie just arrived from—from . . ."

"Make it Kentucky," I said.

". . . Kentucky, and we don't want to ask him for any money right off, but in a day or two we'll broach the subject and borrow it from him to pay her back." What killed me was they didn't have any shame about any of this. They were both sort of feverish.

Jane gazed at me. "Ma, does he look rich?"

"When his pants are pressed . . . and his shirt is ironed out . . ."

"Look at the boots."

I lifted one foot so Toby could see. "All the style in Kentucky."

"Really?"

"Ma, he's from Indiana. He ran away from home."

She scarcely heard. "Oh, my poor boy! But if we're going to see Mrs. Chambers there's no time to lose. Jane, the bath-

room should be clear by now. You take a skirt and sweater and make-up and go up there. Comb your hair out . . . take a bath. Look your best. I'll iron Eddie's pants and shirt down here . . . We'll have to leave by twelve. That'll get us to the Sampling Shop by one . . . if Mrs. Chambers agrees, and I really don't see how she can refuse. And we'll still make it in time for the audition of Cookies or Cash at two-thirty . . ."

Jane was already gathering up the clothes she'd need. I felt sort of panicky. I didn't want her to leave the room. But in about one minute she was gone and I was standing here with this old blonde. She was setting up the ironing board.

"Take off your pants, dear . . . and your shirt." She glanced around at me. "You needn't fear. I won't peek."

I wasn't so damn sure about that.

5

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What I really wanted to do was get the hell out of there. God, I mean every way you turned those beat-up mirrors were reflecting the gold faucets and that stupid zebra-striped john, and I couldn't get over *anybody* living in what had once been the downstairs toilet of a creepy old mansion. There weren't any windows or ventilators or anything else. Just a couple of electric lights, and all this female junk stacked everywhere, real sloppy. I don't know how they ever found anything.

"All right, dear. Give me your shirt."

Where did she get this *dear* routine? Boy, I really hate it when some older dame talks to you with this "dear" and "my boy" bull, and all the time they're looking at you like they're going to reach over and cop a feel or something. It really made me sick, and I'm not kidding. I took off my sweater, and began to unbutton my shirt. She watched me, smiling a little.

"You're very well built."

"Yeah?" Now she was beginning to scare me, those purple eyes looking right straight at me.

"Yes, you are," Toby went on. "Did you play football at school?"

"No." I handed her my shirt.

She took it and began to iron it, but she kept looking at me in the mirror, waiting for me to take my pants down. I was really nervous, and sort of wishing I had a cigarette. I don't smoke too much, but I wanted a cigarette anyway. So I could act calm. The thing is, I've never undressed in front of a woman before. Not since I was a kid, and Ma used to put my pajamas on for me. The big difference was, I'm older now, and Toby didn't look like the type that was about to read me a chapter out of Kipling.

The iron was steaming. I guess she wasn't paying too much attention to it. I fooled around with the top of my zipper, like I was going to take my pants off, and then I remembered my shorts were dirty as hell. I looked around for something to stand behind, and there wasn't a damn thing. Finally, I picked up the spread off Toby's bed. I felt like a real stupe, but I held it in front of me between my teeth and took my pants off behind it. Toby didn't say a word or make any sign. I handed her the pants, then wrapped the spread around my middle like a sarong.

Toby finished ironing the shirt and hung it over a chair. She began laying out the pants. They were blue gabardine, and had quite a few stains on them. She reached over for a can of cleaning fluid.

"I'll see if I can take some of these spots out."

"Thanks."

"How long ago did you leave home, Eddie?" She was asking real casual, like it really didn't make any difference.

"I don't know," I said. "A few weeks ago. A couple of weeks after school was out."

"In June?"

"Well, either then, or around the first of July. I don't remember the exact date. But I know on the Fourth I was on the road, and I slept in a drain pipe that night, right on top of a lot of broken glass."

"Really?" she said. "Didn't you have any money?"

"Oh, sure. I had money. About seventy bucks. I had it in the bank and drew it out the day I left. But I figured I had to take it easy how I spent it. Besides, I wasn't near a town or anything where I could get a room." I was suddenly on a big talking jag. I figured if I kept talking and all, I wouldn't be nervous. "They have these certain states where it's against

the law to hitchhike. If a driver picks you up he can get six months in the can. So all you can do is walk your fanny off all day, hoping to reach the next state line . . ."

"Did you have any unusual experiences hitchhiking?" She was rubbing my pants like a house on fire, trying to get the spots out, but I could see it wasn't doing any good.

"I had a few," I said. "For instance, coming out of San Francisco, a Jap gardener picked me up in this little green truck. He was fairly young, and we got to talking, and then he mentioned he'd been in the war, and for a couple of minutes there I thought he meant on the side of Japan . . . you know, one of those suicide pilots, or something. But he wasn't. It turned out he'd been an American G.I. and fought in Italy. When he let me off, he made me take two bucks to eat on. I didn't want to, I was embarrassed as hell, but he insisted so much that I felt if I kept on refusing he'd be insulted. I have his card in my pocket. I'm going to send it back to him as soon as I can."

"Did you come straight to Los Angeles, or make stops along the way?" She had put back the cleaning fluid and picked up the iron.

"Oh, I knocked around here and there, made a couple of stops . . . until I ran out of money."

"Where are you staying at the present time?"

I grinned. "In DeLongpre Park."

"Oh, that's terrible! You mean you don't even have a room? I had no idea."

"It's not too bad."

"It *is*, though."

"No, I'll survive."

"Do you know it's already August?"

"Yeah . . . I know."

"You've been away from home quite a while."

"Yeah . . ."

"Have you written your folks?"

"Oh, sure." I said it in a real pious tone, like I wouldn't have dreamed of *not* writing. Sometimes, when I have to, I can lie pretty good.

"Otherwise they'd worry."

"Yeah . . . I didn't want them to worry."

"If you're out of money, why don't you ask them to send you some?"

"Well . . . I figure I want to make it on my own. The thing is, they don't think I can, and I'm going to show them."

"I can understand that," Toby said. "But I wouldn't want them worrying about you." You could tell by the way she said it she really didn't care if they worried themselves fruity.

"No, neither would I."

She was bearing down with the iron and didn't say any more for quite a while. Then she finally put the iron away and held up the pants to see if they were creased right.

"There! They look a lot better."

"Thanks, Mrs—"

"Toby. Call me Toby, darling."

She handed me the pants, and kept looking at me. I put the bedspread in my mouth again and held it in front of me. I got my legs into the pants and pulled them up, and zipped my fly closed, and then she reached over and took the spread away from me. I thought her timing was just about uncanny—then I suddenly realized that all this whole time she was able to see my ass in the mirror behind me! Nothing else, though. Just my ass, with the dirty shorts. She put her hands on my shoulders.

"Don't be so shy."

She was practically breathing down my neck.

"I won't bite you," she said.

"No, I know."

"You're a very nice boy."

"Thanks—" I started to say "Mrs." again.

"Toby. *Won't* you call me Toby?"

"Toby."

"There. Was that so hard?"

God, she was making me nervous! All this sugary crap, and her hands on my shoulders. I twisted away real neatly, like I was reaching for my shirt. I picked it up.

"Well, I guess *I'd* better get ready," she said.

"I'll wait in the hall."

"Will you, darling? For just a tiny moment?"

"Yeah . . . sure," I said. I put on my shirt and began buttoning it like mad.

Boy, was I ever glad to get out of that room! Once I was in the hall I decided to take off! I was sick of the whole deal! Then I remembered my sweater. It was still inside. I didn't know what to do, and then all of a sudden I saw Jane headed toward me. I don't know how she got changed so fast, I really don't. I swear to God she *couldn't* have taken a bath! Unless maybe it was a fast shower. But her hair was combed out real pretty, and she had on this tight gray skirt, not any too new or anything, but snug against her hips, and a light green sweater. Her bra stuck out against the sweater quite a bit. She was wearing lipstick, powder, eye shadow, mascara, in fact, the works. I don't go too much for dames that wear all that junk but I have to admit she looked about a million times better.

"Where you going?"

"Nowhere," I said. "I'm waiting for your—for *Toby* to change."

"Oh. You look nice, Eddie."

"So do you."

"I'll go in and see if she's decent."

"Okay."

She went in, and I took out my comb and began working on my hair. A ducktail is pretty complicated, and you've got to work on it a little to fix it just right. I'd spent almost my last buck and a quarter to get it cut neat. That may sound like a big waste of money, but I figure your personal appearance is fairly important.

While I was combing my hair, I changed my mind about taking a powder. I change my mind quite often. I decided I might as well stick with Jane and her mother for a while.

"Eddie . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Come in."

I went back inside. Toby was in front of one of the mirrors wearing a knit dress now, and rubbing a tan cream all over her old white skin. Jane was sitting on the zebra-striped throne again, waiting for her.

"Eddie," she said, "do you want to wash or anything?"

"I sure do."

"Go down the hall, back to the front of the house, then turn right and go up the stairs. The bathroom has a big sign on it, so you can't miss it. Ma'll be a few minutes yet."

Toby put down her smearing rag, and turned around. "Can't you call me *Toby*?"

"Oh, Ma, it's all right in front of strangers, but—" She looked at me, as if suddenly wondering whether she should think of me as a stranger.

"I'll be right back," I said.

I left *them* to argue it out. I found the stairs, all right, and then this old, musty upstairs hall with one single little twenty-five watt electric bulb burning and throwing these weird shadows all over. I located the bathroom, and made for it. It was damned near as big as the layout they had downstairs. I guess whoever owned the house figured one bathroom was enough for all the roomers so converted the downstairs one into something they could rent. This one had the same mirror arrangement, and the black porcelain with gold faucets, but a black porcelain *tub* and a *shower* were still intact. The walls were black tile, except that parts of it were cracked, and you could see the plaster falling out. It was pretty damned depressing.

The floor around the shower was wet, so Jane had taken a shower, all right. I locked the door, stripped down, and did the same. It felt good as hell under the hot water, rubbing soap all over me. I got so carried away that when I came out and dried, I put my shorts in the black porcelain basin, soaped them up and scrubbed them clean. Then I wrung them as dry as I could, and put them back on. That's the way you have to do sometimes when you're traveling and you only have one pair. It feels a little cold on your fanny, but it doesn't hurt you any.

When I got back downstairs they were just about ready to go, except Toby was horsing around, adjusting her dress, and monkeying with her hair, and asking Jane every two seconds or so how she looked. In fact, she was getting sort of worked up. She was a high-strung old dame, no kidding. She was so flustered I thought she was going to pass out before we even got started.

"Mrs. Chambers just can't refuse!" She'd said it about nineteen times by now.

I was looking in the mirror, wishing I'd shaved. I don't shave too often, but once in a while I sort of need one. The big trouble was, I didn't have a razor.

"All right, let's go," Toby said.

You'd think she'd tooted a whistle the way she practically shoved us out the door. She stopped in the hall and locked up—I guess she didn't want anybody to swipe the gold faucets. We went back up the dark hall through layers and levels of food odors, and finally got outside. I began breathing in the fresh air like mad, and the sun was so bright I couldn't see. It was like coming out of a dungeon.

Toby and Jane started walking up the street, and I caught up and got in step with them, which was pretty hard because they kept getting *out* of step with *each other*. I mean, women really haven't got any sense of being in step at all. They're sloppy as hell that way. I *always* had a sense of being in step, even before I was in the R.O.T.C.

"We going to walk?" I guess it was a pretty dumb question, but the way Jane burned me down with this mean look made me feel terrible.

"It's only a few blocks," Toby said.

"Do you feel up to it?" Jane said.

"Sure. I just *asked* . . ."

"We're not using the Cadillac this week," Jane said.

"You don't have to get huffy."

"She's sensitive about . . . things," Toby said. She was trying to keep us on speaking terms. "I've always tried to give her the best. In fact, I've devoted my whole life to my little

girl." I glanced over at Jane and she looked pretty bored. "I've had many chances to get married again," Toby went on, "but I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"That's what I ask her," Jane said.

"It wouldn't have been fair to her," Toby said.

"I don't see why not."

"Why, I couldn't have spent as much time with her . . . grooming her to be the . . . lady that she is now."

Jane's face got a little tense. I thought she was going to let old Toby have it any minute, but she didn't. Toby saw Jane's expression and she was so upset and rattled I decided I'd better pour on the old soothing oil.

"Well, any kid whose mother works all her life to support her owes her more than—" I didn't know more than *what*, and I stopped right there. But the main reason I stopped was that it wasn't getting over at all. Toby was acting as if I'd suddenly run an old rusty sword through her.

It was Jane who broke the silence. "I explained to you," she said, "that mother has never worked. She's always been very . . ." She looked at Toby: "delicate." It was a big damned lie that she'd explained it to me. She'd never even so much as mentioned her mother's health before.

"But if she didn't work, how'd she support you?" Boy, I can really be dense sometimes. This was one of my dense days.

"We lived with—"

"My brother," Toby picked it up. "He was very kind."

"Oh," I said.

"Not the year around, though," Toby went on. It was funny listening to her, because you could tell her mind wasn't on it at all, or at least only *part* of her mind was on it. What she was really thinking about was this deal with Mrs. Chambers. "We didn't want to burden him down. We visited other relatives. And friends. But for the past two years I'm glad to say we've had a place of our own."

I was looking at her while she talked. It was easy, because she didn't look at me once, she was so wrapped up in where we were going, and I could visualize her a few years ago, looking about the same, younger but not much better, trotting around with Jane, who was about three, and very cute, and going from one house to another, moving in, like gypsies, and eating all the food in sight, and mooching everything else they could, and Toby talking about some job she'd claim she was going to get, or else how the doctor told her she absolutely couldn't work for at least two months (or however long she intended to stay) and then when the people got sick of them, moving out and going to the next place, and on and on like

that, all the whole time Jane was growing up, because Toby had a pretty good line of gab, and she could swing it for short stays.

There used to be a woman like that around Gary, except she didn't have any kid, just her no-good loafer husband. They stayed with us two different times. Once this bum was going to get a job practically immediately in another city, but the second time the story was that he was sick and the doctor had told him to rest up, and of course they were broke, and all. They were friends of my old man. He was so big-hearted he was a slob for any story anybody would tell him. I mean, these people weren't even *relatives*. They stayed with us about three weeks on the first visit, and they were on their *sixth week* the second time when he found out that's the way they lived the year around, moving in with saps like him, and he ordered them out, and there was a big scene. I was so damned young I can hardly remember it, but there was a lot of yelling and all that, and Ma's told Harry about it since. It seems my old man and this bum almost came to blows. Which shows you how *grateful* those kind of people ever are about anything.

"That's the greatest . . . to have a place of your own." I hardly even knew I was talking. In fact, I was sort of startled when I heard my own voice.

"We're very happy," Toby said.

"Yeah . . ."

It made me depressed to be able to figure Toby out so fast. I felt *old* as hell. Like some sad old moth-eaten philosopher who knows everything about people just from the few things they say. She was just a lady mooch, that's all! I got kind of sick to my stomach thinking about it. I figured I really ought to put a million miles between myself and a dame like her. I wasn't raised that way, I really wasn't. Not that *I'm* any prize. But God, you've got to have a *few* principles, at least! And *respect* for yourself. I think anybody that hasn't got respect for themselves is really dead.

I would have turned and walked off right then and there, but the thing is, I began to feel sorry for Jane. I began to *worry* about her, no kidding! Working in Arizona as an usherette to support old Toby!

While I was thinking about this, feeling pretty upset, we were walking up one damned street and down another, and after we'd gone about three blocks, Toby began getting real tense, worse than before.

"Remember, Eddie. You're Jane's cousin."

"From Kentucky," I said.

She nodded. She was sort of in a trance, like it was a final rehearsal.

"You're my brother's boy . . ."

"And things are very good in Kentucky. I'll have money coming."

"Yes."

"What's this Mrs. Chambers like?"

"She's very . . . odd."

"She drinks," Jane said.

"Yes, but she's—she's very successful," Toby said. You could tell she was in awe of her. "She once won the jackpot on Life's Fulfillment. That's a *national* show. Coast to coast."

"Yeah. I've seen it," I said. It's quite a famous program, at that. Used to be on radio, then moved to TV. Comes on in the daytime for housewives. Five days a week, and they really load the winner down so that all the dames watching will drool. The way they do is, they pick four or five women from the studio audience and the one that tells the saddest story gets what the announcer claims is her "life's fulfillment."

"How did she get on the show?" I guess I was pretty naive. "I mean, did she just *ask*, or what?"

"No, it's not rigged." The way Toby said it you knew she hated shows that weren't rigged. "Mrs. Chambers was in the studio audience every morning for *seven weeks* before they selected her."

"What'd she ask for her life's fulfillment?"

"Her rent paid for a year . . . and enough food to eat," Toby said.

"God, did they give it to her?"

"They gave her seven months' rent . . . at thirty a month, and supplied eight dollars' worth of groceries every week for that entire time."

"She must have eaten like a bastard!"

"No," Jane said, "she traded back most of the stuff at another store. So she could buy whisky."

Toby was looking at me. "I do wish you wouldn't use profanity, darling."

"She was potted the whole seven months," Jane said.

"Swearing is evil. God doesn't want us to swear."

Listen to who was talking! A crummy old female mooch. I looked at her in that knit dress. Her breast works weren't any too amazing. Jane was a lot better stacked. That's the way with these mooches, though. They go around acting like they're saintly and all that, and you'd be surprised how many people fall for that crap. I mean, it's all right to be saintly, if you really are, but some phony that rings in God just to impress you makes me pretty damn ill, because if there's anything I can't stand it's a phony, and a *holy-pretending* phony is about the lowest on the whole list.

"Here it is," Jane said.

We were in front of the most beaten-up old apartment house I've ever seen.

"It's been almost two years since she won on Life's Fulfillment," Toby said, "but you see, she still lives pretty well."

"What was it she won on last night?" I must have a poor memory, because I couldn't think of what show it was, and I had it all mixed up now with Life's Fulfillment.

"Lost Souls," Toby said. "It isn't network. Just local."

"It isn't even *sponsored*," Jane said.

6

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We went inside the dump, and boy, it was really sad, everything faded and stained and real old, and sort of a moth-spray smell in the air; it was clean, though, but that just made it sadder, I mean, anybody *bothering*. The thing was, it was so old-fashioned that you sort of thought you were in another life, or something. The apartment was on the ground floor, and when we got up to the door you could hear voices, this old, cracked hag's voice, and a man's. The hag was saying:

"Go on, go on, rob me blind, you vulture! I'm an old woman—tired and broken . . ."

And the man's voice sounded like he was laughing at her:

"Quit acting, Potty. The program's over."

Toby straightened up a little, gave both Jane and me a look, then knocked. The voices stopped. There was the sound of feet shuffling across the floor inside, then the door opened, and this witch or something peered out. I swear to God, I thought she'd gotten off a broom! She had this sad old beat-up bathrobe wrapped around her, and gray hair hanging down around the sides of her face, and she was wearing cloth slippers that were just about ready to call it quits forever.

"Mrs. Chambers," Toby said, "may we see you?"

"No," the old lady croaked, "I'm transacting business."

"But this is business, too. And very urgent," Jane said.

"Come back later!"

"But it'll be too late then," Jane insisted.

I noticed that when it came time to do anything, it was Jane who grabbed hold.

"We want to buy something you won last night," Jane went on. "We'll pay you more than Mr. Borson will . . . really!"

The old crone opened the door and tossed her head in a way that meant all right, get your asses in here, which was also about the mood she was in. We all walked into this real tiny living room. It was pretty dark, because the building next door blocked out any decent light from the windows. There was real old, conventional apartment house furniture, a small divan, one chair, a coffee table, and a bed that folded up into the wall. It was folded up now, and locked in behind two French doors, but you could see parts of the sheets and spread sticking out at the ends. There was a kitchenette at the right, with a few dirty dishes on the table.

This "Mr. Borson" was sitting on the divan, and he had these prizes Mrs. Chambers had won on *Lost Souls* in front of him on the coffee table. He didn't attempt to get up or anything, just looked at us a little disgustedly, as if he was sort of in a hurry, and we were going to take up a lot more of his time.

"Good morning, Mr. Borson," Toby said sweetly.

"Morning," he grunted.

He was about forty-five, fairly big, with black horn-rimmed glasses, and a jerky kind of face; sort of the type that gets up at a picnic and makes everybody listen while he plays the harmonica. I mean, that's the impression I got. A loudmouth, always patting people on the back, but really so damned corny he'd embarrass you just by being around.

The "prizes" in front of him consisted of a small portable radio, a fountain pen set, a tiny diamond ring in a box, and a jar of some kind of face lotion.

"This is . . . Eddie Shelton," Toby was saying, and then to me: "Eddie . . . Mr. Borson is a very talented man . . ."

"A talented *crook*, if you ask me," old lady Chambers said.

"Mr. Borson has appeared on many television shows . . ."

"As a contestant?" I don't know why I said that. It was a kind of asinine question, when you think it over.

"Yes. Of course."

But that was what I wanted to know. He was a pro on these

giveaway shows, just like Mrs. Chambers and Toby and Jane. He wasn't any actor or anything, appearing in dramas like "Dragnet" or "Lucy"; which figured, because to be on shows like that you have to be a real person and all with some ability, not a goddamn harmonica player at a picnic.

"He also entertains at dinners and banquets," Toby said. She was really trying to butter him up. "He's very funny . . . Mr. Borson, why don't you show Eddie your—that card with your picture on it—and all the lovely comments people have made about your after-dinner speeches."

"Why?" said Borson. "Is he a boy producer or something?" He was real sarcastic.

"No, but—"

"But I *might* be," I said. I hate these two-bit jerks, and when I want to I can really lay it on. "My old man's thinking of spending some dough on a local show."

He looked at Toby to see whether I was serious.

"I told him what we really need," I went on, "is a clever M.C., but there aren't so many around."

Borson was on his feet now. Boy, he really fell for it! I mean, he was about the biggest sap alive. His eyes were ogling at me from behind the shiny panes of the glasses.

"That's exactly *my* contention," he said. "Young man, have you seen my card?"

He pulled this square hunk of pasteboard out of his coat pocket. He probably had two dozen more, but he acted as if it was the last one. I reached over and took it. There was his corny picture right in the middle with a stupid grin on his face, and all these half-witted testimonials printed around it. "Funniest after-dinner speaker we ever had . . ." "Kept us in stitches . . ." and all like that. I didn't get to see the whole thing because Jane cut off my water.

"Eddie is only kidding."

Four Eyes glared at me as if he were going to let me have it right on the kisser. What I mean is, he wasn't in the mood to keep anybody in stitches. He grabbed away the card, and looked at it, like I'd soiled it or something. He put it back in his pocket.

"Fer Chris' sake, get back to business," old lady Chambers said.

"Do you accept my price?" Borson asked her.

"Eight dollars . . . for *all* of it?"

"It's my last offer . . ."

"I'm sick and hungry," Mrs. Chambers moaned.

"You're thirsty," said Borson.

The old witch had the shakes. She was shaking all over the goddamn place. "Sick, hungry *and* thirsty! You—you leech!"

"Wait a minute," said Toby.

"You stay out of this," Borson screamed, and Toby cringed.

"But are you selling a radio," said Jane, "a diamond ring, a pen set and a *dress* for only eight dollars?"

"Not the dress," Chambers cackled. "He won't buy it till he sees it." She was almost doing the St. Vitus dance or something. "My life blood . . . take my life blood, you—you . . ."

"Why don't you try the pawnshop?" said Borson. The way he said it was sort of nasty.

"Maybe I will . . ."

Four Eyes headed for the door. "Good-bye, then . . ."
For a guy who was supposed to be *funny* he was pretty damned sad.

"Wait . . . it's a deal, if you go to the corner for me and get . . ."

Borson leered as if he had beaten her to death or something. He pulled a half-pint bottle from his inside coat pocket. "I brought it with me."

"How thoughtful of you," Toby cooed.

Mrs. Chambers' eyes were drooling. She began dry-washing her withered old hands. Borson put down the bottle and counted off money. "Eight dollars . . . two and a half off for the whisky. That's five dollars and fifty cents." He looked at Toby. "Every deal you make with her . . . you end up running to the store for booze. So this time I brought it with me."

Mrs. Chambers took the money and the little bottle of whisky, and Borson gathered up the radio and other junk. But he left the jar of lotion. He saw that Toby had noticed this.

"Drug on the market," he told her.

"It's part of the deal," Toby reminded him.

"Yes, but—oh!" He picked up the lotion, then handed it to her. "A present," he said. He looked at her dirty-like, as if she owed him something for the lotion. "Will you be there for dinner tonight?"

"Yes, I—I think so," Toby said. "In fact, I imagine we'll all be there."

I didn't have the slightest idea what they were talking about, but whatever it was, Borson wasn't about to clap hands at the idea that *I'd* be along. He carried his stuff to the door, turned back, looked at me unhappily, then left. Mrs. Chambers was in the kitchenette frigging around trying to get the bottle open. But she was shaking so bad you could tell she'd never make it. She was about to go mad or something.

"I'll help you," Jane said.

I looked at Toby. "You mean he's supposed to be a *funny man*?"

"You've really never heard of Percy Borson?"

"No, I really haven't."

"He's been on—why, even on *network* shows!"

"So what's he now, a peddler?"

"No. Darling, no! Selling the prizes different people win is his sideline."

"Oh."

"You see," Toby said, "we used to take them to a certain pawn shop on Vine Street. Almost everybody did. But they didn't pay anything at all. And the trouble is, you can't sell the prizes anywhere else in town."

"What about the big stores?"

"No. They were deluged with them, so they made a rule never to purchase any item unless you can prove you bought it there. So this pawnshop really had *all* the business until Mr. Borson conceived a perfectly wonderful idea! He buys the prizes . . . at a reasonable figure, and goes around to the used-car lots and sells them to the salesmen." That's one thing, there's about ten million used-car lots in California. "They think it's stolen goods . . ."

"Why doesn't he *tell* them it's prizes?"

"Because," Toby said, "they wouldn't pay nearly as much if they knew it was something people had gotten for nothing. But if they believe it's—well, he calls it '*hot*'—they have the impression they're getting a big bargain. And those car salesmen aren't the type who mind dealing with what they think is a criminal."

So Borson wasn't so dumb, at that! He was like those con artists that sidle up to you on the street and talk in hushed tones and all—as if they're desperate, wanted fugitives—and offer to sell you a very valuable diamond ring for two bucks, and you buy it, thinking you're taking advantage of him, and it turns out the ring is worth about nine cents in Confederate money. I don't want to sound bitter, but if you want to know, it happened to me. It really did. Down on Main Street in Los Angeles. I went in to have the ring appraised and the jeweler said it wasn't even good cut glass. So I was out two dollars, and I missed about seven meals on account of that.

Mrs. Chambers came back from the kitchenette now with a big slug under her belt. She felt a lot better. Her old gray face, which was sagging to beat hell, had a feeble glow on it, and she'd even put in her false teeth. She was still pushing them up. Jane was right behind her.

"So ya want the dress I won?" You could hardly hear her through the teeth and her two thumbs jammed up in her mouth.

"Oh, did Jane tell you?"

"You catch the show last night?"

"No," Toby said, as if it was a crime to miss it. "I *meant* to but . . ."

"I asked for a washing machine," Mrs. Chambers said. She had the teeth all fixed now and you could hear her. "So I could take in laundry."

"*You* wouldn't take in laundry."

"Of course I wouldn't! But I was a poor old lost soul with an aching ass just a-looking and a-grunting for a way to make a paltry few dollars to keep on eating. He'd have paid me seventy-five or a hundred just like that without even a whimper. He even said so. He said, 'You get a washing machine, Potty old girl, and I'll pay you without blinking an eye.' But not *that* cheap show! Cheap skates! Don't want a poor old woman to even live. By Christ, I need another drink!"

She shuffled on these sad slippers back into the kitchenette and drank right from the bottle.

"Can't even get a sponsor. No wonder! Look at them cheap prizes! You can't get a sponsor givin' away junk . . ."

"About the dress—" Jane said.

"How much am I offered?"

Toby and Jane looked at one another. "Well—" Toby began.

"*Cash*," the old hag said.

"Look—" said Jane. "It's like this, Mrs. Chambers. I'm going to appear on Cookies or Cash tonight . . ." What a lie! She was going to audition for it this afternoon. If she got *picked* she was going to appear on it, "and I absolutely *need* a dress—"

"You can win thirty dollars on that program," Toby said.

"I get paid if she *wins*. Is that what you mean?"

"Gamble with us," said Jane. "I'll give you half."

"No, thanks." Mrs. Chambers looked pretty damned defiant.

"But you know that Mr. Borson won't give you more than three or four dollars for it at the most!"

"But it's *cash money*."

"You'll get fifteen dollars if I win," Jane said. "Half of what I get."

"And if she doesn't win," Toby said, "why, in a day or two Eddie's money will be here from Kentucky, and we'll pay you eight dollars for the dress anyway."

"How do I know money's coming from Kentucky?"

"Ask him," said Jane.

"It's coming," I said. "It really is."

Mrs. Chambers went out in the kitchenette and took another swig. The damned bottle was half empty already. "Not half. But *two-thirds* of what she wins," she cackled,

"and never mind the money from Kentucky. I wouldn't see any part of it, even if you did get it. You think I'm some poor old slob with her ass hanging out that you can tell such a story to? *Two-thirds* if Janie wins, and I'll be there to collect it before you get out of the studio. Try and get out without paying me, and I'll scream so loud you'll never get into another broadcasting station."

"It's a deal," Jane said.

Mrs. Chambers nodded, grunted, came back into the living room. She began searching around for something. "Trying to take advantage of an old woman. Shame on all of you. A poor old, miserable woman without a family, or a thing in the world . . . except a miserly little pension. A miserly little eighty a month . . . Here it is!" She came up with a coupon for the dress. She read the name on it. Only her eyes must have been a little blurry by now. "Sapling Shop. Jest take this to the Sapling Shop . . . They'll give you the dress. Cookies or Cash. Let me write that down." She found a pencil and began scribbling like a maniac. "What is it . . . *amateur* night?" She began cackling again, having made her big joke for the day. "*Children's* night?" She cackled like a fiend.

"It's college night," Jane said.

"Oh, ha ha ha!" Mrs. Chambers screamed. "What college are you going to, dear? The college of hard knocks? Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Jane took the coupon from her, her eyes blazing mad. I didn't feel any too good myself.

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We got out of there right away, and started walking again, except now we were moving a lot faster. In fact, we were practically sprinting. I didn't know where Jane and Toby got all the energy, I really didn't. If the Olympic Games had a walking team they could have qualified hands down.

"Eighty dollars a month old-age pension," Toby said. "I didn't know she collected that."

"Me either," Jane said. She was real bitter. "Why, she's practically *rich*!"

"Yeah—and such a *refined* old lady," I said.

"Talks so poor mouth," Toby went on. "Two-thirds of your winnings. It's—outrageous!"

"I know," said Jane, "but I can use the dress for other shows."

"Yes, there's that to think of."

I began to feel real weird just listening to them. It was like being initiated into an insane asylum. All they ever talked about was the different shows and the prizes and the other people who worked the same route. I mean, it was like I was already *one* of them, locked in with a whole crazy bunch of pros.

"Hey, Jane," I said, "what if you don't get picked for this Cookies or Cash deal?"

"I was thinking about that," she said. She was real serious. "I suppose, in that case, Mrs. Chambers'll want two-thirds of whatever show I appear on next."

"I wouldn't stand for it," said Toby. "Why, it might be . . ." She tried to think of something fantastic. ". . . Groucho Marx. You might win three hundred and twenty dollars. Or even the jackpot—fifteen hundred!" She was really building it up. "If you think for a minute we'd give two-thirds of *that* to Mrs. Chambers—"

"Did you ever appear on any shows as big as that?" I asked.

"Not yet," Jane said.

"But we will," Toby added.

"If you hit the right combination of programs," Jane said, "you could easily get rich in one single summer!"

"But even more," Toby said, "*everybody* watches television. Talent scouts, producers. Some people have appeared as contestants and gone from there to stage and screen careers. All in one big jump!"

"The sky is the limit," Jane said.

They were absolutely gone just thinking about it. It was kind of funny. The three of us jogging along the sidewalk about eight miles an hour and Jane and old Toby dreaming it up like they were on opium. I couldn't see it. It was like being in Moronville.

It made me think a little bit about Ma. In my estimation, Ma has one terrible weakness: these puzzle contests they run in the newspapers. You work out a puzzle a day for about six months or something—and all this time, of course, you not only have to buy the *paper* every day, you have to sub-

scribe to it for about eight years, which is the gimmick—and then they have the big finals, with tie-breaker puzzles that even Einstein couldn't solve, and everybody in the contest gets knocked out of it except some secret relative of the editor, who collects all the prize money.

I have no proof the newspaper editors do this, but every time a contest is over it's sure as hell a big mystery who won it, and the paper quits printing any more details, and pretty soon everybody forgets it. Except me. I never forget it. Even weeks later I catch myself wondering who the hell got all that loot.

But the main thing is, I always knew that out of the millions of people who send in those stupid puzzles, *Ma* wasn't about to get it! With the odds against her and all, it just didn't figure, even if the contest was on the square. Some scientist or mathematical genius or somebody might win, but not *Ma*. So it was just silly. A big waste of time. But I swear, all during the whole contest she'd be talking about the prize money—what a godsend it would be—and she'd have it spent seventeen different ways. She was so *sure* she was going to win it was depressing, because I knew damned well she wasn't, and so did old Mike, and when she carried on like that we'd just shake our heads.

But compared to Jane and Toby, *Ma* was a piker.

In fact, I was so disgusted with them that if I'd had even a half a buck in my pocket instead of a measly little quarter I'd have cut loose. Maybe I should have, anyway, but sometimes I don't have too much character. I guess I got sort of swept away in the fever of the thing. I mean, they were so damned worked up that it was brushing off on me. I was wondering if I could get on Cookies or Cash! But I didn't say so. I figured they probably wouldn't like it. But I was secretly thinking it'd be nice to win money and buy a clean shirt and maybe a decent pair of shoes. These boots were beginning to bore me. If you want to know, they made me feel like a juvenile delinquent.

The Sampling Shop was a neat little place right on Hollywood Boulevard, fourteen and a half blocks from Mrs. Chambers' sad old apartment. I was glad to get there because I knew that while Jane fitted on the dress I could sit down for a minute. I was really winded, and God knows where they'd start for next. Maybe Alaska.

We went in, and this tall lady clerk with a shape like a tired beanpole walked over to Toby and Jane, giving them a big welcome smile, and asking them if there was something she could, but when Jane said yes, there was, and handed her the coupon for a free dress, she took it between her bony

fingers like it was an old, maggoty dead rat or something. Boy, I never saw anybody get so unenthusiastic so fast!

"Come this way," she said.

The three of them started for the back of the store and I wandered over and sat down in a chair, right in front of a rack of dresses with a sign that said the prices had been slashed in half. I didn't have much else to do, so I looked them over pretty good, and I finally even got up and began fingering through them, like I was thinking of buying one.

"May I help you?"

I turned around and there was a young girl standing there. She was so cute and all I couldn't believe she was one of the clerks.

"Are you—do you work here?"

"Yes, I do," she said. She was small, with black hair in a real jazzy poodle cut. She was wearing a yellow dress with a red belt, and low-heeled shoes open at the toes.

"I'm—just looking," I said, but the fact is, what I was looking at was *her*. I guess it was pretty obvious because she blushed a little.

"Oh—all right," she said. But she still didn't go away.

I began combing my hair like mad. I do that sometimes when I'm nervous.

"I'd never take you for a clerk."

"Why?"

"So young," I said.

"I just work during school vacation."

Boy, she really stacked up great. Sort of the French type. Her skin was smooth and dark, and she had the blackest eyes I've ever seen.

"What school do you go to?"

"S.C."

"Really?"

She smiled. "No—Hollywood High. I'll be a senior next term. *Then* S.C."

"I'm a senior at Venice High," I said. I say crazy things like that sometimes without even thinking. God, I must be a born liar or something, because it just comes right out!

"At Venice? Oh, do you know Rip Baker?"

"I—*think* I do," I said. "No, wait a minute, let me see . . ." I was fumbling around.

"But he's your star quarterback."

"Oh—*him*! Oh, yeah—sure! I mean, I don't know him to speak to, but I know who he is." I stuck the comb back in my pocket. The thing is, you can only comb your hair for just so long, then it becomes kind of noticeable.

"I like your boots."

"You're kiddin'?" I said.

"No, I do. A few of the fellows at Hollywood wear them."

She really liked me. I'm not kidding. I mean, you could *tell*. But just then some fat slob of a dame came in looking at the dresses, and she had to go over to her. I stood watching her wait on Fatso, and tried to imagine what her name was. Probably Mary or Gladys or something drippy like that. But if it had been up to me I would have named her Yvonne. That's what she looked like. Yvonne somebody. Boy, she was real smooth, and built, and not shy or a damn thing. I *hate* shy dames.

"See something you like?"

It was Jane standing right at my shoulder. I guess I must have been staring at Yvonne pretty hard, because Jane's face was a funny red color. She was wearing a green dress, fluffy at the hips. It was nice enough, sort of half formal like the one I'd ruined, but it was too tight on her, and a little too short. Like it had shrunk about half an inch. She couldn't even breathe easy in it, and the neckline was so low you could see the edge of her bra.

"Is this it?" I asked.

"Who's that girl?"

"I don't know. Just a clerk, I guess."

Toby and Beanpole were moving up now, and Toby was saying: "But just a *half* a size bigger . . ."

"We have nothing in stock that's her exact size," Beanpole said, "and a gift dress *does not* include alterations. *You* should know that."

Toby looked stunned. "Why should I know it?"

"You're one of them," Beanpole said. "I've seen you on television . . ."

"Oh, have you?" Toby said. She was flattered. She was holding a package, and I figured out that Jane's skirt and sweater were in it.

"You're all the same," Beanpole went on, "all of you. Grubbing around, complaining, threatening to notify the station that we've cheated you . . . asking for free alterations, demanding the best stock in the house . . . We give away dresses on several shows, and I get you people in here all the time! *Professionals*." She made it sound like some word you'd pull the chain on to get rid of the smell. "Now that's the dress you get . . . Take it and go."

"Well, I've *never* . . ." Toby said. "I've never been treated so shabbily! I *will* complain to the station. Mark you, my good woman, I will! May I ask what your name is?"

The fat lady customer and Yvonne were staring now, and I felt like crawling through the woodwork.

"Miss Hempstead," Beanpole said, "and it so happens that I own this store . . ."

"You will hear from me," said Toby.

"From me, too," Jane said.

"Get out . . . both of you," then Miss Hempstead looked at me. "All *three* of you . . ."

Jane and Toby went out, muttering threats and things, saying they'd *never* trade there, and they'd see their friends didn't either. I trailed after them, afraid to even look at Yvonne now. But boy, she was really a dish! So damned smooth!

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They stopped on the sidewalk, right there in front of the store, and Toby handed me the package with the skirt and sweater, then began inspecting Jane's dress like mad, making her hold her arms straight out, and turn this way and that, just like they were at home, only they *weren't* at home, they were on Hollywood Boulevard, which is pretty damned crowded that time of day, and the way Jane was holding up her hands and swinging left and right like a traffic cop, I thought sure she was going to bop somebody. As it was, people were walking around them, and giving them real dirty looks, and saying things like, "Of all the nerve." Personally, I was pretty humiliated, and I moved back, about ten feet away, as if I didn't even know who the hell they were. I fumbled around with the package, and there was something lumpy in it. I figured it must be the jar of lotion Borson had given Toby. She had it wrapped in with the clothing.

"The real test is when you see the garment in the daylight," Toby said.

Jesus, you'd think with all the fuss they'd raised they'd at least get away from the shop! But there they stood debating whether it was all right to wear the dress to the audition the

way it was or would they have to go home and have Toby alter it. They weren't even mad at Beanpole any more, or else they'd forgotten her the moment they came outside. It was uncanny how fast they could get over being mad.

"Isn't too bad."

"No, I think it's nice," Jane said.

Now they were sort of gloating over the dress, and everybody passing by was still looking at them. Boy, if Yvonne saw them now she'd *never* talk to me again.

"Where's Eddie?"

"I'm here," I said. But I said it so quietly they didn't hear me, and they began searching around through the multitude like I was about three years old and had gotten lost.

"Oh, *here* you are!" They nailed me right by the door of the shop.

"Ready?" I asked. I was trying to get them to start walking.

"Yes. I think it looks all right for the audition, don't you, Eddie?"

"It looks fine," I said without even looking.

We were finally moving away from there. I wanted to glance back over my shoulder to see whether Yvonne or Beanpole had come out, but I didn't want to start any argument with Jane about Yvonne, so I didn't do it. We began walking pretty fast, Jane and Toby yapping to each other, but I wasn't listening to them because just for a moment I had a funny feeling in my stomach. It was because of Yvonne. I knew it wouldn't last or anything because I've felt the same way before about certain girls. It's a *sad* feeling. After it goes away you wish it hadn't. Sometimes I used to try and make it come back, but it was always phony the second time. Yvonne *liked* my boots. Poor, ignorant child! She wasn't any dope, though. I mean, you don't get to be a clerk in a place like the Sampling Shop if you're half-witted. Boy, life can be pretty damned confusing. It really can. A smart chick like Yvonne and she dug these old beat-up boots of mine the most.

We kept walking, but this sad, fluttery feeling stayed right with me, and I tried to think of the times when I'd had it before. Once was after the big football game last year. It was quite a deal, it really was. The R.O.T.C. drilled between halves, doing all this trick stuff, with the band playing for us. I was just a crappy lance corporal, but I *was* in the company, and I didn't have any idea Anna was watching. That is, I didn't know she was watching *me* in particular. Maybe she actually *wasn't*, but she said she was, and I'm not going to call her a liar. That's her name. Anna Merryweather. I admit it's a highly stupid name, but she was almost as great

as Yvonne. Practically built along the same lines. Only she hadn't been too damned friendly all year. Not *unfriendly*, but she didn't go out of her way, if you know what I mean. Anyhow, what happened was this. When the drill team came off the field there was some kind of a mix-up and I didn't get my same seat. Instead, I was sitting right next to Anna Merryweather.

That was when she told me she'd watched me, *me* in particular, and I'd looked pretty snappy. Especially compared to the way she'd seen me lounging around in the classrooms. Of course, I was in uniform that day, and a uniform always does something to dames, but I didn't feel too bad when she told me that. Later, during the second half, it began to snow a little bit, and I made her put my tunic over her shoulders, while I sat there and got damp as hell, and both of us yelled for touchdowns until we were so hoarse all we could do was whisper. After the game she had to meet her old man, so in the passageway between the old wet bleachers, I took my tunic back and said good-bye to her in this big croaking whisper. She thanked me a lot, her voice real husky and nice from yelling so much, then went off through the falling snow with her girl friend to find her old man, and I just stood and watched until she was lost in the crowd. That was when I got this same feeling and it lasted a good two minutes.

"Well, here we are!" Toby said.

Boy, we'd been crossing streets and every other damned thing, and I wasn't even around! That's a pretty bad habit. I have to watch myself, I really do. I can be walking somewhere, or riding in a bus, or even *eating*, and I don't even know I'm doing it because I'm on cloud three or something, daydreaming to beat hell.

We were in front of one of the broadcasting stations, and there was a line of people about half a block long waiting to get in to see a show. A young jerk wearing a blue uniform was riding herd on them, seeing they didn't push, or cheat to get a better place, and just brow-beating them in general. They were really about the saddest-looking people I've ever seen. They'd have taken anything as long as they didn't get tossed out of line.

"Tourists," Toby said.

"The lowest grade," Jane added.

"Very often *we* have to get in that line," Toby went on. "There are some shows that insist on picking the contestants from the studio audience."

She sounded pretty bitter. Then I figured it out. All the yokels who stood in line were potential competitors to Jane and Toby. In fact, they had practically the same chance to

get picked to go on stage and win prizes. *Practically*, but not exactly, because they weren't *informed*. They wouldn't even know where to sell the prizes once they won them! They were just out to have some fun while on their vacation to California. So as far as Jane and Toby were concerned they were a bunch of stinking amateurs who were always lousing things up for the pros.

We were moving past them to go into the building, and I looked up at the marquee to see what show they were waiting for, and it was Afternoon Frolics. I'd seen about half of it one day sitting in a bowling alley, and it was really for the birds. They had this M.C. who used to be a matinee idol—you'd never have known, but somebody was always mentioning it; some old dame about ninety, shaking and creaking, would tell him she'd seen him on the stage, and my, he hadn't changed a bit and crap like that—and he'd have people from the audience playing parlor games, and every once in a while he'd put on some woman's hat, and everybody would shriek and yell, even though they knew damned well he'd stolen the gag from some other program that was a hundred times better than his; and then in the midst of everything, he and some announcer on stage would begin yapping about the sponsor's product, and as if *that* wasn't enough, the announcer went right from there into a dead serious commercial. This program was on for two whole hours but at least half that time they were advertising one thing or another, and the prizes these people got for going up there and acting funny and making the whole show for this M.C. would be a box of bobby pins or a can of peanuts or a carton of some puky brand of cigarettes nobody ever heard of before.

We were inside now, and it was really ornate. Marble floors, glass walls, corridors going this way and that, a glassed-in information booth, and three or four more young punks in blue uniforms rushing back and forth. You would have thought it was the War Department. Toby and Jane headed for a long hall that veered to the right. God, it looked almost endless, like those futuristic sets in the big technicolor musicals. I half expected to see Cyd Charisse come toe-dancing toward us in a long flowing gossamer gown. But now as we actually moved into this tunnel there wasn't a soul, just office doors on the right and left, frosty neon lights humming down at us, and my boots echoing all up and down the whole place.

"Ma, I think I saw Mr. Prentiss in that line."

"Mr. Prentiss? Oh, no!"

"But I'm sure!" Jane said.

"No—he *can't* be down to Afternoon Frolics!"

"Well, he is."

Their voices sounded hollow. I decided to test mine.

"Who's Mr. Prentiss? Some broken-down pro?" I sounded pretty weird myself.

"We—we *used* to know him," Toby said.

I got a picture in my head of a poor, bent old bastard in a grocery store trying to trade a box of bobby pins for a loaf of bread so he could eat that night. Or sitting in some little ratty room munching a whole can of peanuts for supper.

"He's really quite handsome," Jane said. "He proposed to mother once."

"He proposes to everybody," Toby said, "and goddamn it, don't call me *mother!*"

"Ma, you swore!"

Yeah—and her a *saint* and all! Oh boy, what a perfect phony.

"All right, Jane! But we're in the station now. You *know* you aren't to call me mother."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't mean to lose my temper like that, Eddie," Toby said, "but I always get nervous before an interview."

To tell you the truth, I didn't care. I was thinking of Mr. Prentiss and I was pretty disappointed. I couldn't get that picture back again of him eating the peanuts. All I could see was some handsome old turd going around offering everybody one of these corny off-brand cigarettes he'd won, and pretending like he actually smoked them. Which isn't the same thing at all. But if you really want to know, *that's* sadder yet.

"This is it!"

They turned and headed in through a door. Except that they had numbers on them, I don't know how they were able to tell this door from all the others up and down the hall. But I guess they knew their way around.

9

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It was a pretty fair office, I'm not knocking it, it was big and new and expensive-looking, but even with all that there was something cheesy about it. What it looked like was that it was built to be a huge, dignified sanctorum, a copy of *Fortune* magazine lying casually across an executive desk, a few highly polished ash trays around that nobody'd ever think of putting ashes in, and one of those prim, flat-chested secretaries with horn-rimmed glasses and a Boston accent, standing by ready to give you the chill. But it wasn't. After coming in out of that multi-billion-dollar marble hallway it was more like a barn some college guys had jazzed up to be a summer theatre.

For instance, they had this three by six billboard sheet hung up on one wall advertising the Cookies or Cash program, showing Happy Doc Dooley, the M.C., and some goon contestant holding a wad of money. It was supposed to be pasted up on an old tired fence somewhere, but *they* had it on the wall big as life. No damned dignity at all.

There was a desk, all right, but it was cluttered up with so much junk you couldn't even see what it looked like, and all around the wall they had these wooden collapsible chairs like they use for some Christmas play or something at the church and fold up and put away when it's over.

People were sitting on them, most of them all cramped up, trying to write on a sheet of paper. Some of them had magazines to backstop the paper, and others were writing on their plain old bony knees. It was a pretty stupid picture to walk in on. Most of these people were young women, there were about five or six of them, and nothing to get exercised about. At least two of them were out and out beasts complete with bumpy old pimples and peach-fuzz mustaches. There were two men writing away, one of them a sickly young punk with a chalky face and the other a big, handsome, fairly

cocky guy. A lard-assed woman secretary was hovering over him, practically wetting her pants, and he handed her the paper and said, "You go ahead and fill it out for me," and she said, "Of course, Mr. Stockton. I *think* we know the facts, don't we?" As if he was so famous that the whole damned world undoubtedly knew the facts. I used to watch that "What's My Line?" show from New York and I dug *his* line right away. Carrying a football. But I wasn't too familiar with West Coast players so I didn't recognize his name until later when I heard the whole thing, "Willie Stockton." He was from S.C.

There was one other man in the room—a guy sitting behind the cluttered-up desk, sorting through all kinds of papers, and twitching around like he had ants. He was pretty big, and you could tell he felt important, or anyway wanted to give that impression, but his face was a little vacant, and he had such a bad case of nerves that if he was a woman I would have sworn he was going to have a baby. I didn't know whether he was Happy Doc Dooley or not.

"I don't think Mr. Stockton need fill out the form, Alice," he said. He was sort of bringing her down for insulting Stockton like that, but I would have bet anybody that at the time she handed him the form he just sat there and let her do it. He was the kind that when he saw which way the wind was blowing he'd get right with it.

"It's all right, I'm doing it," Alice said.

Toby and Jane and I had been standing there all that time, and now Alice turned. She was pretty nervous herself. Something like an overweight butterfly. I couldn't figure out why everybody was so damned nervous. It made me nervous just looking at them. I mean, that kind of thing is *catching*.

"Audition?"

"Yes," Toby said.

Alice looked at her with a straight face. "Are you—do *you* go to college?" But she didn't wait for the answer. "Tonight's program is to be devoted entirely to university students." Like saying, so get the hell out. Then before Toby could even open her mouth or anything, she went right on: "Or is it the young lady here who—or perhaps this gentleman?" She broke it off right there, raising her eyebrows in a question mark. The way she did it was real corny. They used to have this place in Gary where they showed old silent movies for a nickel, and she reminded me of Theda Bara asking the burning question.

"My sister—" Toby said.

"I'm starting at U.C.L.A. in September," Jane interrupted. Boy, something had come over her, I don't know what. But she was *projecting* to beat hell. She seemed eager, innocent,

and oh, *so* sincere; along with being breathless and demure all at the same time. "Is a person who is just *entering* college eligible?"

"Harvey," this horsy Alice character said, "is a forthcoming freshman all right?"

"Look, Alice," Harvey said, "we've goofed. Let's face it, we've goofed. The place should be *overrun* with students." He looked around at the poor showing, and sighed. "Right now, I'd take *high school* kids!" Brother, I thought, little do you know.

"Doc wouldn't," Alice said, "and if *anybody* goofed—"

"Alice, please!"

"It's *your* job."

"And what does *your* job consist of?"

She looked like she wanted to say it consisted of wiping up after him, but she didn't. She merely handed Jane a mimeographed form, and a pencil, and nodded her head toward an empty chair, then she looked at me, as if she was tired of talking, and handed me a form too. I checked with Toby for a signal of some kind but she didn't give me any help.

"About next week's show . . ." she asked Alice.

"Darling, we're a little busy right now with this one," Alice said.

I sat down in one of the wooden chairs, put the package of clothes on the floor beside me, and looked at the form. Name, age, school. All the usual stuff. What is your hobby? Do you enjoy movies? Do you have a boy/girl friend? Do you belong to a fraternity/sorority? If so, which one? Were you initiated when you joined? In what subjects are you majoring? What occupation do you hope to follow when you graduate? And a few more just about as stupid. If anybody really ever told all this on the program it'd take up the whole half hour for one contestant!

God, I really hate people that waste your time with a lot of crap they never intend to use. I began filling in the blank spaces with the dumbest answers I could think of. I mean, if somebody's going to be dumb, I'll be even dumber! I figured if they ever looked at the form they'd tear it up and throw me out. But I didn't give a damn. I was sort of hoping old ants-in-the-pants would be the one to get it. He'd probably take it seriously at first, then gradually get real agitated and blow up or something, really explode—all the wires and coils and stuff inside him flying all over the room.

He was still sitting over there at the desk beefing about having goofed. Why hadn't somebody—he meant Alice—had the presence of mind to call the universities and *invite* participants; and she told him, well, *he* knew Doc, when he

announced last week that he was going to have a college night he naturally assumed he had so many viewers in the home audience that there would be a big rush of kids to get on the program, and she, for one, wasn't going to disillusion Doc. What if there had been a big turnout of applicants, then Doc discovered somebody had *telephoned* for them? Can Harvey imagine what Doc would do?

I was just half listening, filling out the form, and now a door connecting with another office opened and Happy Doc Dooley himself came in, a tall, thin guy who looked like an old-time pitch man. But the big difference between him and Harvey was that Doc wasn't nervous at all. He was puffing on a cigar, came over and leaned across the desk, monkeyed with the papers, kidded around, and in general acted like the big wheel. Then he spotted Toby, who was standing by the door.

"Something I can do for you?"

"About next week's show—"

Doc flicked ashes from his cigar, and butted in with: "I never plan that far in advance. Everything on my show is off the cuff. I realize others do it differently. Organize even three and four weeks in advance. But I can't work that way. It's not my nature." He smiled. "If you've watched the show, you probably know. Spontaneity. That's the whole trick. Audiences sense it."

"Yes," Toby said, "I—"

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" Doc asked.

"No, I don't think—"

"Come now, you've been around here before, haven't you?"

"No, I really haven't," Toby said.

"What's your name?"

"Toby Sutton."

"Are you a regular, Toby?"

"A regular?" Boy, she was playing it dumb!

"A pro."

"A what?" she said.

"Ever been on television?"

"Why, no, what makes you think—"

"You look familiar, Toby." She was real dead with him. You could tell. He had her pegged. "Our contestants are always strictly amateurs. Only way to get spontaneity. Anything that's rehearsed sounds like it." He smiled again, and took a big puff on the cigar. Then he looked at *us*. "Well, are we ready?" He had this real jovial voice like he was trying to make you think you'd known him all your life. But the thing was the way he made the switch. He talked *differently* to us than he had to Toby.

Old Harvey was on his feet now, right at Doc's elbow, trying frantically to get his ear. He was pointing to Willie Stockton. When Doc at last understood there was a celebrity in the room he practically started doing somersaults.

"Willie Stockton . . . well!" He rushed over, shook his hand. "Sam sent you down, didn't he? Said he was going to. Sam's one of my oldest friends."

"Here's his form," Alice said. She was holding the paper she'd filled in for him.

"Yes, I *see* his form," Doc said, looking straight at Stockton. It was supposed to be a big belly laugh except nobody even smiled. So Doc kept at it: "One of the best male forms I've seen all year." This time Toby choked out something that was meant to sound like she was laughing. It was real squeaky and horrible. Doc turned around and looked at her. "Thank you, Mother."

It was that old, crappy gag M.C.'s use when a joke dies and only about one person in the whole audience laughs. But Toby didn't get it, and I thought she was going to drop dead, I really did. Her face got absolutely white. If she hadn't been so conscious of her age she'd have *known* he was just being corny. But Happy Doc Dooley, who was at least as old as she was, calling her "Mother" was about the end! Finally she straightened up, and tried to smile around at everybody, and her old purple eyes were as shiny as marbles.

Doc was still talking to Willie Stockton, but I was so busy watching Toby I didn't even hear most of it. Then Doc walked him to the door, shook hands with him about six more times, and said he'd see him tonight.

"We go on at eight. So try and be here by seven or a little after, old man. Make-up and all that, you know."

"That early?"

"Well, we usually have a little discussion before the show. It relaxes everybody."

"All right, I'll be here," Stockton said.

He left, and Doc turned around and faced us common people. I mean, you could really tell that the big star was gone.

"Are these *all* the applicants?"

"No, but we weeded it down to this group," Harvey said. He was watching to see if Doc would swallow it.

"Oh. All right."

He began the interviews and deliberately started with the two female blisters. He read over what they'd put down, and then without asking them a damn thing, said it was very nice, and sit down and please wait, and they'd make a decision after he'd talked to the rest of us. He took more time with the next applicant, which was a fairly pretty woman of about

nineteen, only she didn't seem to race his motor *too* much. He had *her* wait, too, and then came to Jane.

"Jane Miller. Freshman, eh?" he said, reading the form. "Embarking upon a college career?"

"Yes, sir," Jane said, "and I truly mean to make the most of it!" She was so earnest that it would practically tear your heart out. I couldn't figure out why she used a different last name. Maybe it was standard practice or something.

"Only seventeen," Doc said. "You're a year ahead of most kids."

"I work hard," Jane said with crushing humility.

"Hobbies . . . do you *really* work for the Salvation Army?"

"Indirectly, yes sir. I collect old clothes . . . newspapers. Everything. Then they come out for it. I devote all my spare time to it."

"How did you ever get into a thing like that?"

Jane looked up, her face shining and unafraid. "I was poor once myself. Mother worked. It wasn't a very good job. Then when she got sick it was the Salvation Army who helped us. And I made a promise that some day I would return the favor." I was staring at her. The little bitch actually had tears in her eyes! God, I began to wonder if it was really true!

"That's very moving," Doc said. "But now, I imagine, times for you and your mother are different."

"Not necessarily, sir."

"But you're going to college. That takes money."

"I won a scholarship. And I have a job working nights as an usherette in a theatre."

Doc was getting a little suspicious. "How did you—what was this scholarship for?"

"The one who wrote the best thesis. It was open to all high school students throughout the state."

"A thesis on what?"

"Americanism," Jane said.

Doc was sold. That did it! You could damned near hear "The Stars and Stripes Forever" echoing all through the office. Doc moved back to the desk, and Alice had Jane sit down. Horsy Alice was gulping like mad, and I heard Doc tell Harvey Jane was on. "I don't even care if she's lying! If she's *half* as good in front of the camera as she was in here we've got a show tonight."

Now it was *my* turn. Alice was wiggling her finger at me. Man, after Jane's performance I *really* figured to be an anti-climax. Me with those stupid things I'd written down! To make it even worse Toby was glaring at me just if this was the first time she realized I'd had the gall to fill out the form.

Jane was of course still too overcome with emotion to even notice what was going on. I walked up and handed my paper to Doc. I wondered if I could make it out the door before he started reading it.

10

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"Hubert Whipplespoon?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

Happy Doc looked at me in a real odd way. "Is that *really* your name?"

"Oh, yes, sir," I said. "I can show you in my wallet." I don't even have a wallet, but I reached toward my back pocket. Boy, I was scared! He wasn't going to appreciate this clowning around at all!

"No, that's all right, Whipplespoon. I believe you."

It was *that* close! In fact, I even had my hand in my pocket. Now I pushed it down, like I was shoving the wallet back in. "Whipplespoon is a fine old American name," he went on. "Some of my best friends are Whipplespoons." That was a lot of crap because you could tell he secretly thought Hubert Whipplespoon was about the corniest name he ever heard of. I gulped and fidgeted, trying to look as goony as possible, and out of the corner of my eye I could see Toby glaring at me as if I was committing murder. Even Jane was out of her trance, and sore as hell at me. She really looked mean.

"You go to S.C., Whipplespoon, old boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"We just had your star quarterback in here."

"Yes, sir. I saw him." God, I hate it when somebody gets so patronizing toward you. He looked at my paper again. "Let's see now, Whipplespoon, your hobby is—" He stared at what I'd written down, then looked up. "Your hobby is—*collecting frogs?*"

"Yes, sir," I said, just like there wasn't a damn thing wrong with a hobby like that.

"But why?"

"They make extremely interesting noises." I don't know how I think of all this, I really don't, I even surprise myself with it.

"But what's the purpose of—"

"Well, I'm making a study of different types of sounds. Last year I investigated the sounds of fish."

"Fish make sounds?" Happy Doc said.

"Oh, yes, sir. It's a known fact. Each fish makes a different kind of sound. They even talk to each other under water. I have a whole recording of fish sounds, if you'd like me to bring it." There is a recording like that, but of course I don't have it. Doc was pretty fascinated, except he kept looking at me trying to figure out whether I was crazy.

"Fish really talk to one another?" He just couldn't believe it.

"Yes, sir. They also sing." That was a lie, but it sounded so good I threw it in.

"And these frogs, do they talk too?"

"They croak," I said. "Each one has a different type croak."

"Are you able to tell one from the other?"

"Well, I can recognize the main ones. Like the *passion* croak, which is the call of the lovesick bullfrog, and is heard during the mating season just before pollywog time. You see, sir, frogs have a very interesting sex life, they really do." Happy Doc Dooley kept ogling at me, as if trying to believe it. I thought any minute now he'd give me the old heave-ho. I knew what I was going to do, too, I was just going to act *sad* like I was highly grieved that he doubted me.

"Whipplespoon," he said, "this is very interesting. Do you think *you* could imitate the croak of a lovesick bullfrog?"

There was nothing I could do, so I reached real deep in my throat and croaked away!

"Fine, Whipplespoon, fine," he said. "I'd like to go on discussing this, but we're a little pressed for time. Right now I want you to sit down and wait with the others."

He folded up the paper. He wasn't even going to finish reading it! About where I said my best friend was a dog, that instead of joining a fraternity I was organizing one of my own, and that the subject I was majoring in was pornographic literature, and all this other crazy stuff. I was so surprised I wasn't going to get tossed out I couldn't believe it! I started over to sit down when I heard him speak to me again.

"Where did you—get *that*?" He was pointing at my senior sweater.

"Oh—oh, *this*." God, for a minute I couldn't even think. "It—belongs to my kid brother. He waltzed off with my S.C.

sweater this morning. Gets a big charge out of wearing it, I guess. So I took his."

"Where does your brother go to school?"

"Well, you see . . ." I lowered my eyes, ". . . our folks are separated. He's been going to high school in Gary, Indiana. He's spending the summer out here with *us*. My father and our—good-looking young stepmother."

"Oh," Happy Doc said. It was quite a dramatic explanation, particularly that part about this stepmother being young and good-looking. You could see the whole picture. My old man with hot pants running after some cute chick and marrying her, and taking *me* to live with him, while my poor old broken-down mother kept my brother. Old Doc was pretty impressed. Boy, I was glad he hadn't put me under oath! I could have gone up for ten years.

I went over and sat down beside the package of Jane's clothes there on the floor. I didn't look at Toby or Jane either one for quite a while. I just sat there playing with my fingers like some jerk who collects frogs for a hobby. Doc was questioning the others, and getting through it pretty fast. Finally I slipped a look at Toby. She was still standing there by the door, but she beamed at me. So I risked looking over at Jane. She put her thumb and forefinger together meaning I was *in*. Boy, I really felt better! It was like I'd passed my tests. I was now a full-fledged pro like them!

But in a few minues when I'd thought it over, I didn't feel so hot about it, after all. It may sound funny, but I don't go much for outright lying. Especially one whopper right on top of another! I couldn't even figure out how I'd gotten into it. Collecting frogs, for Chris' sake! How did *I* know Happy Doc Dooley was dumb enough to take it seriously? I mean, the way I see it, being a pro isn't really anything too wonderful. It just means you're a terrible liar. And to make your whole living out being a liar is awful, if you ask me. Boy, I was really sinking low!

Happy Doc finished with the questions, smiled at everybody, said good-bye, and walked back into the adjoining office. He didn't even have the guts to tell the ones who didn't make it that he wasn't going to use them. Harvey was sitting at the desk again, with big old horsy Alice standing beside him. Everybody looked at them expectantly. It was really cruel because they didn't have any idea who'd been picked for the program, and all of them were eager. It wasn't just for the cookies or cash, either. Because by now you figured if *you* hadn't been picked, and these others had, you must be some kind of a slob not even fit for the human race.

"Perkins, Miss Dolmine, Miss North . . ." The two girl

beasts that Doc had first interviewed stood up, along with the guy that had the chalky face. He really looked forlorn. I guess the girls weren't *really* beasts. They just weren't any too hot to look at, that's all. One of them was about to cry, and they both seemed so sort of beat up that it was real sad. Harvey called off a couple of other names. Two more women. Then he dropped the axe.

"Sorry, folks. We'll keep your names on file. Perhaps we'll have you appear on some future program."

I was so cut up about the way it was handled I hadly realized that this meant I had been picked to go on TV, and so had Janel! The losers were moving out through the door. Harvey watched until the door closed on the last one. Then he looked at the rest of us.

"I'm happy to say that you people have been chosen to go on tonight."

There were just three of us—Jane, myself and another woman. And of course old Willie Stockton, who'd already left. That made four. The competition was pretty stiff, at that. Harvey told us what time to come back, then looked at me.

"We naturally assume that you won't be wearing your brother's sweater tonight."

"Oh, no, sir."

"In fact," Alice cut in, "we suggest that you wear a suit, shirt and tie."

"Oh, I fully intended to," I said.

"And different—" Harvey was looking at my boots, "—different *shoes*." He couldn't make up his mind what the hell they were, but he didn't like them. I felt like telling him I'd wear my *frogskin* shoes, but everything was all set and I didn't want to louse it up.

"Yes, sir. Shoes."

I picked up the parcel that had the skirt and sweater and the jar of face lotion in it, and followed Jane and Toby out of the office.

This other woman was walking near us and nobody said a word all the way back up that long marble hall. But when we were out on the street again, just the three of us now, it was *still* kind of quiet. Jane acted like she was a little peed off, and Toby wasn't paying any attention to either one of us. It gave me the creeps! Here they'd spent practically the whole day trying to get Jane on Cookies or Cash and they didn't even seem happy that she made it.

"Do you really collect stuff for the Salvation Army?"

"No, I don't," Jane said.

"You had *me* believing it."

"We went to them once . . . as a charity case. And all they gave us was an old Army blanket."

That was her side of the story. The Salvation Army probably investigated and found out they were plain old moochers but threw them a blanket anyway, just to be nice.

"You sure sounded good," I told her.

She looked over and started to smile, and that was when I knew that it wasn't *me* she was sore at.

"Thank you, Mr. Whipplespoon."

"I guess that was pretty mad stuff."

"You have very good timing," she said. Boy, she really talked like a professional. "And you contrasted *me* just perfectly. If two people sound almost alike—for instance, if they're both *dramatic*, or both *funny*, they'll only put *one* of them on. They try to balance the program." She paused. "Of course, *I* didn't even know you were going to try out! I almost flipped when I saw you handing over the form."

"I thought I might as well."

"I'm glad you did," she said.

But all this time Jane was talking she was *still* burned up about something! Then I realized Toby hadn't said a word yet. I mean, she was practically dying for somebody to ask what was wrong. So *I* asked her.

"Nothing," Toby said.

"Except that Doc Dooley spotted her as a regular," said Jane. "These M.C.'s keep a list of the pros. She's now on *five* different lists I know of!" *That's* what was killing Jane!

"*Four*," Toby said.

"Luckily, he didn't link us up," Jane went on. "Because if he had of, *I* wouldn't have been picked for the program!" She was really steaming. "I had to *erase* my name off the paper and put in '*Miller*.' It was real messy! There's something I want you to know, Ma! I'm *not* going on any more interviews with you! Because as far as the TV people are concerned, you're just an old regular!"

Toby grabbed Jane right there on the sidewalk and began to shake her. I mean, she really blew her cork. She was crying, in hysterics.

"You, too? Are you going to insult me like that filthy Doc Dooley? *I'm not old!* And I'm not anybody's mother. Do you understand?"

I guess Toby didn't know what the hell she was saying. Or maybe she *meant* to say she wasn't the mother of anybody as old as Doc Dooley. But she was so excited it all came out wrong. Jane was just absolutely stunned. People on the street stopped to look at them. Finally, Jane said:

"You're my mother . . ."

"Yes, but I'm not old! *Don't* you call me an old regular, or an *old* anything else!" Tears were running out of Toby's old purple eyes and smearing mascara down her face. She was a horrible sight, she really was. She was just plain going to pieces. I butted in, trying to explain that Doc Dooley didn't *mean* it when he called her "Mother." But she didn't really hear me. Jane and I finally got her to start walking along again, and I glared at the nosey morons who were gaping at us.

It was awful when you think about it. All this time Toby had been nursing that Doc Dooley crack. I couldn't figure why she let it worry her. I mean, it meant more to her than getting put down on the list as a regular, or Jane saying she wasn't going to go on interviews with her any more, or anything else.

"It's just too much," Toby was saying, "when your own flesh and blood tells you you're *old*!"

"Ma, please . . ."

Toby's whole body shuddered, but we kept her moving, Jane on one side and me on the other. I told her a lot of crap, like I thought she was *damned* young, and the first time I saw her I didn't believe she was Jane's mother, which is the truth, I didn't.

"You're a good boy, Eddie . . ."

God, if she wanted to be young, why did she come out with *those* kind of remarks? That made her sound about a hundred and seven. Some old wheezing grandma patting you on the arm and telling you you're a good boy.

"Eddie has a very serious problem," Jane said. She was trying to make Toby stop thinking about herself.

"Yes, I know he has," Toby said. She was still sniffing and catching little short breaths.

"He has to have a whole new outfit by tonight!"

"Yes, I realize that," Toby said. She slowed down, and blew her nose.

"Ma, fix your face."

Jane was a clever kid. She had Toby out of it pretty good now.

"I *did* have an idea for Eddie," Toby said. She handed Jane a little mirror. Jane held it up and Toby began making repairs on her face. "Oh, yes . . . I remember. Mr. Prentiss."

"Mr. Prentiss?"

"He's just about Eddie's size."

"That's right, he is!"

"And he likes *me* . . ."

"Ma, you're a genius!"

That made Toby feel a lot better.

"We'll check on him at the Side Saddle Bar." She looked at me. "It's right on the way home." She was still fixing her face.

"Check on him? What does he do, drink there?"

"No—to see if he got on Afternoon Frolics," Toby explained.

She finally calmed down and got her face put back on again, and we walked a block or so over to this Side Saddle Bar. It was a cute little joint, sort of dark and cozy. The bar stools were all imitation saddles. There were just two customers, both of them men. The television set was up above the cash register, and it was turned off. Toby sat down at the bar, and we stood behind her. A sleek little Italian bartender came over, wiping his hands on his apron.

"A beer . . ." Toby said.

"I ain't serving *them*," he pointed his finger first at Jane, then me.

"No, I realize—"

"What is it, Toby? You want to see something on TV again, is that it?"

"Just for a moment."

"Okay. But tell your children to wait outside."

I swear, I expected Toby to start foaming at the mouth! But she just sat there, real cool, and Jane nudged me. We walked out, leaving Toby inside.

"I know what you were thinking, Eddie," Jane said, "but it's all right. We've been in there before. She told him I was her sister, and he always kids her about it. He says, 'Sure she isn't your daughter?' But he *actually* thinks she *is* my sister."

I nodded. "He might, at that. It's kind of dark in there."

Jane laughed, then looked up at me real seriously. "I've got a lot more respect for you than I had before."

"That's good."

"In some ways, you're almost like me."

She meant it as a compliment, but I was sort of insulted, I don't know why. Except that I felt *older* than Jane. Or at least that I had a lot more common sense. I didn't think I was like her at all.

Toby came out about five minutes later. She was smiling.

"Dan is on, all right!" Now that she was about to renew her acquaintance with old Prentiss she was calling him by his first name. "So we can go home and *still* get back by the time the show lets out. Which means we can make arrangements for Eddie." I looked at her kind of funny. "For

a room," she explained. We started walking along again. "You're going to want a place to sleep tonight, aren't you?"

"But I don't have any dough!"

"You're going to get some."

"What if I don't win?"

"Oh, you will. Don't even *think* a thing like that. Just tell yourself that in a very short time you're going to have a cool thirty dollars in your hand." A *cool* thirty dollars! God, you would have thought it was thirty million.

"But *I* won't," Jane said bitterly, "all I'll have is an icy ten spot—thanks to dear Mrs. Chambers."

I thought about old Chambers. "How come Borson calls her Potty? Because she's potted all the time?"

Jane shook her head. "Chambers. Bedchamber. In other words a—*potty*. That's his quaint idea of how to be very humorous." She glanced over at Toby. "I'll bet the old wreck'll be down at Lantern Cafeteria waiting for us."

"Of course she will," Toby agreed.

"Hey," I said, "what's this Lantern Cafeteria?"

"It's where we eat."

"Well, what is it, a special place for pros or something?"

"No, but some of us gather there," Toby explained. "It's in downtown Los Angeles. It's very friendly and nice."

"Look, Eddie," Jane said, "the big gimmick is, in the Lantern all you pay for your food is what you think you can afford."

"Oh, no! Why *some* people wouldn't pay anything!"

"That's right, some of them don't."

"Well, how can they run a business like that?"

"I don't know," Jane said, "but they do. There's all kinds of theories. One is that the owner used to be a hobo and now he's rich and wants to help people."

"Do *hobos* go there?"

"Oh, *no*," Toby was horrified. "It's a *lovely* place."

"The other theory," Jane went on, "and the one most people believe is that a lot of customers are so impressed that they *overpay* and make up for those who don't give enough."

"They *do* watch for free-loaders, though," Toby said. "That is, anybody who continually eats there without paying more than a few cents. As a matter of fact—I don't want you to repeat this—*Mr. Prentiss* has been banned from Lantern Cafeteria for that very reason."

"I think they sort of made an example out of him," Jane said, "to scare the rest of us. You see, he *was* in our group."

I didn't ask any more questions because I was trying to think it over. They even had a place where they could chisel food! God, I wouldn't have the guts to go into a joint like

Lantern Cafeteria and eat a big meal, then hand them a dime or something. I'd feel so lousy about it I'd throw up all the food as soon as I got outside. But it apparently didn't bother Jane or Toby any. Probably if I hung around *them* for a while it wouldn't bother me, either. But that was a pretty frightening thing to look forward to—being that big a mooch, and having it not bother you.

"Mrs. Hales has a place fixed up in the basement, and it really isn't bad at all," Toby was saying. "She charges two dollars a week. I'll say that you're Jane's cousin, otherwise she might ask a lot of questions. Particularly about your age."

We were approaching the house. The same two little girls in pigtails who were there this morning were sitting right smack in the walk playing jacks. "Shouldn't we wait until I actually have the money?" We had to walk over the grass to get around the little rats.

"No," Toby said, "I'll tell her that you'll have it right after the program."

I didn't like the idea. Spending money before you get it is asking for a jinx. But it wasn't any use trying to talk to Toby or Jane either one. We went inside the house, in that dank, smelly air, groping around the hall in the dim light, and Toby dug up some old bag about sixty who kept itching herself all the time.

"Well, you know where it is, show him," she said, itching her ribs. "He can register when he pays." She itched her ass and looked at me. "But if you don't win the money, young man, don't bother to come back here." She itched under her armpit and nodded her head at Toby and Jane. "They're enough for me to worry about. I'm not taking on any more."

"Why, we're paid up for a whole week in advance," Toby said.

The old landlady nodded, itching under the other armpit. "But at the time you gave me the money you were two weeks *behind*. I sat in the Side Saddle Bar and sweated it out the night you won it on that song quiz program! They were the easiest songs I ever heard, but if that M.C. hadn't given you a clue you never would have gotten the title of that last one!" She looked at me again, itching the back of her head now. "That's how close I came to not getting my rent!"

"Ma'am," I said, "I won't come back unless I win, I really won't." God, I was itching all over!

She waddled away, and Toby and Jane started me off in a different direction. We ended up in a big old kitchen, which had gone to pot because nobody used it any more. The stove was rusty, with cobwebs over the open door of the oven,

and in one corner of the room there was a huge icebox. I mean, a real one! I went over and inspected it because I'd never seen one before. It wasn't electric, or anything, just a big wooden box that you were supposed to put hunks of ice in. It looked pretty depressing. Toby opened the door to the basement, flicked on a light, and we all went down these wooden stairs.

It looked *awful* down there. It was the creepiest basement I've ever seen. Big fat soot-covered pipes reaching out of the furnace like dead arms, and this broken-down single bed, with a little naked light bulb dangling over it. Everything else was long, deep shadows, and empty silence. Except for a little area around the bed where there was a threadbare rag carpet, there was just a big, long, cold cement floor covered with gloomy gray dust that swirled up around your ankles when you walked over it.

"Two dollars a week for *this*?"

"At least you'll have privacy down here," Toby said.

That was what was bothering me. All the goddamn spooky privacy! I guess it's childish, but I *hate* gloomy old basements. What I'd be doing was, I'd lay listening to the rats running all over under the house and I'd *never* get any sleep.

"Just take it temporarily," Jane urged.

"*Last* night," Toby said, "you were sleeping in a park."

Jane stared at me. "Were you, Eddie? I didn't know that."

"We'll have to hurry," Toby said, "if we're going to meet Mr. Prentiss."

"Yes, and if we *don't* meet him," Jane added, "you can't even appear on the show tonight."

Yeah, I suppose I owed them a lot. They were going to arrange to get me the shoes and tie and suit and all. Maybe if I won I could buy a flashlight. That way if I was sleeping down here and woke up hearing some noise or other, I could flash the beam right at where the sound was coming from. I guess if you really have to, you can stand almost anything.

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Old Dan Prentiss was pretty handsome, at that, and he certainly didn't look like anybody who was down to his last dollar grubbing around for a handout. He wore a sporty soft gray suit with a terrific pleat in it—I mean, not too much, not *zooty* or anything, but enough so you'd notice that it was real sharp. It was all freshly pressed, and he wore a breast pocket handkerchief, which I don't usually dig, but it was a blue one, and on him it looked great, it really belonged because he was wearing a blue knit tie with a double knot, and blue suede shoes that matched.

He had sort of iron-gray hair, and a ruddy tan face, like he spent a lot of time in the sun. He was fifty anyway, but he looked younger than guys half that age, not in actual *appearance*, maybe, but just by being dapper and neat, and the big smile that came on his face when he spotted Toby.

He was in the crowd coming out of the Afternoon Frolics show and there'd been some talk between Toby and Jane that maybe they shouldn't meet him here, after all, because he'd be embarrassed they'd caught him appearing on such a poor-paying program, but old Dan Prentiss wasn't a bit put out.

"Toby," he said, "this is my lucky day!"

"Hello, Dan."

"And Jane," he said, "looking more beautiful than ever!" Toby introduced him to me.

"Glad to meet you, Eddie," he said. He was carrying a paper bag full of stuff and shifted it under his arm and shook hands with me. There wasn't any of this calling me "son" or "my boy" the way some older men do, and I appreciated it, I really did.

"Toby," he said, "where've you been keeping yourself? I've missed you. I thought maybe you'd gone back to Arizona."

"We intended to go two weeks ago," Toby said, "but—"

she shrugged, "we might even try sticking through the winter."

That was news to me, or maybe she was just saying it for his benefit.

"Wish you would, Toby," Dan said, "but remember, the *big* shows come back on the air in September. It's these summer replacements where you find most of the giveaways." He held up the paper bag. "I just picked up a few trinkets myself. I give them to people around the hotel. Cecil Glad is *one* M.C. who doesn't mind using pros. You know Cecil, don't you? Afternoon Frolics. He called me this morning, and asked me to come down and lend him a hand. You didn't catch the show, by any chance?"

"No, I didn't," Toby lied.

"Too bad. Cecil had me do a little soft shoe for the cameras. The people in the live audience ate it up. What are you doing here, Toby? Are you folks on your way to an interview?"

"No," Jane said, "we've just come from one. Cookies or Cash."

"Oh, yes. College night." He was up on everything, apparently. "Did you make it?" The mob coming out of the broadcasting station was thinning some now.

"We *both* made it," Jane said. "Eddie and I."

"Good!"

Toby gave a sudden start, and then began staring at old Dan like mad, as if some tremendous idea had just come to her.

"Dan . . . I just this minute realized something. You're almost the same build as Eddie."

"You flatter me," Dan said, looking me over.

"Eddie's from out of town," Toby rushed on. "His clothes haven't arrived yet. And he simply has to have a suit to wear tonight. It seems a shame to go out and buy one when his trunk will be here in the morning."

Dan Prentiss didn't look any too happy. I didn't blame him, either. You could tell he took great pride in the way he dressed. Probably all of his suits were just about as good as the one he had on. I mean, if Toby had asked him for something easy, like his right arm, it wouldn't have been so bad. But to lend his *clothes* . . .

"I—I'll dig up something," I said.

Toby and Jane glared at me as if I'd cut their throats, and Toby very sweetly said: "But where, Eddie, dear?"

"He needs a suit, eh?" Dan said. He was beginning to get his second wind. "I'm trying to think. There's one of the bellboys at the hotel—"

"Dan!" Toby was pouting. "We want him to look nice!"

"He won't *hurt* your suit, Mr. Prentiss," Jane said. "He'll be very careful. I'll make him use Kleenex so there won't be any make-up smears or anything, and he'll bring it back the moment the show is over. Eddie is *very* conscientious about those things."

The way she told it, you'd think I spent my life going around borrowing clothes from people!

"Please, as a favor to me," Toby cooed.

Dan was looking right at her. "I've thought about you a lot, Toby." His eyes were sad. "But you've never called or dropped by. It seems that once I stopped eating downtown we never saw each other again."

It was hard for me to believe that this was the same guy Jane said had been blackballed out of the Lantern Cafeteria because he didn't pay for the food.

"I've *meant* to come by a dozen times," Toby said. "But a girl doesn't just casually visit a man at his *hotel*."

"Is that it?" he seemed happy.

"Maybe I'm old-fashioned," Toby said.

"So that's all it is?" He was picking up again. "Well, come along. We'll see if I have something Eddie can wear. And you and I are going to have a little talk . . ."

They started off, but it was so cruel that for a second I wasn't going to go. Toby was really conning him, and he was going for it, *boy*, was he going for it! Only it wasn't funny, because it meant too much to him. I'd never seen her operate her feminine charms like that. It was pretty impressive. But she was taking old Dan Prentiss for a great big sleigh ride. I really felt sorry for him. I'll probably never get anywhere in life because I always feel so damn sorry for people.

He and Jane and Toby looked around for me, and I caught up with them.

"Maybe when Eddie brings the suit back . . . you can come along with him," Dan was saying. "And after he leaves we might take a stroll down the boulevard, just the two of us."

He was beginning to get a little drippy.

"I'd love it, Dan."

So was she.

His hotel was on Hollywood Boulevard, just three blocks away. It was a crummy dump of a place, but they had a regular little lobby, a desk clerk, and even a sick-looking bellboy—the whole works. We went up in the elevator, which was self-operated with push buttons. It clanked along the sides of the shaft and shuddered to a stop at the third floor. We got out and started walking down a dim hall.

"Dan used to be in vaudeville," Toby said.

I guess she was warning me, because when he unlocked the door, and we crowded into his little room, the first thing you saw was a bunch of old theatre programs and variety-act bills. He had them framed and hanging all over the place, like he'd been living here for years. It was just about half as big as an ordinary hotel room, with a single bed, a dresser, a washbasin and pitcher, broken rocking chair, and a coffee pot that had a cord to plug into the wall. It was clean as a pin, all except the window, which was caked with big ugly streaks of dirt on the outside of the pane.

"I'll look and see what I have," Dan said. He opened a closet door, and somehow squeezed into it, pulling the door three-quarters closed behind him. A light went on inside.

I glanced at the theatre bills, and saw his name. *Danny Prentiss. Song and Dance. Specialties.* The paper was turning yellow. Toby and Jane were standing over by the window. They didn't like the room, and now that Dan wasn't here to see them, they were making awful faces. Toby gave me one of those looks that meant she was apologizing for Dan.

I pretended like I didn't catch on, and pointed at one of the old programs. "I'll bet he was the greatest . . ."

It was good timing, because he was coming out of the closet as I said it.

"Thanks, Eddie."

"Find anything?" Toby asked.

I noticed he'd taken the paper sack in the closet with him and left it there.

"I don't know," he said. He gazed at me, as if studying out a problem. Then he smiled. "What about this suit I have on?"

"No," I said, "I wouldn't think of it. It's too nice."

"Just for that, you'll wear it!"

"Oh, but, Mr. Prentiss, I—"

"I insist, Eddie. No use arguing." He looked over at Toby. "We'll go down the hall and change."

"But what are *you* going to wear?"

"I'll give you a laugh," he said. "I'll put on Eddie's clothes. Boots and all."

We left the room, and headed for the men's toilet at the end of the hall. We began undressing as soon as we were inside, but I had a funny feeling. Maybe the gray was the only suit he had! Otherwise why would he put on *my* clothes? He wasn't saying a word now, just sort of grimly taking off his duds. My shorts were still damp from being washed this morning, but he didn't notice, and at least they were clean.

He gave me everything. Shirt, socks, tie, the blue hand-

kerchief, his shoes. The shoes were half a size too small, but I got into them all right. He made me turn around while he put the fancy knot in the tie. Then he helped me into the suit coat. He was standing in his underwear.

"You look swell, Eddie!"

But *he* didn't look very good. Without his clothes on he seemed much older, in his sixties. He had a good firm body, but there were lumps and sags. He didn't appear jaunty or carefree any more. Just sort of *tired* and falling apart.

He pulled on my pants, and then the shirt. I helped him put on the boots. The last thing he climbed into was my senior sweater. Now he looked crazy as hell, with a silly grin on his face. He cackled like Uncle Ebenezer or somebody.

"They'll have to burn the school down to get me out!"

I began to laugh. It wasn't *that* funny, but I guess I *wanted* to laugh or something, and I kept laughing and laughing until I couldn't stop, and tears were running down my face like mad.

He finally got me to quiet down, and we headed back to the room. He went in first, hobbling around on the boots, and repeated the same line about burning the school down.

Jane laughed like a bastard, but Toby didn't see anything funny in it. In fact, I don't think she saw *him* at all, because she was looking at me.

"Eddie . . ."

The way she screeched it, I thought my fly must be open.

"Eddie, you look marvelous!"

"Dreamy," Jane said.

"Oh, Jane, doesn't he look handsome!"

"May I have the next dance?" Jane said.

I moved over in front of the dresser mirror. Boy, I really *did* look good! I'd never looked this good in my life! That's no crap about clothes making the man. I was *somebody else*! I don't know who in the hell I was, but I wasn't any little schoolboy any more. In fact, if I'd been a dame and saw myself I'd probably have swooned. I threw my shoulders back, turned this way and that. It was a perfect fit!

"Wish you'd caught my soft shoe this afternoon," Dan was saying.

They hardly knew he was there any more.

He began to hum "Darktown Strutters' Ball," then went into a tap dance with the boots. It was pretty loud on the bare floor, and the dancing wasn't too good, but then maybe the boots were too heavy for him. We had to all stand there and watch and act like it was good, the way he was doing it. Finally he began to flea hop and every other damn thing,

and it was crazy, seeing an old guy wearing a high school sweater doing the flea hop.

"Wonderful," Toby told him when he stopped.

"We'd better be getting downtown," Jane said.

"Lantern Cafeteria?" Dan asked. Then when they nodded: "I'd come along, but I have an appointment." He looked over at me. "I'll take good care of your clothes, Eddie, and I'll see you right after Cookies or Cash goes off."

As soon as we left his room, I felt like a thief, and I couldn't appreciate the clothes any more, or the good-looking suede shoes, but Jane and Toby could—they kept looking at me all the way down in the elevator, as if I was some movie star.

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I don't know whether it was the clothes or what, but Toby seemed to be in a sort of reckless mood. Ever since I met her we'd been *walking* all over town, every damn place we had to go, but now as soon as we came out of the hotel she went straight to the first *bus* stop, and she and Jane sat down on the wooden bench. Of course they could have been *resting*, but I didn't think so. I stood close by, acting pretty cool and all, and trying not to look down at the blue breast pocket handkerchief every two seconds, or at these snazzy suede shoes. When the bus came, and they got up and climbed in, I followed them, just as if we'd been riding on busses all day.

Toby was putting the money in the box for the three of us, and I waited back by the folding door, real gentlemanly, then when she took a seat, I stepped into the aisle, only I stopped, real fast. Toby was sitting in one seat and Jane was in another, and there was an empty space beside each of them. The worst part of it was, they were both looking up at me!

That seems like a stupid thing to get upset about, but I didn't know what the hell to do, I really didn't. The thing is, Jane had sat down first. She couldn't have known whether Toby was going to slide in beside her or not. In that case, I'd have just taken some other seat. But now I didn't know whether Toby had left the space open by Jane for *me*, or whether she wanted me to sit with *her*. And neither one of them were giving me any hint. I mean, Jane didn't say, "Sit here Eddie," and Toby didn't nod her head, or even give me any facial expression I could figure out.

It was highly embarrassing, to say the least! If I sat down beside Toby, Jane would have thought I was queer for older women, or else trying to ace myself in with her old lady. And if Toby *hadn't* intended for me to sit with her and I did, she would have either thought I was on the make, or that maybe I felt *sorry* for her. But if she *did* want me to, and I chose Jane instead, she'd feel *hurt*; she was so damned sensitive she'd probably think there was a growing conspiracy between me and Jane to cut her out. That's the way some mothers are who only have the one kid. You do some little thing, and they think you're trying to turn their daughter against them.

So I just *stood* there, pretending that I was straightening the lapels of my coat.

"Eddie, aren't you going to sit down?" Toby said. The bus was tearing along now, and it was pretty hard to stand up.

"I—don't want to ruin the crease in the trousers," I told her.

"Sit down," Jane said.

The bus was jerking to a stop, which kind of threw me in Jane's direction. I acted like I had to grab on to keep from being spilled, and I slipped into the seat beside Jane, just as the bus came to a complete stop. I made it all seem like an accident which seat I'd taken. God, sometimes I'm so clever I frighten myself! That's no bull. I must have a twisted mind to figure my way out of situations like that. If I didn't watch it, I could end up being a master criminal or something.

Jane looked over at me as if I'd been a jerk to stand up so long. When the bus started moving again, I looked in the big mirror the driver uses so he can see all the passengers, and Toby was looking in it too, right at me; but so damned intently that I began to get scared. I could almost *feel* her there behind me, breathing on my neck. A thing like that makes you squirm, or maybe I've just got an evil mind. I can think of some pretty disgusting scenes sometimes.

"Mr. Prentiss wanted Ma to get up an act with him," Jane said.

Boy, I was glad to hear her talking. I was getting pretty fidgety.

"Mind reading, can you imagine? Ma was interested for a while. They even talked to some horrible little agent. But he couldn't book an act like that, and he told Mr. Prentiss."

"Too bad," I said.

The reason Ma got sick of him is that he keeps dreaming about all these things he's going to do, and the truth is, he isn't ever going to do any of them. He just talks. You know?"

"Yeah . . ."

"He never mentions the past, though," Jane said. "That's one good thing about him. Of course he *lives* with the past. All those old programs around the room. But he keeps making plans for the future."

Toby was still looking at me in the mirror, but now she realized that I was watching, and she calmed down a little, and smiled. I felt a lot better.

"Are many of the pros ex-vaudeville people and like that?"

"He's the only one I've met," Jane said. "All the others are just ordinary—like us. I think that's the best. Just being *normal*. If they think you're a *real* pro they're afraid you're going to start showing off."

"You mean they want *professional amateurs*, except that after you've appeared *too* many times they put you down on a list and keep you off the air?"

Jane nodded. "That's it. Eventually you have to go on to a real career, or go back home and be content to grow cabbage in your garden. Guess what my *real* hobby is, Eddie?"

"I don't know."

"Reading fan magazines," she said. "I don't buy them. I just go into a drug store or up to a newsstand and read them and put them back. But I read every single one that comes out. I know everything that every star is doing."

She wasn't faking now, she was really getting serious.

"The reason I like my job as usherette at the movies is because I can *study* the performances of all the actresses. I see a picture over and over, and I learn something different from watching the same scenes each time. I know their little tricks, the various inflections of voice they use, the gestures, and each movement. *I'm* going to be an actress. A great actress! I may not be beautiful, like some of them, but I'll make up for that with *performance!*"

"Okay, Jane, take it easy!"

"You don't believe me, do you? But I'll get my break. All I need is to get with some acting group, I don't care where it

is. I'll start *anywhere*, because I know that once I do, somebody, somewhere, sometime is going to see me and I'll move to bigger things, then still bigger!"

"Does Toby want to be an actress?"

Jane made a face. "She can't act her way out of a paper bag! That's why they've begun to spot her. We should be good for two more seasons as pros. But she just naturally gives herself away."

"What *does* she want out of life?"

Jane sighed. "I don't know, Eddie. I don't imagine *she* does, either. I don't think she even thinks about it. You know?"

"Yeah."

"A lot of people are that way," Jane said, "but not me."

"I'm that way a little," I admitted. "I don't know what the hell I want. Something pretty fine, though. Whatever it is, it's pretty damned good."

It bothered me that I didn't know what it was. If I knew I could visualize it, and get a charge. For instance, if I wanted to be a lawyer, which I don't particularly, I could concentrate on some big court trial in which I was the brilliant, young defense attorney talking in a low, dignified voice as I beat down the D.A. with one damning fact after another. Come to think about it, if somebody wanted to give me a pitch I *could* possibly be talked into studying law. Only on the second thought, I doubt it. I'd probably goof off all the time anyway, and fail to pass my bar exams.

"If you're not careful," Jane said, "you'll end up selling vacuum cleaners."

"That's a nice cheerful thought!"

"Well, somebody has to sell them."

"Not me," I said.

"One of the most intelligent boys I know makes his living selling ice cream off a little Good Humor truck."

"When I start doing that," I said, "I'll carry around all the fan magazines so I can look at your pictures."

"Don't be sarcastic, Eddie! I'm dead serious."

"And I'm a vacuum cleaner salesman!"

God, now it *really* bothered me that I didn't know what I wanted to do! I didn't have any defense against her! I could have made up something to tell her, but I wasn't in the mood. I'd told so *damned* many lies today I didn't have one left in me.

The bus had been roaring right along, only stopping every six blocks or so. I guess it was an express. Anyhow, we were already in downtown Los Angeles, and now we began to

slow to a creep. In order to be polite and all, I looked around at Toby. We'd only ignored her for about half an hour!

"How you doing?"

"Just fine, darling."

She was back to this "darling" crap. I was sorry I'd even turned around.

After another five blocks, Jane said: "Here we are," and we all got up, and pushed toward the door behind about a dozen other people. We climbed out onto the wide sidewalk. It was late afternoon, but being summer the sun was still fairly high in the sky, and it was really burning down.

We walked half a block, then crossed the street, and I saw the place. It looked impressive, and yet kind of weird. There was a big neon sign over the door showing some bent old bastard from ancient times carrying a lantern, and just below was the sign: LANTERN CAFETERIA. Even in the bright daylight the neon looked lighted up.

I'm not dim-witted, so I got it all right. I mean, it was only kind of obvious. That Greek philosopher who took a lantern and went out in search of an honest man. I mean, the thing is, he was a cynic, because he never expected to find one. I guess everybody's heard about that little deal. But I just wondered if the public that passed back and forth in front of the door would catch on, unless they actually stopped and looked.

Toby and Jane weren't paying any attention to old neon-lighted Diogenes, or whoever he was, I guess they'd seen him too many times before. They headed straight in the door, and I was about two steps behind them.

Inside, it looked just about like any other cafeteria, with tile walls, and a whole lot of tables and an iron tray rail with the food selections behind it, starting with various kinds of salads, tomato juice, and all. But there was one difference in the place, and that was great big painted signs damned near everywhere you looked. "*Pay what you can honestly afford. Let your conscience be your guide.*" There were about six like that, the sixth one probably being there in case you missed the other five. Then there were these smaller signs spotted around: "*We operate on good faith alone.*"

That was all. No lectures, or anything else! But I began to form my own theory. Some old crackpot millionaire wanted to prove to himself that human beings are no damned good, so he opened Lantern Cafeteria, and every night counted up his losses, and gloated over what turds people really are.

"Here, Eddie, take your tray . . ."

Toby and Jane were already in the food line, and Jane was

handing me a tray, and pointing to a napkin with silverware wrapped in it. I plunked it onto the tray, and started following Jane. But I was still gazing around, and now I saw the cashier's booth. It was by the door. In other words, you paid when you left. Maybe the idea was you always have more of a conscience after you're full than you do before. I was really interested in the whole operation, but somebody began poking me in the back to make me move along.

I turned around, just about ready to slug whoever it was, and I'll be damned if I didn't see the cutest old lady of all time. She was wearing a corny old bonnet with lace on top, and strapped under her chin, and a black taffeta dress, and an old sad brooch at her throat, and her face was so sweet and appealing you wanted to kick her in the teeth—*just* because that'd be about the worst thing any human fiend could possibly do. But now while I was still looking at her I suddenly realized who it was.

"Mrs. *Chambers* . . ."

"Yes, my son?" She was as drunk as a skunk!

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, dear boy." She didn't even have the faintest notion who I was.

Then I heard Jane telling Toby that Chambers was here, and Toby just glanced around, and smiled, and that was all. I mean, she wasn't *surprised* to see her dressed in this Whistler's Mother costume at all. I began picking up little plates of food like mad and putting them on my tray. I'd damn near forgotten how hungry I was, and if I was going to have to go on looking at Mrs. Chambers in that corny outfit I figured I needed every bite. I whispered to Jane:

"What's she trying to prove?"

"Why, she's just dressed up, that's all," Jane said. "She's going down to Cookies or Cash, remember? She's undoubtedly been waiting here for us. She won't let *me* out of her sight from now until I get that prize money."

"Oh, yeah. She gets two-thirds."

I tried to picture old Chambers in her bathrobe and those ragged slippers, and strands of gray hair hanging in her face, the way I'd seen her a few hours ago, but I just couldn't do it. Boy, she could really put on an act! I was kind of sorry now that I hadn't seen the Lost Souls program last night. She must have been a riot!

13

The thing about a cafeteria, I mean

the way they get you is, your eyes are bigger than your stomach, and if you're the greedy type, like I am, you always load up with more than you can possibly stuff down, and in most places you pay *before* you eat, not after, so by the time you find out you've got too much, it's just tough, that's all. There's no taking it back for refund. That's the truth, it really is, because right after I left home I figured a cafeteria was the cheapest place to eat and I wasted a hell of a lot of money like that. I finally had to stop going to them.

I did the same thing now. By the time I got to the end of the line my old tray was so damned heavy I could hardly lift it. The main dish was prime rib, and I'd told the server to give me an extra-size portion. The last thing I squeezed in with the rest of the food was a big glass of milk, and I was just about to heave it all up onto my shoulder and follow Toby and Jane when I saw this woman checker sitting there on a high stool. She was trying to count all the stuff on my tray. I waited, and she finally got through, and handed me a little slip of paper, smiling as she did it.

"My, you're hungry, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. God, I thought you just paid what you wanted to! But apparently they let you know what the real cost was, so in case you didn't pay it all, you'd know exactly how much you'd gypped them. That was a pretty sneaky way to make you feel bad, if you ask me. I looked at the slip of paper. \$3.40. I damned near fainted! I felt like turning around and taking most of the dishes back. But it was too late. Old lady Chambers was poking me with her fork. I glanced back at her. All she had on her whole tray was a small salad!

Boy, I really felt bad when I saw that. Like some damned big hog. I lifted the tray up and almost staggered under the

weight. I began moving in between tables, trying to locate Toby and Jane. But they were nowhere in sight. Finally I just stopped, still holding the heavy tray, and gazed around, and about that time old Chambers with her lacy bonnet sort of *reeled* by, and I followed her. She was so drunk she could hardly navigate. But in that get-up she had on, if you saw her falter or anything, you'd just get real sad because you'd think it was old age. I'm telling you, I'll *never* help any sweet old lady across a street again!

Mrs. Chambers was going up a flight of stairs, so I trailed behind. No wonder all she took was a salad! If it'd been anything *heavier* she'd have fallen down. She made it to the top of the stairs, and I saw tables on the balcony, one of them a great big long one with a lot of people seated at it, including Toby and Jane.

Chambers beelined right over to it, and fussed around, like a quaint old lady, putting down the salad, and setting the tray aside. Ordinarily half the men would be up on their feet the moment they saw her, helping with her chair and all, but they *knew* she was a big phony, and nobody even moved.

She pulled out a chair, and sat down, just as I walked up. I started taking the dishes off my tray, and it seemed like I'd never get finished. Everybody was looking at me. I saw Borson. He was sitting beside Toby, half finished with chow mein or something on his plate. Don't tell me *he* couldn't afford to pay! He was probably *rich* by now selling all the corny prizes the others knocked themselves out to win. He looked even crappier this afternoon than he had this morning, wearing the horn-rimmed glasses, and beaming around, like he was about to stand up and call the meeting to order, then play a harmonica solo. I really hated him, and I'm not kidding.

I noticed one other familiar face, only at first I couldn't believe it. It was one of the *beasts* that had been at the Cookies or Cash audition, the one with the most fuzz on her face. I mean, she practically had a mustache. Here she was a *pro*, and I'd been feeling sorry because she didn't make it! I was fast becoming pretty damn bitter. It looked to me like it wasn't safe to feel sorry for *anybody* any more.

There were about thirteen or fourteen other people at the table that I didn't know, and I swear, you would have thought they were on a box-lunch picnic or something! They were cutting up, and all yapping at once, one butting in while another one was talking. There was one pale, thin woman with real blank idiot eyes of about twenty-five or so, but the rest were mostly older people, even older than Toby.

They looked nice, though, sort of spruced up, and cheerful. They could have passed for a church group, only I had my

doubts about all of them. I kept thinking how *darling* Mrs. Chambers appeared to be right now, and what a witch she was this morning. Maybe they were *all* like that, looking one way out in public or in front of TV cameras, and another in the morning with their old beat-up bathrobes on. Thinking about it like that, they were pretty weird. All trying to be so gay and all, when they didn't have a damn thing to be gay about. It made me feel kind of awful just being around them, because they were like a bunch of sad old clowns in the rain.

I sat down beside Jane, and directly across the table from Mrs. Chambers, who was peering at me now in a dainty old-lady way, with her little wrinkled hands half up to her face, and a lovable smile at the corners of her withered lips. She was going to speak to me. I could hardly wait to hear her poor, pitiful voice.

"You the young snot that was over to my place today?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Where'd you borrow the duds?"

"Do you like them, Mrs. Chambers?"

"He's going to appear on the program, too," Toby told her.

"College boy, eh?" Chambers said. "Heh, heh, heh!" She was starting *that* again.

"If you win," Borson was talking to me, "I'll be waiting to buy whatever you have."

"Really?" I said. "Tell me, what's your current price for dollar bills?"

"Oh, it's a *cash* prize," Borson said. "Oh, yes. I forgot." He frowned. I guess he hated programs that gave out cash prizes.

"Is the young man a friend of Jane's?" The beast had joined in. She was way down the table.

"Yes, he is," Jane answered. "Why?"

"Well, I was just thinking," old Beastie said. "I've been trying *ever* so long to persuade some personable young man to appear on the Man and Wife show with me. They're eager to get young couples, and I know someone who can write in a wonderful letter to recommend us."

Some wise-guy type old geezer interrupted her. "Yep, she's right about them wanting young squirts! Younger the better! Me and Minnie wrote in, then *phoned* 'em and they gave us this story about how the home audience likes it better when they watch *young* people getting married. If you ask me, I don't see what's so *different* about that! Happens all the time. Now Minnie and me, we'd give 'em quite a show. Plenty of laughs. Jokes about the honeymoon. Make it real entertaining."

Minnie was sitting beside him, a small, toothless old hag

who kept grinning, real friendlylike. But it was pretty hard to imagine what she'd do on a honeymoon. Particularly anything that was entertaining.

"Are you suggesting *Eddie* appear with you?" Jane asked.

"Oh, he could get the marriage annulled right afterwards," Beastie said.

"You mean because it'd never be *consummated*?" Chambers piped in, and now she began to laugh again, this shrill cackle of hers. "I can easily see how it wouldn't be consummated," she went on, and she was looking right at this female blister. "And there isn't a judge alive who wouldn't believe it. Ha, ha, ha!" She was so loaded she practically tipped over in her chair.

"We could divide the prizes and each go our separate way," Beastie told Jane, just as if Chambers hadn't butted in.

"You talk to Eddie about it," Jane said.

"How do you do, Eddie? I'm Caroline North," Beastie said.

"Hello, Miss North. I'll think over about your proposition. The thing is, I've never seen this show you're talking about."

"Fantastic prizes," Caroline said, "just absolutely fantastic."

"Including a trip to Honolulu for two which *cannot be sold or transferred*," Borson said bitterly. "They have it iron-clad. The winners themselves must make the trip or the tickets are no good!"

"There's your big chance," Chambers croaked. "A trip to Honolulu with Caroline! Ha, ha, ha!" God, she sure looked stupid wearing that bonnet that tied under her chin and then carrying on like *this*. "A room at the Royal Hawaiian! Just the two of you." Chambers broke up now, shrieking with laughter. "Wish I could be there to watch!"

Caroline was blushing like mad, even through all that peach fuzz on her face.

"If somebody wins a trip somewhere," Borson said, "and doesn't want to go, I don't know *why* he hasn't the right to sell the tickets!"

"They're probably trying to beat you out of your profit," I said. I don't usually needle people too much, but I couldn't stand him.

He got back at me in a real dirty way. "Look at the food the boy has," he said. He called everybody's attention to it. "And when he walks out he'll give the cashier a *quarter*. That's the kind of thing that's going to get us a bad name here."

"What do you mean—a *quarter*!"

"That's all we can allow this week, darling," Toby said. "A quarter from each of us for each dinner."

"All *who* can allow?"

"Our budget. Jane's and mine . . ."

Borson began to smile. He was probably the only one at the table who had any money but I wasn't going to ask *him* for a loan. I wouldn't give him that satisfaction. But on the other hand I sure as hell wasn't just going to walk out of here and only pay a quarter! I'd work something out, only so far I didn't know what.

I plowed into my food and kept eating, while the rest of them jabbered back and forth, mostly about the different programs. I wasn't listening any too closely, but then all of a sudden the chattering slacked off, and I noticed that this pale woman with the blank eyes was now the center of attention. Somebody was explaining that she was the mother of a little girl five years old who was going to die in two months of leukemia. One of the pros had read about the case in the newspaper and went out and visited her, and told her that by appearing on various radio and television shows she would be showered with gifts.

For one thing, she should certainly get on Life's Fulfillment, because with such a sad story she *had* to win. And now everybody began making suggestions concerning five or six other programs almost as good. I got kind of sick listening to it! I mean, this poor dumb broad of a mother had some hazy idea she was going to help her little daughter. The TV programs would supply a special bed, for instance, so the kid could spend her last days at home instead of in the hospital—where she'd get better care and maybe live a day or two longer.

But the main deal was, these pros, or at least the one who had contacted her, were out to sweep the boards of every prize in sight, just because it was such a heart-rending case. God, it was like offering up the dead! And I knew damn well she must have agreed to cut them in on the take.

"Anything, jest anything will help so much . . ." She was a real stupe, with a whiny twang in her voice.

It was like Christmas to her! She'd had no idea so much loot was around to be plucked. I don't even think she was worrying about her five-year-old kid any more. She was on a big merry-go-round. And she'd be a celebrity for two months at least. After the funeral they'd drop her, and she could go back to her hovel, and starve to death for all they cared. Because she wasn't a real pro like them. She was a "circumstance" pro.

"They've been plagued with quite a number of hardship cases, though," Borson said. He was the one sour note.

"But *this* isn't a *hardship* case," old corny Caroline North protested. "This is—"

"Besides that," Borson cut in (They *all* cut in on each other), ". . .the M.C.'s have come to realize that putting such gloomy subjects on the air depresses the home audience."

It was all so disgusting that by the time I finished eating I was more depressed than any home audience Borson ever heard of. I didn't even want to be at the same table with such a bunch of vultures. I looked at my empty plate, then asked Borson if he had a pen. He handed one over, and I borrowed a piece of paper from somebody else. I wrote:

To Lantern Cafeteria:

I.O.U. \$3.40. I will not come back here and eat until it is paid. The 25¢ I am leaving is for the interest on what I owe.

Edward J. Shelton.

I handed Borson back his pen, and Toby said: "Let me see that, Eddie. What did you write?"

"No, it's personal."

I was folding it in two, and Jane slipped it out of my hand before I could stop her. I tried to grab it back, but she handed it over to Toby. Boy, I was sore!

"Give it to me, Toby!"

But she was reading it.

"I said *give* it to me!"

"No, dear," she said, "no." Now she was tearing it up. "We don't *do* this sort of thing. You see, they trust us."

"I do that sort of thing," I said. "I don't mooch meals or anything else from anybody!"

"Except clothes," Borson said. "Isn't that Dan Prentiss' audition suit you have on?"

I almost started crying. It seems silly, but I did. God, I was shaking! I was upset by everything. The whole crazy deal!

"One more word, Borson," I said, "and I'm going to wipe the floor up with you!"

Borson climbed to his feet. "You and who else?"

I pushed back my chair so fast it fell over backward. Borson was taking off his glasses, and I was coming around the table after him.

"Stop it!" Chambers shrieked. She grabbed my pants. "Want to get us *all* thrown out?"

Now everybody was yelling at us to stop, but I pulled away from old lady Chambers and kept coming, and Borson chickened out fast. He held his hands up with the palms out.

"Now wait a minute, son. Wait a minute."

"Don't call me *son*, you dirty slob!"

"Wait a minute, please!"

"I'll knock you on your ass so fast you won't know what happened!"

"I'm sorry, Eddie, I—was thoughtless!"

"Please—both of you!"

Borson sat down in a hurry before I could smack him. I stood there for a minute, really sizzling, then I went back, picked up my chair, and sat down and gulped my milk in about one swallow.

"As for the I.O.U.," Toby was saying, "we just don't—"

"I'm going to write another one."

"No, Eddie," Jane said. She was the only one who sounded halfway sensible. "You see, *Mr. Prentiss* used to do that sort of thing. He was always writing notes, promising how much he was going to pay when he came into his money. You know?"

"Yeah . . ."

"But he never *did* pay anything, I guess because he never had it, and all he managed to do was draw attention to himself."

"Then they added up all his chits," Toby said, "and the total was so enormous—"

"They asked him to leave," Jane said. "They hardly *ever* do that. But as I said before, I think they were making an example out of him."

"So don't write notes, sonny," Chambers said. "Life is hard enough."

A few minutes later, Toby, Jane and Chambers and I left. I think Borson had intended coming along but changed his mind. Old lady Chambers was right in front of me at the cashier's booth. She was still a little bleary-eyed, but she was acting "quaint" and "dear" all over the place. She handed over the chit.

"Only a fifteen-cent salad," she said in this quavering little old lady voice, "but there have been times when I *couldn't* pay . . . So I want you nice people to have this." She handed over three one-dollar bills.

"Thank you, Mrs. Chambers."

Chambers nodded sweetly, and went out. The way the cashier looked after her, all choked up, you could figure that her credit was going to be good in Lantern Cafeteria for another year, at least. No wonder the old hag had dolled all up in her Mother Hubbard clothes. She was investing three dollars for three hundred and sixty-four dinners!

Now the cashier gazed at me. I gave her my chit, and handed over this little, small quarter, and turned and started out, my head down. I expected any minute to feel the hand

of a cop on my shoulder. But nobody stopped me. I went straight on outside and across the sidewalk to the curb and tried to puke, but the only thing is, I couldn't. I guess the food was already half digested. But I felt awful, I really did. I was conscience-stricken about being so full, and what made it worse was that neon-lighted figure of Diogenes there behind me holding up his tired old lantern.

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Riding back to Hollywood on the

bus, I sat next to Jane, but I felt so damned miserable I didn't say a single word. I don't know how to explain it, but it was like I was *degraded*. And what made it so awful was that it was *my* fault for not having any character, or anything, and getting in so deep, wearing somebody else's clothes, eating food I couldn't pay for, and even renting that bed in the basement on credit. God, I hated myself! I felt like a girl who's just been *had*, and didn't even try to stop it. I was really down.

Jane must have sensed I wasn't in any mood to talk to her, because she didn't read me off about almost starting a fight with Borson. She just sat kind of calmly, and pretended to be looking at the scenery. Toby and old Chambers were in the seat behind us and I could hear the old lady moaning about the three dollars. She'd really debated whether it was worth the price, and what had decided her to do it, she said, was the fact that she was going to get such a big share of Jane's winnings tonight.

"Otherwise, I'm cleaned!"

"What about your pension check?" Toby asked.

"Spent. All spent. How long do you think it lasts?"

Toby began talking to her real low then, and I couldn't hear much of it, but after a while I got the drift. Toby was wheedling and pleading for Chambers to take half instead of two-thirds of Jane's money. Mrs. Chambers kept saying no, and finally Toby was just outright begging, telling her how

much they needed every penny. I can't stand a person that begs and crawls like that. It was so embarrassing I tried to keep from hearing any more of it. Finally, Jane turned around.

"Oh, Ma, for heaven's sake, stop it!"

"I was only asking her to do the right thing," Toby said, sniffing.

"A deal's a deal," Chambers cackled.

By now we were already in Hollywood. We got off on Vine Street and started walking. Boy, I still felt rotten! I wanted to chuck the whole thing. But when we approached the broadcasting station and I saw a line of people waiting to get in, and the words Cookies or Cash big as anything up on the marquee, I got a funny sensation. Like I was a star actor.

Then when we started walking *right past* these people to go in, it really hit me, because they were looking at us, and talking among themselves. Of course they didn't have any idea who we were, but it wasn't too hard to imagine that they at least *guessed* Jane and I were on the program. I mean, if you let yourself go, you could really feel like a celebrity. Robert Mitchum or somebody. I started walking sort of *slow*, to let them get a longer look. They weren't the world's *brightest* citizens or anything, but you have to consider that the show wasn't due to go on for more than an hour yet, and if they were willing to stand around *that long*, they must have thought it was pretty important.

"Eddie, come on!"

It was Jane. She was twenty feet in front of me, ready to go into the building. I looked around for Toby and Mrs. Chambers. Then I saw them. They had joined the line outside. Toby lifted her hand, smiling, and waved at me. Boy, the people *really* stared then.

"Good luck," Toby called.

I nodded, and started after Jane.

Inside the building, she went up to the glass-enclosed information booth and told the girl our names and that we were on the show. She wrote out passes.

"You're to go directly to make-up."

She started to tell Jane how to get there, but without even thinking, Jane said:

"Oh, I know where it is."

She realized she shouldn't have done it, because the girl was looking at her real funny, but it was too late now, so she just turned and started away, and I kind of smiled at the girl, and then caught up with Jane.

"That was dumb!" she said. "Now she knows I'm a pro."

"Suppose she'll tell anybody?"

"No. Besides, it's too late to cancel us off now. They wouldn't be able to get alternates."

We were in that long marble corridor, and I began thinking about the show, trying to figure out how many millions of television screens there are, and how many people watch each one, and I began to get scared! Guys sitting in bars, people in their living rooms, television sets in store windows with a whole big mob standing out on the sidewalk staring in at it. There would be all these little images of me all over everywhere! When I considered that, I began to feel weak. Particularly my legs. They were getting so rubbery I could hardly walk.

Maybe even old Yvonne would see me. But I hoped not. Because then she'd know I was a pro just like Toby and Jane, and there at the Sampling Shop they hated pros. Anna Merryweather wouldn't see me, of course, because it wasn't a network deal, just local. It wouldn't have mattered if she saw me because she doesn't even know what a pro is. She probably thinks they really dig all these people out of the audience. She's sort of dumb that way. But it was too bad Mike couldn't watch. *He'd* really get a bang out of it, and so would Mom. Harry wouldn't, though. He'd probably make them turn the set off, or he'd switch it over to boxing or else some ignorant kiddie program that his puky little son Harold could watch. Boy I was sure glad I left *that* setup!

We reached the end of the corridor, and turned right into another one, which wasn't quite as big or fancy. The make-up department was about three doors down. I was really getting nervous! Jane started to open the door and I stopped her.

"Why do we have to put make-up on?"

"So we'll show up better for the cameras."

"Can't I tell them I don't want any, Jane? I mean, God, I'll look *faggy* or something."

"No, you won't. When they see you on television you'll appear perfectly normal. But if you don't put any on you'll seem real pale."

"Oh."

She went in, and I followed, then we both stood back by the door. It was a large room with a big long mirror and dressing table. There were four high stools, and all of them were being used. I saw Willie Stockton sitting on one of them and almost didn't recognize him. This make-up woman was putting some brown stuff on his face with a sponge and he looked weird because you couldn't see his eyebrows or his lips. But now she began *drawing* eyebrows over his real ones, making them dark and big. I was very interested, because if he let

her put *lipstick* on him I was going to lose my respect for the S.C. football squad.

The people on the other three stools weren't for the Cookies or Cash show. One of them was a famous disc jockey, and the other two looked vaguely familiar, so maybe they were song writers, or one of them was a bandleader or something, and were going to be his guest stars.

"They're for the Down Melody Street show," Jane whispered. "All strictly professional."

I was leaning back against the door, and now all of a sudden it opened—and damned near pushed me into the mirror. I grabbed the dressing table just in time, and turned to see who it was, and naturally it was Happy Doc Dooley. He breezed right past Jane and I and headed over to Willie Stockton.

"How are you, boy?"

"I've been here half an hour," Stockton said.

"My fault, I was late," Doc said. He was one of these guys who expects everything to immediately be all fine and dandy if he says it's *his fault*. I mean, he doesn't even give it another thought! He could probably knock you down with his car and say, "Sorry, old man, it was my fault," and expect you to jump up and apologize for having been in his way.

"Have you talked to Harvey?" he asked Stockton.

"I haven't talked to anybody," Stockton said. He was pretty griped at getting here early and finding nobody around. The make-up girl was putting lipstick on him, but I didn't mind now because he was standing his ground with Happy Doc.

"*Alice* isn't even here?" Doc said.

"Nobody, until you came in."

The door opened again, and the woman who had been selected today along with Jane and I entered and looked around, then came over and stood with us. The disc jockey was all made-up now, and getting off the stool. I noticed he didn't say a word to Doc. He *looked* right at him, too. He was a pretty fine deejay, if you want to know.

"I don't understand it," Doc told Stockton.

"You want to talk to me about the show?"

"Yeah," Doc said, "soon as I'm made up. We'll walk over to my office."

He was still trying to be real palsy with Willie, but now he turned around and peered at us. He'd seen us when he first came in, all right, but *now* he was giving us his attention. He sort of looked Jane and the other woman over, then glanced around to see if anybody else was here, and finally looked at me again, as if he was just now recognizing me.

"Oh, *no!*" he said. "Whipplespoon?"

"Yes, sir."

I felt stupid, because as soon as he said it everybody started looking at me, the deejay, and his two guests—who were finished with their make-up and getting off the stools—and everybody else.

"What have you done with yourself?"

"I—nothing, sir."

The deejay and the two guys with him walked out, and before the door even closed behind them Harvey came in. Doc Dooley looked as if he was going to bash him.

"Where have you been?"

"Having dinner." Harvey was as nervous as a whore in church, but he played it down, acted real casual, hoping Doc wouldn't embarrass him in front of Willie Stockton and all of us.

"Having *dinner!*" Doc said. "While the star player from S.C. cools his heels waiting! He's only an All-American, you know. That's all. Nobody important. Just football's greatest quarterback last year!"

"All-American on whose list?" Stockton said. "Yours?"

"You'll make it this season, all right," Doc told him, then glared at Harvey again. "Where's Alice?"

"She'll be here."

"Good. I'm glad to know she'll be here. We have a show tonight, or didn't you mention it to her?"

The make-up people were ready for Jane and the other woman, and they went over and sat down on the stools, and had these aprons put on them, like in a barber shop.

"What's on your mind?" Harvey asked. He was trying to make it sound as though he and Doc were equals.

Doc pointed at me. "Whose idea was this?"

"You picked him for the show, didn't you?"

"Yes, I picked him, but not the way he looks now. Look at him! He looks *human!*"

Boy, I was ready to slug Happy Doc!

"Can I help it that he dressed up?"

That did it! Now this weaseling Harvey bastard was going to *deny* he'd told me to put a suit on!

"It was up to *you* to tell him to come back the way he was!"

"You didn't tell me to," Harvey said.

"Goddamn it," said Doc, "do I have to do *everything* for you? Even hold your hot little hand when you go to the toilet?"

Harvey's face was getting red.

"I wanted him to look just as—" Doc looked at me. He was going to say "jerky," but he didn't. "—as *youthful* as he did

this afternoon. We're supposed to be having a program of *young people* tonight."

"So I goofed," Harvey said. I guess that was his favorite expression. He meant it to bring the same results as Doc hoped for when he admitted something was his fault. Doc gazed at me, shaking his head, then looked at Harvey. "Get him a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and a bow tie."

That *proved* he was going to say "jerky"! He was still determined to make me look as much like a moron as he could. But with a name like Hubert Whipplespoon what else could I expect? Harvey left, and Doc went over and sat down on one of the high stools. I took the one next to him. Willie Stockton was finished and on his feet.

"Be right with you," Doc told him.

The girl worked Doc over fairly fast, while I just sat there, without even an apron on yet. Jane was almost made-up, and boy, she looked beautiful. I guess on girls it looks all right. With the make-up she reminded me a little bit of Susan Hayward. Not much, though. But she looked very good.

They got through with Doc and he left with Willie Stockton. The girl came over and spread the apron, tying it around my neck. She gazed at me in the mirror, and smiled. She was a blond of about twenty-five, and not too bad. She began smearing this brown stuff on my face, and she was so close to me I could feel her breathing on my neck, only she was real impersonal about it.

Old horsy Alice came in just about the time she was painting mascara on my eyelashes. Alice had a notebook, and some mimeographed form. She explained they were a "release" from legal action against the station in case anything happened to us during the show or as a result of it.

"Just routine," she said. "Everybody that goes on has to sign one."

Jane was off her high stool by now, and signed hers right away, and I had my fingers crossed that she'd make sure to put down Jane Miller instead of Sutton.

"Now about the questions," Alice said. "Since this is college night, we're going to deal entirely with the American scene, and particularly with the forty-eight states. The questions are in four different categories and you will draw in here to see which you get."

"What about Willie Stockton?" I asked.

"He's already drawn his," Alice said.

She had these three slips of paper in her hand. Jane took one, the woman got hers, and she handed me the one that was left. *State Capitals*. I grinned. Boy, this was going to be a

breezel I can name the capital of every state in the Union! But Jane was frowning. She looked almost panicky.

"Hubert, what did you get?" I told her, and she wailed: "I've got *Populations*. I don't even know the population of *Arizona*!" She looked at Alice. "Miss, would it be all right if I traded with Hubert?" God, she wasn't even going to ask *me* about it, and I'm not any too hot on populations because I think that's something you study in about the sixth grade and I was already through my third year in high school!

"If you can get *him* to do it, it's all right with me. But don't mention it to Doc Dooley."

"Oh, I won't," Jane said. "I won't! Hubert?" She was holding out her slip.

I didn't want to trade, I really didn't, and I just sat there. The make-up woman was finished now, and taking the apron away, and I stalled, fixing this Kleenex in my collar so the grease wouldn't smear on the suit. Then the door opened and Harvey came in carrying a bow tie and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. While I was looking at him, Jane took my slip and pressed *hers* in my hand, and then looked at me with a real grateful expression.

"Oh, well," I said, "it's only money, isn't it?"

Harvey was taking off the beautiful blue knit deal Dan Prentiss had knotted so carefully. Now he snapped on this silly-looking polka-dot bow tie, and it really spoiled my whole appearance. He tried the glasses on me for size. I gazed at myself in the mirror. It was just as well that Mike and Anna Merryweather and the rest of them wouldn't be able to look. Because if they could have seen me now they probably would have vomited.

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When Harvey was satisfied that I looked good and jerky, he took us all up to Doc Dooley's office. Doc and Willie Stockton were talking as we came in but they knocked it off right away, and looked at one another

and nodded, as though they had a little secret. Some secret! Doc had been giving him the answers. They both looked guilty as hell. Doc glanced at his watch.

"May as well get started," he said. "We go on in fourteen minutes." He didn't even look over to see whether I was now goony enough for his stupid show. He just got up, and everybody followed. Jane and I were last, and when we were in the hall, she said:

"Hubert, do you happen to know what the capital of Alabama is?"

"Montgomery."

"What about Arkansas?"

"Little Rock."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Positive."

"Arizona is Phoenix, California is Sacramento . . . Colorado is Denver." She looked over at me again. "Is Bridgeport the capital of Connecticut?"

"No, Hartford."

God, I wanted to have a little time to think, but she just kept it up, even when we went into the studio.

"Tallahassee, Florida. Boise, Idaho . . ."

The studio was like a miniature theatre, and we came in a door that was backstage. It was kind of dark, and all disordered with a lot of old props from other shows, and big cables going across the floor. The Cookies or Cash set was up, but all we could see was the cardboard backdrops. I peeked through to the stage. There were lights all over it, a boom microphone they could lower to pick up your voice, and two different TV cameras both pointing inward. Over at one side was a television screen, and it was on. Alice saw me looking at it.

"That's the monitor," she said. "There's a deejay show on right now in Studio B."

"Hubert," Jane said, "quick! The capital of Missouri. Is it St. Louis?"

"No." I was getting pretty annoyed. "Jefferson City."

I peered out at the stage again. There were about forty rows of seats in front of it, and the studio audience was just now coming in. I spotted Toby and Mrs. Chambers. They were pushing into seats in the fourth row, but over to one side. I didn't know why they wanted to sit on the side when there were empty places in the center, then I looked at the TV cameras again and *they* were center. Anybody who sat behind them wouldn't be able to see a thing.

"Lincoln, Nebraska," Jane said. "Austin, Texas. Salt Lake City, Utah."

There was something *I* wanted to be thinking about, but she had me so rattled with this crap I couldn't even figure out what it was. That's pretty sad, when you can't even remember something you want to think of. It was sort of driving me crazy.

"Richmond, Virginia . . ."

"Jane, will you please—"

"Shhhh. I'm concentrating!"

I decided what I'd do was, I just wouldn't pay any attention to her.

"Six minutes . . ." It was one of the TV crew. There were about seven guys going back and forth to the stage, and in and around all over hell, and now *they* were making me nervous. So much that I still couldn't remember what I wanted to think of. Maybe it wasn't important. But if I at least knew what it *was* then I'd know whether it was worth worrying about. It could have been something real simple. Like maybe I wanted to say a prayer. Sometimes just before a tremendous thing happens I say the Lord's Prayer. It doesn't always fit the subject at hand, but it's about the only decent prayer I know.

But *that* wasn't it, either. Now that I thought it over, I realized it was something *else* I was trying to remember. But I still didn't know what! Boy, I began to strain my brain cells! Then I just about had it!

"Four minutes."

Happy Doc Dooley jarred past me, going out on stage, and it went blooey again! Boy, I was really frustrated.

"Hubert, is Baton Rouge the capital of Louisiana?"

"Yeah . . . yeah . . . yeah . . . it is!"

God, what was the use! Doc Dooley was out there talking to the studio audience, and now Alice started on us.

"While Doc's doing the warm-up, I want to give you a few instructions. When you see the two little red lights burning just below the lens, the camera is on you. When they go off, the other camera will be on Doc. Speak up and speak clearly, but don't raise your voice."

"Two minutes!"

By now I figured I'd probably go through *life* without knowing what I was trying to think of. Then it came to me. *Populations!*

"One minute."

There was a trick to it some guy had told me a long time ago.

"Thirty seconds!"

When a certain state is named, count up its largest cities, and take a guess from there.

"Stand by!"

"Hubert, hurry," Jane whispered. "Rhode Island?"

"Providence."

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen." It was an announcer out on stage. "Kreider's Kakes Company, the Southland's finest bakers, presents Cookies or Cash!" I guess the mike was picking up his voice, but back here you could hardly hear him. It sounded sort of hollow and muffled. I got over to one side and took off the glasses and looked out at him, but all I could see was the back of his head. He was telling about how great Kreider's cakes and pies were. "Yummy, yummy, in your tummy! And be sure to remember Kreider's coffee cakes and cookies! Mmm—good! And now, the man you've been waiting for, your genial master of ceremonies, none other than Happy Doc Dooley!"

Doc had been there all the time, but *his* camera was off. It was on now, though, the two little red lights glowing to beat hell, and moved in as if he was making his entrance. The announcer was facing the audience, pulling his hands toward him like a bastard to get them to clap it up big. A guy wearing earphones was at the other end of the stage doing the same thing. But even so, the people *still* didn't applaud hard enough to make the roof fall in or anything. Doc was nodding, smiling. "Hello, out there. To you . . . and you . . . and especially *you*!" It was pretty sickening. Now, still smiling away at the camera, he explained that this was college night on Cookies or Cash.

"And I'm sure that everybody—yes, everybody—even the U.C.L.A. Bruins have heard of our first guest this evening. He's none other than that Trojan terror from U.S.C.—star quarterback, Willie Stockton!"

There was a big hand from the audience. Of course the announcer and this guy with the earphones were standing there whooping them up again, but this time it sounded like they would have clapped even without that.

Alice had already maneuvered Stockton out on stage, and he was standing where he was supposed to when the second camera picked him up. Doc moved over to him, and they started talking. I watched, sort of fascinated, and noticed that they were never in view at the same time. Either Doc was in camera, or Stockton, at pretty close range, but never both together. Besides being able to watch them in person, I could also see them on the TV monitor, which showed exactly what the vision was at home.

Doc acted like he was just chatting informally, but he was digging out Stockton's background, where he was born, about his parents and all, and then it came. The pay-off.

Stockton let it drop that his father used to belong to some bird-watcher society or something and had taught him all about it. Happy Doc said in that case maybe they ought to test Stockton's memory.

"The questions on this program are in different categories. What if we make yours about birds?"

Stockton pretended to be reluctant, and Doc asked the audience, "Isn't that fair?" and they clapped, and a few even said aloud that it was. That was Doc's way of getting intimate with his audience, and at the same time fooling them into thinking it was *their* idea. Maybe I'm the suspicious type, but I'd have bet anybody Doc and Stockton had made all this up between them, and that if the fact was really known, Stockton couldn't tell one bird from another.

"All right," Doc said, "for three dollars. What's the chosen bird for the state of Florida?"

"Mockingbird," Stockton said, and everybody in the audience applauded, because of course not knowing the answer themselves, they thought he was smart as hell. They wouldn't have believed it, though, if Doc hadn't invented that crap about Stockton's father being a bird-watcher.

"The chosen bird for the state of Mississippi?"

"Mockingbird," Stockton said.

I thought he'd slipped up, repeating like that, but Happy Doc yelled, "Right!" in a real triumphant voice, and those morons out front applauded again.

"All right, you're going for nine dollars. Tennessee?"

"Mockingbird."

God, it was getting monotonous! Old Willie Stockton sure had a hard part to learn!

"Texas?"

"Mockingbird."

The audience was laughing like mad. A mockingbird, it turned out, was also the feathered symbol for Arkansas, which Stockton somehow managed to guess. He now had fifteen dollars and depending on his answer to the next question he could either double it, or end up with nothing but three dozen doughnuts. The only thing is, I wasn't in too much suspense over how it was going to come out.

"The bird for the state of Kentucky?"

The studio audience had already decided that *every* southern state used the mockingbird, so Stockton wowed them with:

"A cardinal."

When Happy Doc announced that was *ab-so-lutely* correct they began to cheer, and Stockton walked off with thirty bucks in his hand.

This other woman that was with us was next. She was a nineteen-year-old coed from Stanford who was visiting down here. Her category was state songs and she got five of them: "Maryland, My Maryland," "Michigan, My Michigan." Some of these states aren't too original. "My Old Kentucky Home," "Oklahoma," and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny." Then he lobbed her with the jackpot question. The state song of Kansas. She didn't know, her time ran out, and then he was oh, so terribly sorry, it was the best-known song of all, "Home on the Range!" I don't know *who* could have known that, but the song being so famous, the stupid studio audience thought he'd been real fair with her, and she went slumping off thinking she was dumb, and not even blaming him.

There was a two-minute commercial, then Alice was pushing Jane out on stage. She looked pretty great, and she went into this same story about being poor, and her hobby was collecting things for the Salvation Army, and Doc stopped and got serious with the audience, telling them what a great organization the Salvation Army was, then he worked up to where Jane had won a scholarship at U.C.L.A. by writing a thesis on Americanism, and turned to the audience in real Arthur Godfrey style and said:

"How about that?"

The jerks practically clapped their hands off, and some of them were blowing their noses, they felt so patriotic about it. Finally Doc began hitting her with the questions about state capitals. Jane whipped through the first five like an honor student from I don't know where, getting applause every time.

"Now—for Cookies or Cash, tell me the capital of New York."

"New York City," Jane said.

"Oh, I'm *sorry*! It's Albany!"

Jane came off carrying nothing but three boxes of cookies.

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She looked so damned bewildered, and mad and confused, I wanted to say something to her. But Alice was maneuvering me out onto the stage, and I was fumbling for the horn-rimmed glasses, putting them back on so that I didn't see a cable I was supposed to step over, and I stumbled, and when I looked up about ten million lights were shining right in my face, and two of them were small red lights on a TV camera. I mean, I made a real first-class moron entrance, and I hoped Doc Dooley was at least overjoyed with it. That was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? Boy, I was so damned p.o.'d I forgot to be nervous.

But I began to sense something funny. The audience out there hadn't laughed when I tripped, and when Doc said, "Hubert Whipplespoon" the drippiest, dragged out way he knew how, they *still* didn't laugh, and I could feel a sort of mass embarrassment. I'm not kidding, it just comes right to you. Doc was pressing a little now, using the same gag he had this afternoon about some of his best friends were Whipplespoons. Him and his *spontaneity*! Just slightly somewhat rehearsed, that's all! And he *still* wasn't getting any reaction.

We went into the frog department, and got to the place where I croaked like one, and the silence out front was now practically unbearable. I figured it out, too. They were taking it seriously. They might have *secretly* thought Whipplespoon was a stupid name, and that collecting frogs was even crazier, but they were afraid if they laughed *I'd* be all upset. I began to get a better opinion of human beings, I really did. Especially because by feeling so sorry for me, they were hating Doc like mad. He was making a big slob of himself.

"All right, Hubert." He'd stopped calling me Whipplespoon. "I believe your category is populations."

That's the thing. Who could possibly *care* whether *I* knew the population of various states!

"You are to hit within a million of the correct answer."

On the slip of paper I'd drawn it said within *half* a million. But he was making it simpler, figuring if I walked off with the dough they wouldn't think he was such a heel, after all.

"Let's start with Illinois."

"Nine million?"

The way he shrieked that I was right, that I had come within less than *three hundred thousand* of the true figure, you'd have thought that *he'd* just won the whole broadcasting station.

"Arizona."

"Less than a million," I said.

"Get this boy," he screamed at the audience, and they applauded. He kept handing me easy ones: California, which is less than eleven million, New York where there's about fifteen million, and New Mexico which everybody knows is hardly populated at all.

"All right, Hubert, you've done wonderfully. Just wonderfully! Now think hard, boy. Think hard. For Cookies or Cash—the population of Indiana?"

Indiana? All of a sudden I was scared! Was it a trick? Suppose he'd seen a Gary, Indiana, missing-persons report on me! Maybe they posted them in all TV and radio stations. I didn't know, but it sounded possible, all right. I was just about tongue-tied. The only thing was, Doc was waiting for me to answer, and looking like he was about to melt from the suspense. He had little streaks of sweat on both sides of his face. Even the audience was straining.

"Time is running out. Take a guess!"

He was afraid I didn't know the answer! That was when I realized naming Indiana must have just been a coincidence. Boy, I wasn't relieved *much!*

"A shade under four million," I said.

"Ab-so-lutely correct!"

The people were applauding, the announcer came over and handed me three ten-dollar bills, and I turned and tripped on that same cable coming off stage. Happy Doc was still out there saying what the show was going to be next week, and to be sure and tune in, and he meant you and especially *you*.

I found Jane in the wings, still holding the three boxes of cookies, her face stony, and now I felt a little guilty. For a minute I just looked at her, but she was so cut up about losing she wasn't even thinking of anything else.

"Look, Jane," I said, "you were the *best*. Hands down." The show was over, and the regular house lights went on backstage. "Anyway, all you really lost was ten dollars. So you're only a *one-third* loser."

She gave me a pitiful look. "That isn't the point, Eddie. It just slightly isn't the point."

"Yeah, I know. But what I want to see is old Chambers' face when you hand her two boxes of cookies!"

Out front, the studio audience was in the aisles, leaving, and I saw Toby and Mrs. Chambers headed back here. Chambers had a real snotty look. She came up and relieved Jane of the cookies, taking all three boxes. But Jane was in a pretty vicious mood, really ready to battle old Whistler's Mother, and she grabbed one of them back. The tissue paper tore, and a couple of cookies spilled out. Chambers glared with a baleful eye. I guess she figured since she wasn't going to get even ten cents in cash for the dress, the least Jane could do was hand over *all* the cookies.

"It was *you* who told us a deal is a deal!" Jane said. "You've got your two-thirds!"

Chambers was glaring at her, about ready to spit in her face. But then her expression changed to sweetness and light. She was looking over my shoulder. I turned and saw Happy Doc. He didn't know what was going on, but he was pretty suspicious, and now he spotted Toby, whom he'd already tabbed as a pro.

"Sir," I said, "I'd like you to meet my aunt, Mrs. Grayball."

"Oh," Doc said, peering down at Chambers, who was almost puckered up, gazing at him. "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Grable?" He paused. "Any relation to Betty?" That was old Happy Doc. Always there with a funny remark.

"Young man," Mrs. Chambers quavered at him, "did I hear you say next week was social security night?"

"You certainly did."

"Well, I—I'm on social security."

"How'd you like the way your nephew won?"

"Oh, fine, jest fine," Chambers said. "Now about next week's show . . ."

Harvey walked up, and Happy Doc interrupted Chambers. "How do you like this? These four . . . all of them pros! And two of them were on the show tonight. *I* didn't even suspect they knew one another! How do you account for this, Harve, old man? I don't use pros on my show, or haven't I ever told you that? Did you notice, Harve, old man, that I said *my* show? I didn't say *our* show, the way I usually do, did I? Does that tell you anything, Harve, boy? Does it? Do you begin to dig me, Harve, cat?"

"But *I* didn't know—?"

"That's right, Harve, boy, you didn't know, and that's just why you are no longer with us."

"All right," Harvey said miserably, "so I goofed."

"Yeah, Harve, old man, you goofed. Goofed one last time. Isn't that a pity?"

Harvey was still trying to reason with him as we left. I mean, next he'd be asking for the thirty bucks back and probably even the cookies. I didn't realize I still had the tie on until we were all the way out of the broadcasting station. But Prentiss' blue knit was in my pocket so I didn't even care. I just took off that polka-dot monstrosity and the puky glasses and tossed them in the gutter.

"Why'd you two have to go backstage?" Jane wanted to know.

"Because you didn't come out," Chambers said.

"And you couldn't wait to get your cookies!"

"Now, now, we mustn't fight," Toby said.

Chambers looked at Jane. "I was counting on that money. It's too bad yer ma raised you so ignorant, dearie."

"I keep asking her to go to the public library and read these quiz books, like the rest of us do," Toby said. "But you can't tell Jane!"

"Ma, are you starting on me too?"

"Well, I at least knew the capital of New York was Buffalo," Toby said.

"Did you, Ma? Really?"

"Of course I did!"

"You're a liar! The capital of New York is Albany."

"Oh," Toby said, "that's what I meant."

"That's what you meant," Chambers mimicked. "The two of ya make my ass ache!"

She went off up the street.

Jane said: "I hope she chokes on those cookies."

Toby was looking up at the clock on a billboard. "While we were waiting in line she was telling me about the Lost Souls show. They audition tonight between nine and ten. We can just make it."

Jane looked at her disgustedly. "Are you kidding?"

"Why, no."

"Well, in the first place, I've already told you. I'm not going on any more interviews with you."

Toby's face creased. "Then I'll go alone."

"Go ahead," Jane said. She was tired and cranky. "You're more of a lost soul than I am, anyway."

"Thank you, dear," Toby said. "Thank you so much. You're so complimentary."

"And that show prefers older people."

Tears shone in Toby's eyes. "You know I'm not old. I

won't even let myself become angry with you. You're just upset that you didn't win tonight."

"Eddie and I'll go on home," Jane said.

"Oh, no," I told her. "I've got to take this suit back. I thought Toby was coming with me."

"Darling, I can't," Toby said. "You explain it to Dan. Tell him I'll—I'll look him up sometime."

"He's going to be pretty disappointed."

"That can't be helped, Eddie," Toby said. "Business is business, and *you* saw the prizes Mrs. Chambers won on that Lost Souls show."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, I'll see the two of you in the morning."

"All right," Toby said vaguely. She acted like she was hung up, as if there was something else she wanted to say but couldn't think of what it was. She was really an awfully helpless type of dame. I walked off and left her standing there. I got about a quarter of a block when she caught up with me. I walk pretty fast, and she'd had to run to do it, and she was all out of breath.

"We both think it's splendid that you won."

"Oh, thanks," Some deal. Big afterthought! Of course they'd been pretty agitated there in the station. But when you *win* something you like to have it mentioned in passing at least. But even so I was kind of touched she'd run all this way to tell me.

"You won't do anything *foolish*, will you, Eddie?"

"Huh?"

"You won't just go off and leave us? And you'll hold onto your money, won't you?" I wasn't quite so choked up any more. "Do you want *me* to keep it for you?"

"I can manage."

"Then we'll see you later. Or in the morning, anyway." She was looking right in my face. "I'm very fond of you, Eddie. Do you like *me*?"

"Yeah. A lot." God!

"I'm glad. I have to rush now, dear. 'Bye."

She hurried away. When you looked from the back she didn't have too bad a figure. I suppose if I was eighty years older I really would have thought she was young. But I was *still* griped that she wasn't coming with me to the hotel. Dan Prentiss would be looking forward to that stroll down the boulevard with her after I left.

17

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There was a drug store at Hollywood and Vine and I drifted in and looked around. It felt pretty damn good knowing that if I wanted a Coke, or a magazine or practically anything else, all I had to do was buy it. It's probably hard to believe, but having money in your pocket can do a lot for you. In the first place you don't have to strain real hard in order to *look* as if you have it, and in fact, if you were in a certain frame of mind, you could even creep around like you were poverty-stricken, then when some hot-shot clerk figured he had you pegged and asked if he could be of help, you could flash a big bill under his nose, sort of stifle a yawn, and say, "Yes, my good man, a box of cough drops."

Only right now I'd forgotten why the hell I'd come into the place. There was *some* reason because it was running through my mind just before Toby caught up with me. That's the trouble, people are *always* interrupting something you're thinking about. After a while you get so you don't even know what you're doing. I was just about to start out when it came back to me. And this time it *was* important.

I went over to one of the counters and bought some envelopes and a fifty-nine-cent pen. That broke one of the ten-dollar bills and I stuck a coin I'd gotten with the change into the stamp machine. Then I went to the soda fountain and splurged on a five-cent Coke, while I dragged out the card the Jap gardener had given me up in San Francisco that time. I copied his address on one of the envelopes, wrote, "Thanks a lot, soldier, as you see, *I'm* doing fine—Eddie Shelton," on the back of the card, and stuck it inside with two dollar bills.

I probably should have waited until morning and had it registered, but I was anxious to get it off and I mailed it

on the corner. Walking up the street, I began wondering just when he'd receive it. Maybe day after tomorrow when he came home after mowing people's lawns all day. He must have figured he'd *never* see that two bucks again so he'd be surprised, and I guess kind of pleased. God, people don't have *enough* good moments like that. It's real nice to make one happen, particularly if it's because of something *you* owe them.

But the big thing is, a person should pay his own way through life, no matter what. Only that made me think of my rent for that bed in the basement. I transferred two dollars to another pocket. That'd pay that. Then I made a mental note about the balance of three dollars and fifteen cents I owed to the Lantern Cafeteria. Boy, paying your way is great, but when you do the money sure disappears! That's probably the best thing about not having any. It can't disappear on you.

I arrived at Prentiss' sad little hotel and went in and took that creaky self-service elevator up, then went down the hall to his room. He opened the door as soon as I knocked. He was wearing a blue-stripe bathrobe and straw go-ahead slippers, but his light gray hair was all slicked back, and his face was beaming. He was ready for company, all right. Only now when he noticed that Toby wasn't with me some of the shine went out of his eyes. He even glanced down the hall.

"Where's our girl?"

"She couldn't come with me."

"Oh," he said. "Oh, well." He tried to act as if it didn't matter, and closed the door.

"She had to make an audition."

"Oh?" he said. He was "oh-ing" all over the place. I guess he was trying to straighten out his mind or something. He'd probably been rehearsing what he was going to say. But now she wasn't here, and he was going flat, like a tire that had been all pumped up and ready to roll, then got punctured.

I took off the coat to the suit and he started inspecting it for spots. But I think it was just something to do because he was upset. Most tires can be fixed with a patch. But the way *he* looked, there were quite a few puncture patches on him already. It was fairly depressing, especially when I happened to glance at the wastebasket. There was an empty peanut tin lying in it. And then I realized there was a faint smell of peanuts on his breath.

"Audition, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Eddie, you *do* have my tie, don't you?"

I nodded. "It's in the coat pocket." I slipped out of the pants. I was already beginning to miss wearing the suit.

"What show is she—"

"Lost Souls."

"Oh." That's about all he could say—"Oh."

I slipped off the shoes and socks, and began unbuttoning the shirt. The silence was awful. He walked over to the closet and got my old beat-up clothes and brought them out.

"How did *you* do on the program, Eddie?"

"I won."

"Jane?"

"Lost," I said.

"Oh."

His mind wasn't on it, it really wasn't. It was on *something*, though, because all of a sudden he began getting dressed in a big hurry. That was when I remembered I'd left my money in the pockets of the pants. God, it was embarrassing! I didn't know how to ask him for it.

"Something the matter, Eddie?"

I was dressing in my old blue gabardines. "I left something in the pockets . . ."

"Oh." He put his hands in both pants pockets. "Yes." He brought one out holding two tens, a five and fourteen cents. "There it is." His face was getting red as hell. "There you are!" He pulled out the other hand in a real casual way, just as if he hadn't felt the two dollars I'd put over there in the other pocket for my rent.

I was kind of stunned. I didn't know what to say or do. I guess my mouth just hung open. I knew damned well he'd *felt* that money there. But he got real busy now, dressing himself, putting on the shoes, slipping into his shirt, fixing the tie.

"I think there's still time," he said.

"Time for what?"

"To meet her there. They'll be auditioning for another half hour yet."

"Oh." Now he had *me* saying it. I felt like asking him why didn't he give up on Toby, but he was the kind that wouldn't. Dames hate it when you act like that—chasing after them when they don't really care. I could have told him about a real frantic chick named Pat that I knew when I was sixteen. But he wouldn't have listened. It's pretty discouraging when a guy as old as Prentiss hasn't even learned *that much* in all the years he's lived. I mean, you figure maybe *you* might live that long and still be dumb yourself, and it's awfully damned frightening. Why bother getting old unless you're going to get something out of it—such as brains.

Stealing that lousy two bucks from me wasn't too smart, either. He must have realized that I knew. Nobody could be stupid enough to not know how much money he has. And if he'd *asked* me for a rental fee for the suit I'd probably have *given* him two bucks, at least. I felt flush and all, and I'm not a very stingy guy that way. Particularly when I know somebody's whole dinner consisted of one can of peanuts.

He was just about dressed, and I wasn't even ready yet. But I snapped it up. The last thing I put on was my poor beat-up boots. He was in such a big rush we didn't even talk any more until we started out the door. I told him if he didn't mind I was going down the hall to the men's room and wash off this make-up.

"Go right ahead, Eddie."

"Thanks very much for the loan of the suit."

"Any time that you're in a jam like that," he said.

He hurried off, and he didn't even wait for the elevator. He went down the stairs. Maybe he *did* think I hadn't missed the two dollars yet. Anyway, he wasn't sticking around until I did.

In the washroom, I looked at myself in the mirror. It was a big letdown to see these clothes on me again. They looked juvenile and sloppy as hell. I ran water in the basin, and washed all the crap off my face, and from behind my ears. It took quite a while. Then I dried, and combed my hair for a minute, and I fairly well figured out why Prentiss hadn't asked me a rental fee for the clothes, or for a loan. In either case, I'd have told Toby about it, but this way, if it ever came up he could deny the money had been there and make her think I had lost it.

I was pretty disillusioned with the old son-of-a-bitch. He'd seemed so nice and all.

I left the hotel and started walking back toward the house. Boy, I was really fagged. It'd been one hell of a long day, and I didn't get any *too* much sleep the night before. But thinking it over, I was glad Jane wasn't sore about me playing around there in the alley. With a little help from her, I could probably fall in love. I fall in love fairly easily. But the trouble is, it never develops into anything, and most of the time the stupid girl doesn't even know about it. God, I wouldn't even mind having my heart broken if afterward I could feel there was that one big love affair in my past. Because when there isn't a damn thing in your past, it's rather bleak.

The house looked gloomy. Not even a little light on outside the front door. I thought there wouldn't be a soul up, but as soon as I walked in I saw old Itchy, the landlady. She was

wearing a scarlet kimono and she looked like a big vampire or something coming at me through the dim light. I wanted to run, and that's no crap. But when she got closer I saw that she was smiling. She had her hand out and for once it wasn't scratching anything.

"I saw the show . . . and waited up for you. You were very good, Hubert."

"My name's Eddie," I said. I was reaching for money.

"Two weeks in advance," she said. "Might as well pay up now while we have it."

I wanted to argue, but when I saw her face I knew it wasn't any use. She had all the answers ready to throw at me. She'd lie, say anything, but she was determined to get as big a piece of the pie as she could. I gave her the five-dollar bill. She held it up to the light to see how much it was, then nodded, and started off with it.

"Wait a minute. What about my change?"

She turned and looked at me. "It's two and a half a week. What change?"

"Toby told me it was *two dollars* a week."

"She was wrong," Itchy said, and moved off again.

I was getting slightly scorched. The way everybody was tapping me you'd have thought I'd just found the treasure of the Sierra Madre. A bunch of goddamn bandits had me practically surrounded!

I groped through the crazy, stinking old house to that weird kitchen. A feeble light was burning. Probably the only reason they turned it on was that I'd never have found my way to the basement in the dark. I opened the door, turned on the light below, then went down the wooden steps. I was so groggy by now that my head was spinning to beat hell. I didn't even care about how spooky or dusty or rat-infested it was or anything else. All I wanted to do was hit the sack.

I sat on the little bed and almost fell asleep pulling off my clothes. I probably would have but it was so cold and sort of *damp* that I couldn't. When I was down to my shorts I crawled under the covers and huddled there, shivering. I was beginning to black out, and I got the impression that I was back in DeLongpre Park, with the dogs trotting back and forth and sniffing around.

18

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I woke up hearing all these different voices, three or four of them talking all at the same time, and I didn't know what the hell was going on, where it was coming from or anything else. It was sort of muffled and hollow. I'd fallen asleep with the light on, and it was still burning, but there were no windows down here so I couldn't tell whether it was day or night, and I didn't have even the slightest idea what time it was.

I sat up and looked around and didn't see anything except the crappy gray basement. But the voices were *still* bubbling away! I got to my feet and started trying to track them down. Boy, I was really mystified. Then I came to the old-time furnace and stopped. I guess I was still groggy and half asleep or something because for a minute I was scared peeless! The voices were coming from in there! It was a pretty big furnace. I didn't know how deep it ran or anything, and I was afraid to look. But these morons inside kept talking away like mad and they didn't *sound* like anything was particularly the matter with them—what I mean is, they weren't yelling for help or ice water or anything—so I opened the door.

Nothing! Just dead ashes that looked like the dust on the floor. But the voices were much clearer now. I poked my head in and looked around, and I saw all these vents that apparently piped heat to the various parts of the house. The people up there in the different rooms were gabbing, and the heat outlet was echoing it all back through the pipes down to the furnace. It was like a wide open switchboard with everybody talking at once. Man, it was fascinating! I stood there for a minute trying to pick up what they were saying. But with *everybody* talking it was kind of hard. Just when I expected to overhear some interesting thing somebody from one of the other rooms would laugh or sneeze.

I pulled my head out of the furnace and looked around and spotted the dusty pipes jutting out of it. There were

about ten or twelve of them, and on the side of each one was a little lever. It was fairly obvious that by flipping it up you could shut off whichever pipe you wanted. For instance, if there were two or three rooms unoccupied, you could come down here, close off the vents and conserve the heat for the rest of the house. That meant, of course, you could also shut off some of the voices and concentrate on others.

All of a sudden I got this big urge to experiment. I began closing vents all over the place, cocking one ear to the furnace to hear the latest reception. Finally I had the whole house shut off except for what was undoubtedly a private bedroom where some dame was really carrying on. I couldn't tell how old she was, but her voice was high-pitched, real feminine, and she was talking fast.

"... can't just leave her there in Detroit, or maybe you could, you're the type who could, you could do anything, and always do, oh, you dirty remorseless bastard, are you going to leave her there? Yes, I guess you are, you'd really do anything, and you'll get away with it, only some day you won't, they'll have your ass in a sling but good, *are* you going to leave her there?"

"What the hell do you care?"

"What do *I* care? She's my sister, isn't she? How do you think I feel? It's bad enough. You can't do it, Tony, my conscience won't let you . . ."

"*You've* got a conscience, you dirty gutter tramp? No, I don't think you've got a conscience. All you've got is this . . . just this . . . That's what you've got, isn't it? Isn't it, tramp?"

"Yeah, that's what I've got that you like, I guess. And that's all you like me for, admit it, it is, isn't it?"

"It is, I admit it, so what, tramp?"

"So you can't just leave her there in Detroit . . ."

"I think I can, and you *know* I can, so shut up, because the truth is, you like it, you really like it, you're just talking so you'll feel better later, so you'll say to yourself you tried to talk to me about her, only you aren't talking very hard, why don't you cry at least, and throw a big scene, or have you got too much of a hangover for that?"

It sounded very promising at first, but they never got anywhere, just nagged back and forth, repeating all the same things they'd already said. I shut them off and tried a different vent. Some little brat was bawling and a woman, I guess it was her mother, was telling her to cut it out. *That* bored me, and I closed them off, and tuned in a new channel.

"... like him." It was Jane.

"How much do you like him?"

"Wow, Ma, I just met him, I mean, my God!"

"Does he mean anything to you or not?"

"No, how could he? Look, he's *nice*, but—"

"Can I trust you?"

"Oh, now really! This is rich. I think you can just slightly trust me, don't you?"

"You say that now, Jane, but Man and Wife is a very serious program."

"Oh, wow, and you think I'll believe it's real."

"It will be real until the annulment."

"Ma, it's just a program, and we aren't even on it, we have a plan but that doesn't mean it's going to work, so why don't you wait and worry when we get on, *if* we do, which I doubt, because it's network, and *everybody* has ideas how to get on it . . ."

"When I think of all those prizes! Jane, we'd be on Easy Street. It'd see us through the winter, and more, almost into spring."

"You sure he's down there?"

"I checked last night when I came home."

"Maybe he woke up this morning and left."

"Eddie wouldn't do that to us," Toby said.

"I'll go down and get him up."

I shut off all the vents and headed back to bed. God, I felt real funny. In fact, I wasn't even sure *how* I felt. It was like being dead, and somebody talking about you. They sure hadn't wasted much time cooking up another program. Of course, old Caroline North had contributed the idea. They'd probably been thinking about it ever since dinner last night. Marriage program. I closed my eyes so Jane would think I was asleep when she got here. I visualized how it would be walking up the aisle with her with organ music playing and all that. It made me sort of excited, it really did, although I don't know why, because it was the craziest, stupidest scheme they'd come up with yet. Did they have some bug in their heads that they could make me do anything they wanted? Jump on a string like a moron? But I still felt funny, I admit it, like I had goose pimples or I don't know what. I tried to get the whole thing out of my head by concentrating on that poor lost dame in Detroit that Tony was going to leave there while he went out and got roaring drunk with her high-voiced tramp sister. Then I heard Jane on the steps, coming down, and Detroit blacked out, and I was all weak again, like some dim-brained sex fiend.

She came over to the bed, and leaned down and gently pushed my shoulder. I opened my eyes real innocently, as if I was just waking up, and there she was, looking at me. All she had on was cotton pajamas and a bathrobe and slippers,

and her hair wasn't even combed out yet, it just hung loosely, a dusky gold color. We looked at one another without speaking, and I don't know why, maybe *she* was kind of dim-brained herself, talking about a dopey marriage program and letting it get to her, but she leaned down and kissed me. Then she pulled away real fast.

"Hi."

"Hi," I said. Boy, I felt good! Better than that time after the football game with Anna Merryweather, or yesterday in the store with old Yvonne. They didn't even compare with the way I felt now.

"It's time to get up."

"Really?" I said. "What time is it?"

"A little after nine."

"Oh."

She gazed at me. "Did you send Mr. Prentiss over to Lost Souls last night?"

"No. It was his idea."

"But you told him Ma was there?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"He pestered the life out of her. Insisted she go to the Side Saddle Bar and drink beer with him. He spent almost two dollars. We can't imagine where he got it." I gave her a look, and she said: "Oh, no! What'd he do—*ask* you for it?"

"No. I made a mistake and left it in his pants pocket when we exchanged clothes."

It depressed me a lot that old Prentiss had gone to all the bother to steal the money from me and didn't even save enough out of it to buy himself a meal.

"Honey, soon as you're dressed, come on upstairs."

"Okay," I said. I was trying to be very casual about the fact that she had called me honey. "Any plans for today?"

She smiled. "A couple."

She left, and I jumped up and put on my pants. About two minutes later I was upstairs in the hall barefooted and bare-waisted, headed for the second-floor bathroom, when Toby nailed me. She said Jane had told her about Prentiss and the two dollars. She was wearing her blue satin robe, but her face was glistening with some kind of grease. Her blonde hair was whipped back in a severe knot.

"Darling, I *do* think you'd better let me keep the money for you."

"No, I told you last night I can handle it."

"Please, Eddie." She was pouting.

I was kind of p.o.'d. "Look, I'm man enough to handle my own money."

"Then let me put it this way," she said. "Would you be

sweet enough to lend us ten dollars? We need it very badly, and we'll pay you back. You know that, don't you?"

I handed over a ten-dollar bill. Boy, the bandits of Sierra Madre were still snapping away at my ass!

I went up to the second floor but the bathroom was occupied and I had to cool my heels for almost fifteen minutes. Finally some husky guy came out with a towel over his shoulder. I went in and locked the door, then I noticed he'd left his razor on the black porcelain sink. I glanced in the mirror, feeling my face, waiting for him to come back, but he didn't, so I turned a gold faucet, ran some hot water fast, shaved, then wiped the razor clean. By the time he did come back I was already in the shower. I wrapped a towel around me and got the razor for him, pretending like I hadn't even seen it.

I showed up in front of Jane and Toby's door about twenty minutes later, and knocked.

"Come on in, Eddie," Jane said.

As I opened the door she was just pulling a sweater down over her bra, and I could see her in three different mirrors at once. She was wearing the same gray skirt and green sweater I'd carried around for her in that package after she got the free dress yesterday. She began pushing at her hair, then running a comb through it. She was already made-up, and she looked real fine. Toby was pulling the same old knit dress down over her hips. She wore a slip under it, so she wasn't advertising her legs or anything, but the thing is, they certainly didn't seem to care if I saw them putting on their clothes. It was all right with me, it really was, I'm pretty broad-minded that way, but *some* women would have about ten fits if a man walked in on them.

Toby sort of stared at me, as if she had expected to see me in Prentiss' gray suit; then she adjusted herself back to what I was wearing. She was a little let down. She was the type that when she was let down she would always smile sweet as hell to throw you off.

"Did you sleep well, Eddie?"

I nodded. "Are we going to have breakfast?"

"A bite," Jane said.

Toby kept fussing with her dress. "Darling, are you *inviting* us?"

"No, Ma," Jane said, "we're inviting him. It's *his* money, isn't it?" Then she looked at me. "But you won't eat quite as much for breakfast as you did yesterday, will you?"

"I'll order pancakes," I said. "They don't cost much."

Boy, they were sure stingy with my dough! Jane was willing to give me a cheap meal out of the ten I'd loaned

them, but Toby was drooling for the *other* ten, which was just about all I had left. To be exact, I had ten dollars and fourteen cents. Out of thirty!

"I was just teasing him," Toby said.

"Oh, I'm sure," said Jane. "I'm sure I really believe you were teasing him about who was going to pay."

Toby dropped her arms, and turned around. "What's come over you, Jane? Everything I say you jump down my throat."

Jane just looked at her.

"Why?" Toby said. "God in heaven, what have I done?"

"Nothing, Ma."

"All day yesterday you kept picking on me."

"Forget it."

"You know I'm not well."

"Look," Jane said, "don't pull that for Eddie's benefit. You're well, all right."

Toby looked pained and beaten. "Do I look well to you?"

"You're *weak*," Jane said, "frail. A bundle of nerves. But you're not sick. Or unhealthy."

"No, I'm thankful for that." Boy, she was ducking right away from the main point which was that she had said she wasn't well. Now she was admitting she *was* well and she was thankful for it. She was sort of a slob that way. Anybody could talk her out of anything. Anybody, that is, except a worse slob than herself, such an Dan Prentiss. With somebody like him she probably enjoyed having the upper hand. She'd torture the crap out of them just to get revenge on the people who'd given *her* a bad time. She *was* weak, all right. That was the big thing. Jane had her pegged.

"We'll wait out front for you," Jane said. She was all ready to go.

"No, stay here," Toby urged. "I'll just be a sec." But Jane went out the door, and I followed her.

We moved down the dim hallway together, Jane going kind of slow, dragging her steps, and then she suddenly stopped, and stood back against the wall, and pulled me over in front of her, and looked up at me, and didn't talk for a minute, just kept looking. It was so damned dramatic I thought I might go crazy. Then she kissed me. That made the second time. The thing is, a girl can kiss you *once* for any number of reasons, but when she does it the second time, that's just about it. It means you're practically going together. When we came out of the kiss I wanted to say something great that would really cement the whole deal, but I couldn't think of one damn word. It was Jane who talked first. She dug a Kleenex out of her purse and handed it to me.

"Wipe the lipstick off your mouth. If Ma saw it she'd die."

19

.....

We had breakfast in a booth at this little place on Gower Street, and I ordered pancakes, all right, but then I could hardly eat them. I just didn't have too much of an appetite. Jane was sitting right across from me, nibbling on a piece of toast, and I kept trying not to look at her, except *casually*, that is, because Toby was squeezed in beside her and could see every move I made. I was so nervous my hands were shaking, and I kept ordering refills on the coffee. Sometimes when I'm nervous like that I keep drinking coffee like mad.

Toby didn't notice, though. I guess mainly because she was in a great big tizzy about something else. They hadn't broken the news to me yet that we were going to try out for the marriage program, but I could sort of tell that was it. In a way it was funny, because that was about the farthest thing from my mind. What I was thinking of was Jane.

God, it's funny how you can know somebody and not really *see* them at first. She seemed different to me now. What I mean is, I was noticing all this stuff I hadn't paid any too much attention to before. Her features and her mannerisms, and the way she accented her words, which was just a little bit different from other people, and made you want to hear her talk so you could listen for it; and the nice shape of her eyes, and the way she held her shoulders back. This kid really had carriage. Anna Merryweather, for instance, was kind of slim, and sometimes walked with her shoulders slumped, which in my opinion looks awful.

"About through, Eddie?" Jane asked.

"Oh, yeah. These pancakes aren't so hot." I pushed in my plate. "Oh, Toby, I meant to ask, how'd you do on the audition last night?"

"She didn't make it," Jane said. She and Toby exchanged looks.

"Darling," Toby began, "how would you like to hit the jackpot of a lifetime?"

"The Man and Wife show," Jane said.

I played it dumb. "With Caroline North?"

"No. With me." Jane was looking straight into my eyes. I glanced down at my fork and began fiddling with it.

"Jane of course doesn't *really* want to get married," Toby said, "and I'm sure you don't either, Eddie. You're both far too young. It'll just be a ceremony, and we'll have it annulled immediately afterwards."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"You'll get a week's vacation in Honolulu, and a whole wardrobe of clothes."

I looked at old Toby. "That all?"

"No, there's *loads* of prizes. We'll make this a partnership, we three, and divide it all equally. You may ask where I come into it, but Eddie, it's a very difficult show to get on, and I'll have to sign a release for Jane because of her age, and arrange for somebody to sign for you, and in general, well, *manage* the two of you. See, darling?"

"Yeah, doll," I said.

I don't know why I said that, it just came out, but I was sort of in a Humphrey Bogart mood. I mean, with the way she was yapping at me, I was getting *bored*, like Bogie does sometimes when he has a scene with some talky sex dish. It kind of rocked Jane. She opened her eyes wide and looked at me, but I don't think Toby even heard it. She was still going on about the prizes and what an opportunity it was, and how, of course, there was a possibility—a big one—that we wouldn't get on the program at all because they usually picked their contestants from letters people wrote in, but that to go there in person was certainly worth a try, and with my full cooperation, that is, if I'd be not only willing but *enthusiastic*, it might just work.

"Okay."

"Oh, wow, some enthusiasm!" Jane said.

"No, it sounds good."

"Am I so repulsive?"

"That has nothing whatsoever to do with it, Jane," Toby said. "It's a strict business proposition."

"Yeah, but Ma, we can't go down there and try out unless he at least *acts* like he's in love."

Boy, I began to tingle. It started all the way down in my toes and just kept coming up. Toby and Jane were wrangling back and forth, but I didn't even hear them. I just kept staring at Jane. This morning while I listened through the furnace, they'd talked about having a *plan*. Then she'd come down-

stairs and *kissed me!* All of a sudden a great big affection. And she'd kissed me again in the hall. Now the deal was that we had to appear to be madly in love when we tried out for the marriage show. So she didn't think I was a good enough actor. She'd be on safer ground if I *was* half-assed on the make for her!

It was hard to believe that anybody would stoop that low. They might lie to some M.C., or cuff meals they never intended to pay for, but to throw themselves at somebody just for the sake of getting *realism* into a lousy audition . . . well, that was it! Just when I was getting to *like* her, trying to make myself believe I was fascinated with her voice and all, getting so worked up I couldn't even eat my pancakes.

I could have gotten up and walked out, but there was just one little thing holding me back. So far I didn't have any proof. It was just suspicion. Maybe I was *wrong!* If I stalked off like some maniac, and then it turned out that I *was* mistaken, that she had really *meant* those kisses, I could ruin everything. I *can* be wrong about things, it's happened before. Once I went into a gigantic rage and then found out the other person was actually trying to surprise me with something I wanted. Boy, I felt like a real ass.

So I didn't say a damned word. I figured I'd go along with it, and watch to see how it turned out. *I'd* be able to tell if she was faking. I'd set a trap for her or something. But there was no use blowing off until I was sure. I was kind of proud of myself that I'd decided to do it like this. I was handling the matter in a pretty adult way. Not like some adolescent moron. That's the way you can tell that you're grown up. When you can manage to keep your mouth shut. The trouble with *kids* is that they're always screaming bloody murder over something that's probably their fault to begin with.

"I'll act like I'm in love," I said.

They both looked at me, because I'd just dropped that in from out of nowhere, right in the middle of *their* conversation. I kept my eyes on Jane.

"But don't *fall* in love," Toby said. "Remember that it's just—"

"A business proposition," I said. She was certainly worried about it.

"Jane won't be going to Honolulu. Just you."

I was still looking at Jane. I would have sworn that when Toby said that she just barely shook her head *no*. It was so slight I couldn't really tell. But that was the way it *looked*, and for no damned reason at all I got my blood pressure up again. I watched for another sign from her, but now she

wouldn't look at me, which, I think, wrapped it up; she'd delivered the message and she didn't want to repeat it and risk Toby seeing her.

The waitress brought the check, and I was so rattled I grabbed it without thinking. Neither one of *them* seemed to notice, so I handed over my ten-dollar bill. We were getting up when the girl brought the change. Now I was down to a little over eight dollars.

When we got outside, Toby said the station that put on the marriage show wasn't far, and the walk would do us good. We were pretty flush this morning, so on the corner of Sunset and Gower she bought the two Hollywood trade papers. She paid for them herself. A whole twenty cents out of the ten spot I'd handed her a couple of hours ago.

"On one day a week they list all of the TV shows," she explained.

Jane laughed. "Tell the truth, Toby, you got them for *me*." She felt pretty good to be calling her Toby. "They have a TV list all right, Eddie," she said, "but Toby knows that I like to get the trade papers whenever I can because they're what every big actor and actress and all the others read every single morning, and one of these days I'm going to be reading them every morning. Does that sound crazy? Just having them in my hand makes me *feel* like an actress. As if I belong. As if I'm part of it." She took the *Variety* and *Reporter* from Toby. "What a gorgeous town Hollywood is." Her eyes had a mist over them. She looked at the papers, but she didn't read a thing. It was what they *meant* to her. "Come on," she said, "let's go!"

For twenty cents Toby had aced herself in pretty good with her daughter. Only she had a motive. She and Jane weren't getting on so good. It wasn't what Jane *said* to her in particular, but something Toby sensed. At least I think she did, because *I* sensed it. Like something was in the air. Toby, for instance, reminding me every two seconds that the marriage was only a business proposition. If she was *sure* of Jane she wouldn't have had to say it more than once.

I was doing all this heavy thinking about it to see where *I* stood, and it began to look as if I *had* been wrong about Jane making a woo pitch just to get me in a love mood for the audition. The way Toby was so concerned, I could almost figure out that Jane was sincere about me.

God, love is terrible! You're always asking yourself all these questions, and analyzing every word that's spoken to see what your status is, and one minute you're up, walking on a cloud, and the next you're eaten away with some dark suspicion, and back and forth like that, waiting for some

assurance that it's true or false, on or off; but the worst thing was, I hadn't even talked to Jane about it yet, and I didn't really know how the hell she felt. I was just judging by a couple of kisses, and a negative shake of her head I couldn't be sure of. Boy, I was really clutching at straws.

We walked along the sidewalk, with Jane beside me, and I decided to get real calm about it. I mean, I was just slightly jumping the gun to think about it as love. *I* wasn't in love with her, and she wasn't in love with me. What we were doing was, we were just maneuvering around to see whether we liked each other. It was really that simple. But I do that sometimes. I run away with myself. Then I come back to earth and see things clearly again. I really *was* back on earth, too, because I suddenly thought of my clothes.

"I can't audition in this outfit!"

"Of course you can," Toby said. "They like young couples . . . and they want them to be—well, the poorer the better, so it will seem that the show is giving them their start. And of course if they're *really* poor, the prizes will appear to be a dream beyond belief."

Jane said: "You're dressed fine, honey," She reached over and put her hand in mine.

I guess it sounds like nothing, somebody holding your hand, but it isn't. *Now* I was pretty sure she wasn't just building me up so I'd act lovelorn at the station. I mean, you can sort of tell when a girl's on the level. They don't usually hold hands with you if they're faking. Toby couldn't see what we were doing, and I suppose that was part of it too. It was a secret.

Not that I was falling for Jane. I'm not some pushover for any chick that comes along. But the truth is, I hadn't been feeling any too hot about things lately. For instance, I didn't exactly run away from home because I was so happy there I couldn't stand it. It was fine for Ma to get married, she had every right, it was just that she selected such a terrible phony, and then on top of it, they go and have this phony little kid Harold, who keeps getting phonier every year. *Mike* might worry about me, but a kid thirteen, even a good guy like him, isn't the same as a woman sixteen. So that's the only thing, I just wasn't in any mood right now to chase Jane away with a club. If she wanted to hold my hand, it was okay. It didn't *mean* a damn thing. It just simply meant that we felt like holding hands.

I hate to be so emphatic, but thinking about it depressed me. God, that's pretty sad, when holding hands with a beautiful babe depresses you! Life sure is a riot. You never know how the hell you're going to feel, you really don't.

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The broadcasting station wasn't in the hub with most of the others. It was quite a distance, twenty-three blocks to be exact, and after we got there I wasn't so sure the walk had "done us good," the way Toby'd said; I think as far as she was concerned what was good was that we hadn't spent any dough for bus fare. It was quite a different deal from the other station. I guess it was just as big, but there weren't all these elaborate new buildings with marble halls and glassed-in rooms. Instead, it was a huge area with a high adobe wall around it, and a main gate. Inside, there were office buildings, and two or three large sound stages. It looked as if it used to be some small movie studio or something, and had been taken over for TV. There was lots of ground, a big parking space, trees and green lawn. In a way it was better than the other place because it didn't seem to be so busy and frantic, and there weren't all these messengers rushing around in blue general's uniforms.

They stopped us at the main gate, and Toby told the cop in charge why we were here. I figured this was as far as we were going to get. I mean, Man and Wife wasn't *officially* auditioning, so the cop would call the office and they'd say come back some other time. But I was wrong. He didn't pick up the phone, or even write out a pass. He just said to go ahead. Boy, they were *really* relaxed over here. I wanted to start moving before he changed his mind. But Toby stalled around getting directions.

It turned out that where we had to go was along a narrow street past a big wooden building, and then beyond to where there was all this lawn, and a group of pretty nice bungalows, each one the office for a different coast-to-coast TV show. The little local programs undoubtedly had their space in the old building, which is where Doc Dooley would have been, if this was his station. I sort of wished it *was* his station, because

then probably every time he passed the bungalows that housed the big network time he'd go mad with jealousy.

Man and Wife was bungalow number three. It was just like being at somebody's house. I opened the screen door and Toby, Jane and I walked in. A small, wispy dame with red hair was sitting behind a typewriter. She looked up at us, and Toby went into a spiel, the drift of which was that we were a couple of kids crazy in love; she said she'd tried her best to talk us out of marrying so young, but that we were determined and nothing could stop us.

"Then when I read in the paper about that girl of sixteen committing suicide because her parents wouldn't let her get married, I gave in," Toby said. You would have thought this was the office of the Justice of the Peace and it was all as simple as that. The old Justice would come out and perform the ceremony and we'd be on our way. Only I detected that Toby was being *overly* naive. She wasn't any too bright to begin with, but she was deliberately trying to sound about as ignorant as you can be without having somebody drop a net over your head.

The redhead smiled indulgently. There was this polite chit-chat while she sympathized with Toby and said she didn't blame her. I mean, she was really going out of her way to be nice about it. She even told Toby her name, Miss Lyons. Jane was holding my hand all the while, and we were both trying to look real sad and overwhelmed with one another.

"But Mr. Carter doesn't audition in quite this way," Miss Lyons said finally. "We've always followed the 'Letter From a Best Friend' policy."

I guess Toby and Jane knew what that was, but they let her explain it. It seemed the way they selected couples for the program was that the best friend of either the bride or the groom wrote in and told of their intention to wed, and went into detail about how long he had known them, what fine people they were, and how much they needed a good start for their marriage, meaning financially, of course. There was always a deluge of incoming mail and every letter was carefully considered, but only one was picked for each week.

"Once we have made our selection," Miss Lyons explained, "we communicate with the couple and ask if they'd like to appear. Usually, they seem surprised. You see, the letter writer seldom tells them what he has done in advance, because he doesn't want to build up their hopes." She smiled. "If the people live out of town, and most of them do, we invite them for an interview, and naturally, we pay the way round-trip."

I was ready to cut out. God, with a system like that, we'd *never* make it! No wonder the cop at the gate had shooed us

in. He probably thought we had won the show's letter of the week contest.

"Do *all* the couples you interview get on the air?" Toby asked.

Miss Lyons was pretty proud when she answered that one. "Yes. So far we have yet to turn down any two people who have a friend thoughtful enough to write in a letter about them."

"Then a letter *is* necessary?" Toby said.

"I'm afraid it is," Miss Lyons told her.

"But if we could just see Mr. Carter for—five minutes—"

"I'm with *you*," the redhead said. "I honestly wish you could. But it's impossible. I do hope you understand."

Toby looked crestfallen. I was ready to leave, but all of a sudden Jane began to cry. She turned toward me, and put her head on my shoulder and started sobbing. I was so damned embarrassed I thought I'd drop dead! Toby looked at us, then faced Miss Lyons again.

"Just this once—*please?*"

"But if they want to get married," Miss Lyons said, "why don't you take them to City Hall?"

Toby's eyes were wet now too. "Without some kind of a head start in life, they simply *can't* get married. I didn't want to say that. But it's true." *She* began to cry.

God, old Jane and her mother were really fighting tooth and nail! I was so ashamed and all that I was a hundred percent numb. The sobbing got louder and finally it was so hectic that Miss Lyons rose and said she'd speak to Mr. Carter but she didn't think it would do any good. What I figured was that she was going to ask the old boy how in the hell to get us out of here.

She went into a private office. Toby and Jane didn't pay any attention. They just kept crying. In about a minute Miss Lyons was back, and Carter was with her. He was a thin, fairly small guy about thirty-five with black curly hair specked all through with gray. He had a kind, understanding face. What I mean is, you could easily believe he'd never turned down any couple once they came here to the office. He was the type you'd look at and say right off he wasn't any damn phony. Having a decent-looking guy like him come out made *me* feel even worse.

"Ladies," he said, "ladies, please!"

Toby and Jane subsided from outright crying to quiet sniffles and looked at him, both of them brushing tears from their faces. Gabriel Carter—that was the name outside the bungalow door—looked right back, and I swear that I thought for

half a second he was going to break out laughing. I mean, it was weird. He gazed at me, then Jane.

"Cookies or Cash," he said.

Man, that was the end! I mean, we'd *had* it! I suppose sooner or later some horrible fate like that has to catch up with all pros. But to be caught dead to rights in the middle of a corny dramatic act by a big network wheel who's seen you on a program just the night before tops everything!

I was waiting for him to call the cops and have us thrown off the premises, but Jane started moving toward him, and talking, her voice husky and intent. God, she was almost magnificent! I couldn't believe it, the way she'd changed from a sobbing little drip.

"All right, we're pros, is that what you're going to say? Regulars. And you don't use regulars on Man and Wife. You use *deserving* people. Poor people. Being pros . . . we're rich, aren't we? Rich, famous . . . we give out our autographs at *Ciro's!*"

"Young lady," Gabriel Carter said, but that was all he got out because Jane was off again. She had stopped, dead still. She was so young and all that standing right up there to him she made quite a picture.

"And why shouldn't we be famous? We supply the talent, the amusement and the laughter on the giveaway shows. And we're the lucky ones who get what they give away! Usually it's fountain pens, or portable radios, or an order for a cheap dress, and when you go in to pick it up, the store *throws* it at you in contempt!"

"Young woman, I'm sure—"

"Those prizes are our existence, Mr. Carter. If we don't win . . . we don't eat . . . Eddie and I have only been in town a few months. My mother can't support me . . . and *he* has no parents, only an old penniless uncle. Appearing on TV shows is the only thing that's kept us going. We *want* to quit. Don't you think we want to quit? He has a chance to get a job at a gas station. I want to go back to school. But we don't want to be apart. We don't *ever* want to be apart! So we thought—I guess it was really very foolish of us—we thought if we could get on your show we'd have enough for a clean, decent start in life."

There was a silence now, and Carter kept studying her, kind of fascinated.

"You mean," he said, "Man and Wife would be the climax to your career as pros?"

"Yes, sir," I piped up, "it'd be the last show we'd ever appear on."

"Then I'd tell my audience the truth about you," he said.

"It's a pretty cute angle. The two young pros who finally hit one of the biggest TV jackpots of all—and intend to quit on the proceeds."

Everybody was looking at him real hopefully, even Miss Lyons, who had been somewhat less excited than he was over Jane's dramatic outburst.

"You might recount one of two of your experiences as pros," he went on. "I don't think that's ever been done."

"We could tell you lots of things," Jane said.

Gabriel Carter put his hand on his chin and considered it for at least two minutes. The suspense was about killing me. Then he shook his head.

"I'm afraid I'll have to think it over. We're booked up for several weeks in advance, anyway, so there's really no rush."

Jane looked disappointed, and he tried to smile her frown away, but he couldn't. Then she said:

"Do any of these couples ever cancel out on you?"

"Yes, once in a while," he told her. "They have a quarrel or something and call it off. But when that happens we just move all the others up a week."

"It's quite a hassle, though," Miss Lyons said. "They usually have their hearts set on the exact date we've given them and they hate to change." It was probably true, but she sounded as if she was trying to be helpful.

Jane said: "Then why couldn't you put us down as alternates? We wouldn't mind. We'll be standing by any time you want us."

Toby nodded. "They could appear at a moment's notice."

Carter thought it over, then looked at me. "Will your uncle give his consent for you, son?"

"Yes, sir."

Toby said *she'd* sign for Jane.

Carter turned to Miss Lyons. "All right. Use them as alternates. It's a good idea." He looked at us. "You understand you may not be called for months. So if you ever change your minds, let us know."

"We will," Jane said. She was smiling real big now.

There was a few minutes more of small talk, Miss Lyons taking our names, addresses and all. *I* lived in a cheap hotel on Hollywood Boulevard and got all my mail and calls in care of my uncle, whose name was Dan Prentiss. Gabriel Carter said good-bye and went back into his office while the redhead was still putting it down. Then when she had all the dope she began to worry about the marriage license. There is a three-day law in California, and if there was ever an emergency on the program we might have to go on sooner.

"We'll take out one today," Jane said.

"No, I don't think that's necessary," Miss Lyons told her. "I'll call a friend in City Hall and have him register your intention to wed. That's the important thing. Then we can pick up the license any time, and you can get married the same day, if need be. You see, the law was made to prevent hasty marriages when people are drinking and things of that sort which they might regret the morning after."

In a few minutes, everything was squared away and we were ready to go. Toby was gushing sweet now, everybody's friend, and especially Miss Lyons' friend.

"You're such a dear for letting us talk to Mr. Carter. We'll simply *have* to watch the show this week! What are they like—the couple you're going to have?"

"They're young," Miss Lyons said.

"From Los Angeles?"

"No. They both live in El Centro, California."

"Well, thank you again," Toby said, "you've been just wonderful."

We left the bungalow and started on the trip back to the main gate.

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But we didn't make it right away, because when we were passing the old office building again Toby spotted a sign that said *Ladies*, and asked if I'd mind waiting a minute for them. I mean, she just went ahead and *assumed* that since she had to go to the can, Jane did too. I don't know how anybody can assume a thing like that, but dames are always doing it. If one goes to the toilet the other is sure to tag along. Sometimes I wonder what the hell they do in there.

This time I had plenty of reason. The one minute stretched into fifteen and they still hadn't come out. I was getting frantic. People were going back and forth, and it must have looked awful to see some young guy standing in front of the

women's rest room. They probably thought I was a peeping Tom. But I was afraid if I walked away they'd come out and I'd miss them.

I was upset because I thought maybe Toby had noticed that Jane liked me and was pumping her about it. I guess I had a guilty conscience. God, I was biting my nails and everything else. And every minute longer made it worse. At last some secretary or something walked past me and went in, and a couple of seconds later Jane and Toby came out.

I looked at them, but they didn't say a single word about a girdle busting or something delaying them, so I figured maybe they didn't *know* how long it had been. They were talking, no doubt. Boy, it must have been pretty exciting chatter! What bothered me was, I hate a secret when *I'm* the one who isn't in on it. It always drives me about fruity. But they didn't say a thing, and we just walked along.

We moved out through the main gate, and started in the direction of the first busy street, which was a half a block up, and finally Toby made some comment to the effect that there weren't any other worthwhile auditions today. Then she wondered how old "Mrs. Melford" was, and Jane said:

"Ma, you absolutely promised you'd visit her while we were in California."

"Yes, I know."

They explained to me that Mary Melford was a very dear friend of Toby's who lived quite a ways out of town.

"She isn't well. Next year she may not be alive," Toby said. "Poor dear!"

Jane suggested she grab a Greyhound bus and run up and visit her, and Toby sighed about the expense, but Jane said it was worth it. They argued all the way to the corner, but the moment we got there a local bus pulled to the curb and Toby made up her mind in a hell of a hurry. She ran for the bus, calling that if it was humanly possible she'd be back sometime late tonight.

I stood there with Jane, feeling a little numb. Jane was all emotional that her mother had really decided to go. She looked after the disappearing bus and started a line of bull about Mrs. Melford and how kind she was.

"Where does she live—in El Centro?"

Jane stared at me. "Why, Eddiel!"

"Isn't two auditions right in a row a little strenuous?"

"Two auditions?"

"The one you and Toby just put on for me!"

"You think we're lying?"

"Yeah. How'd you ever guess?"

"Why would Toby be going to *El Centro*?" Then she sud-

denly looked shocked. "Oh, wow! You mean you think—" She began to laugh. "What a suspicious little mind! When you grow up you ought to be a detective."

"What do you mean, when I grow up?"

Her face was dark and angry. "What do *you* mean accusing my mother of—I don't even know what it is you *are* accusing her of! In the first place, Mrs. Melford doesn't live anywhere near El Centro. It's the other direction. Carmel."

"Yeah—and I suppose there really *is* a Mrs. Melford. I'm *sure* she's a dear old friend of yours!"

She slapped me.

"Look, Jane, don't start that crap again, I'm warning you!"

She had tears in her eyes. "We don't even know the *names* of the people who are going to appear on Man and Wife. And even if we did, what could my mother do about it—talk them out of appearing?"

"What was the big discussion in the little girls' room?"

"Must I tell you *everything*? Mother had an accident. That's why she was in a hurry to catch the bus. She has to get to a drug store."

"I thought she was going to the depot?"

"Later."

I felt a little stupid. I knew what she was talking about. You learn those things at school, in the seventh grade, to be exact. But I still thought it was damned funny Toby was suddenly leaving town. The way *she* squeezed a nickel, I just couldn't visualize her liking some old bag well enough to go all the way up to Carmel to see her. Jane practically read my mind.

"We're impulsive, both Ma and me. Always have been."

I figured old Jane was a little *too* good with the answers. "Some coincidence—getting impulsive just after she finds out they live in El Centro. And *you* practically ordered her to go. I've never seen anybody so anxious to have somebody else take a trip!"

Jane stamped her foot. "Eddie, what do you think—Ma's going up to El Centro and knock them on the heads? Is *that* what you think? Yes, *I* was anxious for her to go to *Carmel*. Because I wanted to be alone with you today. Is that a crime? I talked her into it so I could be alone with you!"

I was dead right then! But I couldn't afford to show it. I was in too bad a light. What I had to do was pretend as if I hadn't heard her and keep pressing my point.

"Okay, Jane," what it *sounded* like was that I didn't believe a damn thing she'd said, "so if Toby's *really* headed for Carmel you won't mind coming down to the depot with me, will

you? We haven't anything else to do, so we can see her off on a bus that says *Carmel* on the front of it." I was gaining ground again. She looked disgusted, as if I was some overgrown Mongolian idiot. She didn't answer, just kept looking at me. "Coming with me?" I asked. I was plenty casual about it.

"No, *you* go. You check up on it. Then catch some other bus and keep *on* going. As far as your money'll take you!"

Boy, I hadn't expected anything like *that*. I guess I'd pushed her too far. I suppose I should have broken down and apologized, but I didn't. I was too shocked. And now to *really* cut my water off, she turned and walked away. I stood there like a dope, watching. That old gray skirt really fit her good. She was quite a trim little doll. But I was getting frustrated losing every damn argument to her! The trouble was, I always gave in too easy. It was just about time I asserted myself. If I let her keep going, I wasn't gambling too much because, after all, I knew where she lived. She wouldn't *vanish*. And either I was a man or I wasn't. A bus pulled over to the curb. I was the only person waiting there and when the door opened I climbed in.

I watched out the window as we sailed right by her, and I saw her looking. She didn't appear to be any too cool about it, either. But by the time we were a block ahead of her I felt awful. I put my money in the coin box, but I wanted to get out and run back. I didn't, though, I just walked over and sat down in one of the seats. Now I felt powerful as hell. She wasn't going to play around with me, boy. The bus stopped at the next corner, and the doors folded back. I looked over, sort of tempted. But I waited too long and they closed once more, and we started up.

I stumbled to my feet and rang the bell. What scares me is, I wasn't thinking or anything, I just did it. The bus only picks up and unloads at certain corners, and it kept right on going. I got in a panic about it, and rang the bell a couple of more times. But the driver didn't pull over until we reached the regular bus stop. I leaped out, and started sprinting back.

I ran fast for the first block, and slowed to a dog trot in the second. Then I saw her from a distance. She was in the third block up, half running. She didn't see me, and I started *walking*, keeping my eyes on her. When I got closer I noticed she was crying. Then she spotted me, and she kept *right on* running—straight into my arms, and she stayed there, all out of breath, and still crying to beat hell. She was really miserable. When she was able to talk, she said:

"I'm such a fool! I didn't think you'd let me do it!"

She was trembling something fierce. I could feel her arm

twitching. It took about five minutes for both of us to get our breaths, then I helped her wipe away the tears. I wasn't going to nag her about that El Centro deal any more. God, I really *am* too suspicious! Always doubting everybody. If I'd stopped to think, they must have known about a million people they hadn't told me about yet, friends and all, and I was getting so conceited I thought I was their whole damned world or something!

"I was sort of mad," Jane said. "Honey, will you forgive me?"

"Yeah. I just slightly think I will."

"I was rushing to the depot to find you."

"Why don't we go to the movies this afternoon?"

"I'd love to, Eddie."

The thing is, now she was a girl, a real girl, and there wasn't any more crap about it. Walking back to the main part of Hollywood, we wasted time looking in store windows and all, and didn't talk about anything in particular, just the stuff we saw on display, like furniture. We had quite a discussion about that. She went for modern, and I was more inclined to early American, which is what we have in the house back in Gary, or at least we *did*, before a certain person started moving in all these freak mahogany odds and ends and spoiled the design. She was fairly broad-minded about it. She said *she'd* go for early American if that was what I liked. The way she said it I almost felt like crying or something. She was trying to be so damned sweet.

We got into this movie about one-thirty, and sat side by side in the dark. I hadn't seen a picture in quite a while, and I was watching it fairly closely, when she slipped her hand into mine; after that I couldn't concentrate so well on the actors. All I could think of was her sitting there, and finally I looked over, and she was gazing at me. That's pretty startling, when you turn in the dark and see someone looking at you. I kissed her. It was a double feature but I never did find out what the second film was about. We must have kissed a hundred times. That can really make you *weak*. Because it isn't just the kissing, it's all these different sensations you get, like when she kissed me on the neck, and I kissed *her* on the ear, and all that. I didn't horse around, if you know what I mean, but it was bad enough the way it was.

We got out at a quarter of six and for a while, in the bright summer daylight, it seemed unreal, as if we hadn't been close at all. We were both too embarrassed to talk about it, and we even went out of our way to discuss other topics, like how hot it was, the smog, and baseball, or whatever came to our minds. When it's obvious you're crazy over one

another there's no need to mention it. In fact, it's a lot better if you don't. About the only people who talk about it when they're in love are squares.

We walked up to that place on Gower where we'd had breakfast, and sat at the counter this time. I ordered a hamburger steak and fried potatoes and she said she'd have that too. Now that we felt pretty secure with one another we both ate like pigs. I guess the only time love makes you lose your appetite is when you're half nuts with suspense.

After we left there, we walked over to Music City. I picked out a few real groovy records and we went into one of the glass-enclosed booths and played them. Some of it was this mad Louis Armstrong stuff and she dug it pretty good. Of course, I explained certain passages that were particularly gone, and told her why, and who was playing the instrument every time there was a solo. She wasn't any too hep on jive but she rode with it fine. Then I put aside old Satchmo and located a collector's item, a twelve-inch, seventy-eight-speed disc of Bunny Berigan's "I Can't Get Started With You," and she thought it was the greatest.

By the time we returned the records to the counter and said we didn't want them, it was dark outside, and all the street and store lights were on. I walked across Sunset with her to the drug store and goofed around doing nothing for at least a half an hour while she pulled movie magazines from the rack and read them. As soon as she finished with one she'd put it back real neatly, then take another. The store was crowded with people going in and out, and nobody paid any attention to either one of us.

We eventually started for home, going up Sunset, but there was a wild flute playing with a combo inside a little night club, and we stood out on the sidewalk listening to it for around twenty minutes. Man, that cat in there was really flying!

Then we were walking again. We turned down a side street, getting closer to the house. It was somewhere between nine-thirty and ten o'clock, time to call it a day, and we were both very quiet, wondering what it was going to be like once we got inside. I was thinking about it to beat hell, and I knew damned well she was too, or else she'd be talking. I guess we were nervous, and when you're like that you try to act as casual as possible.

We reached the house, and went in, and I followed her down the hall to her room, and she still didn't say anything, then at the door she turned, and looked at me. I figured this was it, so I kissed her again, for good night. But the kiss lasted quite a long time, with old Jane standing right up close

to me, and when we broke out of it she unlocked the door, and I followed her in and she turned on the lights.

I closed the door, and we kissed again right there. Then she gently pushed away and walked over to a mirror with her back to me, and friggled around with a hair brush or something that was on the vanity.

"Eddie . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I feel . . . strange."

"Me, too."

"No, I mean . . . about the program."

"So far, our chances of getting on it are pretty remote."

"No." She turned and looked at me. "I have an odd feeling that we *are* going to make it, and—well, you'll think I'm awful to ask you this—do you really care for me, or is it just the kisses and—do you think we're too young to *really* get married?"

I was in love right then. "Hell, no."

"When I first talked to you that day in the drug store. You know, at the counter? Well, I admit I had this show in the back of my mind. Among others. Let's be honest, I was looking you over as somebody I could possibly talk into going on it for the prizes. I mean, the idea didn't exactly originate with Caroline North. It was in horrible taste for her to even bring it up. Because every pro wants to get on Man and Wife. We've all thought about it. But now that we're really close to it, it seems different. Maybe you won't believe me, but I'm not even thinking about the prizes any more."

I stepped toward her, and she moved into my arms, and I held her so tightly it probably almost broke her back. Then she was looking at me, and her eyes were wet.

"You're not mad at me for—"

"No. With our share of the prizes we'll set up house-keeping."

Jane shivered. "Don't even talk about it. I get so excited I can't stand it. Let's not talk about it any more. Except the trip to Honolulu. Let's talk about that. A bride on her honeymoon. But don't mention anything to Toby. If she thought I even wanted to go to the Hawaiian Islands with you she'd lose her mind. What's left of it."

"Calm down, Jane," I said. "We may not get on the program for a long time yet . . . if we ever do."

"Eddie, we just have to!"

"Yeah . . ."

"Hold me!"

I kissed her neck, and her hair, then I picked her up and

carried her over to one of the beds and put her down. She stayed there, and I walked over to turn off the lights. I had the shakes all over the place.

"Eddie . . . honey . . . don't scare me. Please."

"No, it'll be all right"

"You *are* scaring me."

"I won't do anything."

"I haven't had any—experience. You know? I've never even had a steady boy friend."

"Stop worrying."

"All right," she said, "I'll trust you. But if you do anything to break that trust—"

I flicked the switch, then groped my way back to her in the dark, and lay down beside her, and we fooled around quite a bit, but she made me keep promising every minute or so that I wouldn't do anything, so I didn't, but boy, we really horsed around for about two hours, and my technique was improving like mad; then we dozed off, but she woke me later and told me I'd better go downstairs because Toby was sure to come home sometime tonight, and if she found us here everything would be ruined.

I was sort of glad to get down to the basement, because I figured I'd be able to think everything out very clearly; but when I hit the bed, all I could think about was her on the floor above me, laying there in *her* bed, and I missed her so damned much I could hardly go to sleep. I finally grabbed the pillow and went to sleep with my arms around *it*.

22

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I don't know why I woke up so early except that I had a terrifically strange feeling; it was as if somebody had nudged me. For a minute, I was scared as hell. I thought maybe I'd heard a prowler. But the light was burning, and there wasn't a soul down here. Then I remembered I was in love! I mean, for once in my life it was the real thing;

and I figured that was what probably awakened me. I was so frigging happy I wanted a lot of extra time to think about it, and sort of revel in it. There aren't so damned many times in your life when you can be this happy, so the least you can do is be awake enough to appreciate it.

The funny thing is, whenever I go to bed with something tremendous on my mind, I *always* wake up like this, about three hours before I'm supposed to. When I was a kid, I used to do it every Christmas. I guess that was because on Christmas Eve, Ma and my old man would plant it firmly in my head that Santa Claus wouldn't come until he knew I was asleep. Then they'd tuck me in and warn me not to leap out of bed in the morning and go tearing madly through the house to see what was under the tree. I wasn't to budge until they were both up and had at least one cup of coffee. I guess they wanted to be there when I got my first glimpse of the presents, and the reason for the coffee was to be sure they were fully awake. So after making me promise I'd stay in my room, they'd tiptoe out, and there I'd be in the dark, listening for sounds through the house, particularly noises on the roof, such as reindeer steps. I used to stay awake for hours because, naturally, I never heard anything; so you'd figure being up so late I'd sleep a little longer. But I never did. I'd wake up at five A.M. or something, and then I'd have to sit on my bed, waiting for *them* to get up. There were times when it drove me almost batty. Once in a while I'd sneak out to the edge of the hall and peek at the tree from a distance, and if there was a baseball bat, or an electric train, or something big like that, I could see it. But then I'd always rush back to my room and wait for them. In fact, I got so I sort of enjoyed having them watch me discover the presents, and even after I quit believing in Santa Claus it was always the same; I wouldn't open any gifts until Ma was there. The one Christmas I remember the most clearly was four months after my father died. I woke up early that morning, too. It wasn't quite daylight, and it had snowed during the night and looked real white and peaceful outside; our old apple tree, black and barren, was coated with a tinsel of ice. Mike slept in my room at that time, and when I looked over at his crib I saw that he was gone. He was about two and a half and used to wear one of those wool teddy-bear pajama deals. He knew just enough about Christmas to understand that there would be a lot of shiny new toys under the tree this morning. But Ma wouldn't be up for two or three hours, and if Mike saw his presents before she was there she'd about die; I mean, she was so sad and all, anyway, about my father. So I jumped up and padded down the hall, and caught him just

as he was halfway across the living room, headed for the tree. It was a big tree, about twelve feet, all lighted up, and dripping with silver. We always had big trees. Well, old Mike didn't care too much for the idea of me grabbing him. He started to scream, and I was going mad for fear Ma would hear, and I lifted him and started rocking him in my arms, singing Rock-a-Bye-Baby, which was pretty hard for me to do because I was just a little kid then myself, but he kept on crying, and then I was crying, too, because I was so sore at him, and by now I was rocking him like crazy, and then Ma showed up at the head of the hall, with her robe on, and I tried to tell her that I couldn't help it being out here, that I'd gone chasing after Mike. But I was crying so much I couldn't make the words come out right, and she just rushed up, and I put Mike down, and she kneeled and held both of us close to her, and Mike stopped crying right away. That was the only time we ever got to see our presents before daylight. Ma sat on the floor, her legs folded under her, watching us, and what I remember about it is that I wasn't really too interested in my things, because I was thinking about her being so sad, probably missing my old man like crazy; but when she noticed how I was acting she thought I didn't like what she'd gotten me. She assumed that's why I wasn't jumping around and yipping like I usually did, and of course her thinking that just made it a lot worse. I guess there are some days in your life that you never forget.

The thing about waking up today was that I couldn't see whether it was dark outside or not, so I wasn't really sure what time it was. I figured it was probably awfully early. So I just stayed there on the bed, and after a while I crossed my legs in front of me like an Indian and started having a council with myself. That was another crazy habit I'd picked up as a kid. Whenever I wanted to be absolutely alone to think something over I'd sit that way, legs crossed, arms folded on my chest, like I was Big Chief Pontiac or somebody, full of great, silent wisdom.

I didn't really think I was Chief Pontiac, though, because in those days I was somebody else, and if you really want to know, I'll tell you, but don't laugh, because I was pretty young, and it didn't seem funny at the time. I was X9, secret agent. A spy. Not that I spied on anybody. It was just that X9 was a very respected person who had a lot on the ball, which included some quite lofty ideals. One of the things X9 knew was the ancient rites of Indians, which is why he sat like one whenever he went into council with himself.

X9 not only had all these fine principles he was supposed to keep, he also made a lot of corny vows about going to the

rescue of other guys who might need help and all like that. The best part of it is nobody ever knew what X9 stood for except me. Not even Ma. I used to write it on everything I owned. One summer I carved X9 in the bark of the apple tree, and that fall I painted it on the garage door, but I wouldn't explain what it meant. It was the only real secret I ever had.

Anyway, I sat on the bed, like X9 used to sit, trying to calmly think everything over, when I suddenly realized that for about five minutes now I'd been hearing these faint, far-away voices. I'd been thinking so damned hard it hadn't penetrated. But now it began to disturb me, and I shut my mind off so I could listen without any distractions. It took me another good half a minute to recognize who the voices belonged to. Jane and Toby!

Man, I can be an idiot without even trying! *That* was why I had awakened so early! It had been in my subconscious that Toby would be arriving back from her Greyhound bus trip a little before dawn. Old demon suspicion must have lingered with me. Because I went to sleep remembering Toby'd get back at this hour, and that I wouldn't mind overhearing the truth of where she really went. Now I just sat there, and my hands got as cold as ice. I wasn't so sure I *wanted* to know the truth. The smartest thing I could do was plug my ears and go along with the parade. What I didn't know couldn't hurt me; and I'd have a heap of prizes.

I debated about two seconds flat, then I couldn't stand it. I got up and crossed to the furnace, and opened the little iron door. The whole house was quiet, and their voices were real clear.

"But letting him kiss you and paw you—" That was Toby.

"But, Ma, I *had* to; you don't know him!"

"He *said* he'd go through it for the prizes."

"Yes, he *said* he would; but he wouldn't. Unless he believed it was a serious marriage, he'd chicken out. He'd get all conscience-stricken. If he didn't actually *refuse* to go on; he'd give it away by being nervous. He's the dreamy type. I know. I spent all day with him."

"Oh, I think Eddie's mature enough to—"

"No, he's *not*! He's not like us. He isn't a real pro, and he never will be. What about the scene he made at the Lantern Cafeteria because he didn't have enough money to pay the bill?"

"Yes, he's sensitive . . ."

"And another thing, Ma, I *don't* intend to miss out on that trip to Honolulu . . ."

I stood there, petrified, listening. Jane was talking as

though we'd already been picked to go on the program. Toby began storming, saying she would not permit Jane to make the Honolulu trip. But Jane dominated her.

"I'll make Eddie stay at the YMCA or somewhere. I can handle him. He'll do what I tell him. But to *waste* a ticket, which we can't cash or anything—well, I'm not going to do it!"

"Oh, yes you are!"

"All right, then," Jane was saying, "we'll call the whole thing off, lose all those prizes . . . everything, if that's the way you want it."

"Jane, you've become unreasonable!"

"That's because I'm tired of doing everything the way *you* want it; I'm not going to any more. Try and make me and see what happens! I'll tell about some of the tricks you've pulled to get on TV, and how we've been living all this time . . . in filth, with hardly enough food to eat . . ."

"You'd blackmail your own mother?"

"It's not blackmail! The station will be calling us by nine o'clock . . . and after that we'll just be two days away from the biggest jackpot of our lives, and this time it's *my* show! *I'm* running it. Who figured out how to bump this week's couple off the air?"

Toby sounded like she was crying. "You did."

"What'd you say in the telegram?" Jane asked.

"I sent two. One with his name signed to it, and the other with hers. I just said they'd decided not to get married, but I worded them differently."

"Did you have any trouble finding out their names?"

"No," Toby was saying, "as you suggested, I contacted the newspaper, and they had the advance publicity about the home-town couple who were to appear on *Man and Wife* this week. After that I just went over to the Western Union office there in El Centro. If the clerk asked any questions I was going to say I was a friend of the couple and that they'd just had a quarrel and had asked me to wire the TV program."

"What about the other telegrams? The ones going to *them*?"

"I took care of those right here in Hollywood before I left."

"Did you sign Mr. Carter's name?" Jane asked.

"No, I just said their appearance had been temporarily postponed."

"I asked whose name you signed?"

"Oh—'Man and Wife TV Show'—wasn't that all right?"

"I guess so," Jane said.

I shut the furnace door. I didn't want to, but I was sick as hell. I was sick for about ten minutes. Finally I went back to the bed and sat down. I was trembling. I wanted to rush

upstairs and have it out with them; but right now I just couldn't do it. I didn't even know what I'd say. I was going to have to think about it. Man, what a snow job that Jane had given me! And I'd eaten it up! How ignorant can you be? God, what a little bitch!

There's a big different between suspecting something and finding out that it's true. You don't know it, but you're always about nine-tenths sure your suspicion is only in your own warped mind. Now I was so shocked that I couldn't move. I just sat there, like a lump of manure.

I suppose what stopped me from running up to their room was that that would end everything, and I wasn't so sure I wanted it to end. Maybe I could reform Jane, or eventually make her fall in love with me so that the marriage *would* be real. I mean, Jane was strictly Toby's own hand-wrought production, and if anybody ever tried to pound sense into her, she might change; see things differently. It was just a wild hope; I was clutching at straws. But when you're in love with somebody you don't just automatically stop loving the moment you discover it isn't quite mutual. In fact, you want her all the more. I was in a big goddamn panic!

Then I began considering the El Centro deal. Jesus, that was *raw*! Knocking a couple of innocent people out of what was probably the greatest thing that would ever happen to them. Phony telegrams going both ways. If the TV station ever found out that Toby had done it, she'd probably go to jail. For fraud or something. Obtaining a couple of thousand dollars' worth of prizes under false pretenses. Boy, she wasn't only a phony, she was a cheap-assed, underhanded criminal.

Now I knew what I was going to do. I'd turn her in! I'd wait up in the hall for that phone to ring, and when it did, I'd tell Miss Lyons, or Gabriel Carter, whichever one called, the whole lousy story; then I'd watch the cops come after Toby. I know for a fact that signing somebody else's name to a telegram is against the law because I read about a guy back in Gary getting locked up for doing the very same thing.

I got to my feet, and began walking around the basement, planning it out. Of course, I'd probably get Jane in Dutch; the juvies would want to know all about her . . . how she and Toby made their living. But maybe they'd straighten her out. She wouldn't see it that way, but I might possibly be doing her a favor. And she'd be out from under Toby's influence for a while; at least until Toby served her sentence. God, I was beginning to feel fiendish. Naturally, Jane would never speak to me again. I'd be colder than Kelcey's with her; but from the conversation I'd just overheard I wasn't in

very solid anyway. And this was a fate old Toby richly deserved.

Then I thought about the prizes for a minute—practically a freight car full. I could use a windfall; it'd mean I could knock around until I got a halfway decent job. And if I *did* stand still for all this conniving, I wouldn't lose Jane so quickly. What the hell was I, a puritan, who couldn't stand the sight of a little blood? What was I being so squeamish about? If I made up my mind to it, I could be as tough and as cold-blooded as Toby and Jane put together; in time, I'd even top them. I mean, if things got slow I could buy a gun and stick somebody up. If you're going in for shady deals, what's the difference what kind it is? I began to feel my upper lip jiggling up and down like Humphrey Bogart's. I stuck out my finger like I was holding a gun on some guy.

Then I came out of it. The thing is, I was going batty! In a minute I'd start visualizing myself dragging Jane around by the hair, and browbeating Toby. I don't know how I conjure up all this crap, because now I was as confused as a bastard. I didn't know whether I should try and go along with the phony setup for getting on the program or not. It was still awfully early, so I decided I'd go to the bathroom and think about it sitting in the tub.

And that's what I did. I sat in the tub half full of water for one solid hour, my arms folded over my chest, pondering the whole problem; but I was getting more depressed all the time. And *I* was the boy who'd wanted a sad love affair in his past! What made *this* one sad was that it wasn't even an affair. It takes two to tango, and I'd been dancing around all by myself. Jane's sugary lies, and the kisses she'd wrapped them in! *She* hadn't felt anything; she probably didn't even particularly *like* me. That was the worst part. I was just some moron she'd picked up to promote herself a lot of prizes. It was pretty shattering to my ego, to say the least; and by the time I climbed out of the tub I had the blues so damn bad I could hardly stand it. I felt plain rotten; worm-eaten, useless to the human race. A big pile of nothing!

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The telephone in the hall rang at a quarter of eight, and I grabbed it off the receiver. Jane and Toby's room was so far back I figured it'd have to ring for at least a minute before they'd hear it, but I glanced back anyway, to see if one of them was coming. They weren't; the hall was empty.

"Hello?"

It was Carter's secretary, all right; she asked for Jane, and I said I'd just come over to take her out to breakfast but that she was gone for a walk, and I was waiting for her.

"Is this Eddie Shelton?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, good morning! This is Miss Lyons of the Man and Wife show. The message I have is for the two of you. Very good news, I think. I have telegrams from the couple in El Centro; they're cancelling out. So that means you and Jane will be going on in their place."

"Miss Lyons—"

"Now there's a hundred things to be done," she went on, "we can't lose a moment. We need fittings for the wedding dress, and your cutaway; we have to go to City Hall for the marriage license; then there's interviews and rehearsals; and if you want to leave for your honeymoon in Honolulu right after the ceremony, I'll have to arrange for your booking by noon today . . ."

I felt lousy, just *dead*; and she went on and on, about the prizes now, a complete wardrobe for each of us, and how we'd have to go to a department store this afternoon to select what we wanted. By the time she ran down I was so weak I didn't know whether I could talk or not, and my head was swimming with visions of palm trees, and Waikiki Beach; and how great I'd probably look in those new clothes, dancing with Jane in the dining room of the Royal Hawaiian

Hotel. Debonair, boy; that'd be me. Cosmopolitan. Man of the world! I'd be nuts to turn my back on all that.

"Eddie . . . Eddie, what's the matter?"

My end of the line had been absolutely silent.

Miss Lyons laughed. "I didn't mean to overwhelm you. Is that it? Eddie, are you there?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, how soon can you and Jane be here?"

"About those telegrams . . ."

"What?"

Now I didn't even know what I was doing. I was just blurt-ing it out: "They're phonies. Besides that, there was a phony one sent to *them* from *here* with the program's name signed to it—saying their appearance was postponed."

This time her end of the line was silent.

"Miss Lyons?" I thought maybe she'd fainted.

"Are you *sure* about that, Eddie?" She was back on, and her voice had changed completely; it was icy.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure." I felt as if a big weight was off my chest.

"Why were these telegrams sent?"

"It's like this, Miss Lyons, pros will do about anything to win a jackpot."

"Who sent the messages?"

I took a deep breath. This is where Toby was going to get it right in her teeth.

"I did," I said. God, I was so surprised I said it, I even looked at the receiver to make sure it hadn't come out of there.

"Did you know that falsifying the name of either an individual or a corporation on a telegram is a criminal offense?" She was hard as nails now. "And when it's done for the purpose of fraud, the police can—"

I cut in: "Yeah, Miss Lyons, I know. But the first thing those cops are going to have to do is catch me." I was bawling like a son-of-a-bitch, and I hung up. I started down the hall to Jane and Toby's room, and reached it just as the door opened, and Jane looked out. She was fully dressed.

"I *thought* I heard someone talking out here." Now she saw my face, and she looked startled, scared. I shoved her back into the room. "Eddie, what is it? What's wrong?" Toby was asleep, all curled up, but she began to stir. I walked over to the black porcelain sink and filled a glass with water, then crossed back and threw it in Toby's face. She sat up, sputtering, but still half asleep, and Jane was screaming at me now: "What are you doing?"

"I dropped around to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" Jane echoed. "You mean you're *running out on us?*"

Toby clutched at her blue satin robe, and wrapped it over her shoulders so that her breasts wouldn't be visible through the filmy gown she was wearing; she had a cross look, and was studying me.

"You can't do it!" Jane said.

I looked at her. "Why not? I'm just beating *you* to the punch."

"Darling," Toby said, "for heaven's sake calm down and tell us what's troubling you."

"All right," I said, "what's troubling me is that I'm fed up." I was going to tell her a lot more, but she saw what was coming and began to flinch; she didn't want me to go on. Jane was watching me, puzzled; she was waiting for the phone in the hall to ring and if I wasn't in the mood to get married, what could she tell Miss Lyons? That was all Jane was thinking about.

"Miss Lyons phoned and I told her the truth."

"What?" Jane said. She turned pale; and Toby jumped from the bed.

"What, darling, what did you say?"

I told them that I'd overheard the whole deal through the vent in the furnace. Jane was horrified, not that I'd eavesdropped, but that I'd reacted so violently.

"What was so *wrong* with what we did? Did you want us to wait *months* on the chance some *regular* couple might drop dead?"

"It was the *way* you did it. Lying to me. Making love."

"See, Ma," Jane said. "I told you. He's a square. A hick from Indiana. He doesn't understand anything. A little boy wearing cowboy boots. I *told* you we didn't dare trust him. I told you he was chicken!"

"Big girl," I said, and I looked at Toby. "You like the way you raised her? Lying, scheming all the time; practically on the verge of turning whore!"

"Don't you say a word about my daughter!"

"Why don't you wake up, Tobe, open those big purple eyes of yours. She's sick of you . . . sick of holding your hand, baby-sitting with you; you heard her say she was going to Honolulu. Think she'd ever come back! To *you*? Once you'd signed the legal release to allow her to get married?"

"Of course she would! She's my—"

"No, she wants to be a big, big actress, and you're in her way; you embarrass her on auditions."

"Eddie," Jane said, "shut up!"

"It's true. You've told her that in front of me. Why don't

you admit you want to get away from her? And that's where *I* came in. You started priming me from the first day. Man and Wife show. Honolulu. Then you'd blow *me* off and get a job for yourself in the Islands."

Jane began crying, and it was like a confession that I was right. She crumpled on the bed, sobbing. But she wasn't crying because she'd been exposed, or felt sorry, or out of pity for Toby or myself. She was just heartbroken that the plan hadn't worked. She'd been so close to it; it was almost in the palm of her hand, and at the last minute it'd been taken away. I'd robbed her. Toby went over and tried to comfort her, and suddenly Jane looked up, wiping away tears. She pushed Toby to one side, and climbed to her feet.

"You may be responsible for getting my mother sent to jail. Do you know that?"

She ran at me, and started hitting me in the face. Toby tried to pull her away, and couldn't, and I had to grab her wrists while she kept struggling, and yelling at me. It was a terrible scene. I couldn't get a word in edgeways. She was bawling again, and blasting away about what a rat I was; I'd spoiled what could have been paradise. I didn't appreciate all she and Toby had done. She was incoherent, in a real tantrum, and the funny part of it is, I began to feel sorry for her. I wasn't mad any more about anything. She was sixteen, smart as they come, but with Toby for a mother she'd never learned one decent thing; she was groping, doing the best she could. I wanted to hold her, and protect her; but at the same time I had a feeling I just wanted to back away and never see her again.

"Jane, if you really want to get married—"

"Really want to get married?" She was still in hysterics. "To *you*? Oh, wow! How rich! What a perfect comic! You ought to be in TV!" She sobbed, and turned away. "Ma, he's right—I'm in a trap!" She faced Toby. "I'm in a trap with you. A chamber of horrors. I can't stand it any more. Why don't you get married? Why don't you leave me alone? Get some other interest. Stop slobbering over me. Start admitting that you're out of your teens. You're not old, but *you're* not in your teens any more . . ."

"*Don't* you call me old," Toby was back at it. That was the only word she heard. *Old*. That was all that penetrated. Now *she* was crying. It was a stupid madhouse. As Toby approached her, Jane began to shriek:

"Ma, you're *impossible*! You don't *listen*. You're like an animal. You're selfish."

"Don't you talk to me that way, Jane—"

I backed up to the door, and they stopped wrangling, and looked over at me, almost as if some instinct had told them to.

"Anyway, Jane, it was nice meeting you; and Toby won't be going to jail. I took the rap for the phony telegrams."

Jane was very still for a moment. "You did?"

"Yeah."

"Why? It doesn't make sense."

I shrugged. "I'm a hick."

"Ma," Jane said. "Ma, aren't you going to thank him?"

I'd ruined everything for them, but she wanted Toby to thank me. The hell of it is, she *did*. I guess she wasn't thinking; she was knocked out. Jane kept looking at me, her face all tear-streaked, and then she came up and gazed right into my eyes.

"I'm sorry I said those things, Eddie. I didn't mean them. Do you believe me?"

"If you say so."

"I haven't been very nice." She wasn't acting; I could tell. There was a terrific difference. She even looked her age, and took my hand, like she wanted to kiss it or something. I'm positive it was the first honest emotion she'd felt toward me. "You don't have to go away, do you? We'll forget all this. The whole incident." She turned. "Won't we, Ma?" She faced me again. "Please don't be too disgusted with us."

"Jane, don't *say* that!"

"But it's the way you feel. I can tell. And I don't blame you. But I'll be *different*. I'll be good." It about killed her to get that last part out, but she did it; she was forcing herself to be honest, and her real self was somebody who was secretly ashamed of her actions. "Will you stay?"

"You forget about the cops."

"Oh!" She *had* forgotten. Toby was looking on, twisting her fist in her mouth.

"I'm on the lam," I said, "starting right now. Miss Lyons was pretty indignant. She may have the police on their way here. So I'm afraid I can't linger any more."

"Where'll you go?"

"I don't know. I'll start hitching."

"A fugitive," Jane said, and broke into tears anew. Toby just trembled, and kept biting her fist.

I leaned over and kissed Jane on the cheek. Then I glanced around at all the different mirrors, and the clothesline stretched between them, and the zebra-striped john, and all, because I knew it was the last I'd see of it, or of Jane or Toby; and I somehow realized I'd never know what finally

happened to them, but from now on I'd probably watch television like mad, particularly the quiz programs, the ones that sometimes use pros.

I opened the door and slipped out, and neither of them said another word; they didn't try to stop me.

24

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I didn't have much dough left, but I took a bus to Pasadena, and hit the highway. Old Route 66. If you were driving along there the last part of August and saw this hitchhiker wearing boots, and a school sweater, that was me. I guess I had a pretty serious look on my face because I got one ride right after another, and made terrific time. I didn't actually figure out where I was going, but four and a half days later I found myself in Gary, Indiana. I wasn't too surprised, though. If I'd taken time to think about it, I probably would have known that was where I was headed.

I used my last dime to telephone Ma, and I guess Mike or somebody was watching for me from the window, because when I arrived on the sidewalk in front of the house the door opened and they all came outside. Mike was the first one to speak. "Hi," he said. Then Ma ran and grabbed me in her arms and began sobbing like anything; and Harry and his little son Harold stood watching, feeling sort of helpless. Harold was toting a football under his arm, and when Ma let him get a word in, he said: "I can catch a pass now. Want to try me?" If that was true, it was certainly an improvement, because Mike and I had tried to teach him for about a year and all he caught was—cold. After Harold spoke, *everybody* began talking, and laughing and all, and that was when Mike suddenly turned away and started walking toward the backyard, and I could tell by the way his shoulders shook that he was crying. Mike's a great kid, he really is.

I found out that the Man and Wife program showed in

Gary; it came through the second night I was home, and I turned it on, just for the hell of it. I watched the wedding couple very closely, imagining myself in the place of the groom, and Jane as the bride. It was sort of fascinating, but when it came to the moment where the organ struck up the wedding march, and the bride started down the aisle, I couldn't stand it any more, and I excused myself to the family and went off to my room.

I closed the door, then paced around a little, hitting my fist into the palm of my hand, sort of lost in thought, and going kind of crazy; and when I looked up Harry was standing there. He looked embarrassed and I glanced away, not to be mean, but I was slightly embarrassed myself. I figured he was going to make a speech or something. So far, he hadn't said much. But now it was coming.

"Eddie, I—I'd like to tell you something."

"Okay, Harry."

"It seems that I've had an almost fanatical attitude toward schooling. I always felt education was terribly important. I was raised that way, and well—" He looked right at me. "I've learned that I'm wrong. It's the individual who's important. If a boy is old enough, he should be let do what he wants. Your going away has taught me that. I can never tell you how much we missed you. I won't even try. I just want to say that if you dislike school, you don't have to go back. Nobody's going to make you do anything. I mean that sincerely." He smiled. "I've changed a little."

Boy, you could have bowled me over, and I'm not kidding! But when he turned to go out, I stopped him.

"You shouldn't have changed, Harry. No, sir! Because you were right. Any kid who gets education offered to him and leaves it to go out in the world is nuts."

He stared at me. "Is this Eddie talking?"

"Sure it is. I've figured out a couple of things myself. In fact, if you want to know, I even intend to go on to college. I won't ask *you* to lay out the dough. I'll work my way. But I want the full treatment."

He just stood there for a minute, and then he said: "I don't suppose you'd consider the University of Indiana? I mean, I don't want to influence you just because it happens to be *my* alma mater, but—"

"Harry, I *live* in Indiana, don't I? Naturally I'll go there."

"You *will*?" He was so excited it was pitiful. "If you want, I think I can get you into my fraternity!"

"Well," I said, "that's a whole year from now. I've got high school to finish. And by the way, I'll make up that

chemistry credit. I'll take on an extra period. Don't think I've gone soft. It's just that, well, you know—I've changed my views.

"Yeah," he said, "I know."

He left, nodding, a big smile on his face; he could hardly get out of there fast enough in order to run and tell Ma. Which was all right with me, because she was still pretty worried about what I had in mind for the future.

I walked over to my old beat-up desk and looked down at it, and I was in a much better mood, because the funny thing is, all that stuff I'd told Harry had just sort of come rattling out. I hadn't previously *thought* about it at all. I guess it'd been there in back of my head. Now that I'd gotten it off my chest I wouldn't be so damned nervous any more. At least I knew what I was going to *do*.

I began to think. School would be starting in a few days, and I'd be a senior this year, which of course is the greatest; nobody fools around with a senior; and I'd be seeing Anna Merryweather and everybody else. Another thing was, I'd probably be the first senior on the whole campus who already had his senior sweater. What I missed now was my wide belt; maybe if that fad was still on, I'd get another one.

I opened the drawer and took out my battered, loose-leaf notebook; it was one of those enduring ones I'd had ever since I was thirteen. I realized it looked old as hell, but it'd been with me so long that I felt a kind of sentimental attachment, as if it was my lucky piece. And now I noticed something I'd carved on the cover the day I got it. It was block lettering, filled in with ink scratches: X9.

I stood and looked at it for quite a while.

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