Her hand shot up, and as she looked around the room Holly Hatfield smiled to see that hers was the only arm raised. Then she caught sight of Roger, with head ducked low, in one of the desks near the back wall, and her smile became a smirk.

Mr Bertram, also looking around the room, said with some surprise: “Only one this year. Usually, my enriched class has several NHS’ers.”

“No,” said Holly, her dark hair dancing as she spun around to address the teacher. An arm was pointing toward the back of the room. “Rog Waller’s in it too.”

Everyone turned to look at Roger whose head was swaying back and forth. Smears of red had appeared on his forehead and cheeks.

“Roger?” asked Mr Bertram, stretching tall at his desk and tilting his head. “Are you?” His eyebrows were elevated.

“Yeah,” Roger mumbled.

The teacher looked down again at his sheet of announcements. “Well, the two of you have an NHS meeting this morning in the auditorium. Soon as I get done here.”

While he continued reading, Holly exchanged grins with several of her friends in nearby desks, occasionally glancing back to see Roger’s painfully crimson face, still bent low over his desk.

Finishing with the announcements, Mr Bertram nodded dismissal to the two students and they headed for the door.

“Thanks a lot, bigmouth,” Roger muttered while holding the door open.

Holly’s arms were crossed over her abdomen as she paced out into the hall, her purse swaying on its long shoulder strap in rhythm with the swirling of her pleated skirt. She preceded him down the empty corridor and made no reply until he had caught up to her. “It makes me sick,” she scolded over her shoulder. “National Honor Society isn’t something to be scorned! Like it doesn’t mean anything. Are you planning on getting so many honors in your life you can throw away even one of ’em?”

Roger made a deprecating laugh. “Snob club is what it is.”

“Shut up. You’re the snob!” She glanced around briefly, aware that their voices were echoing in the locker-lined corridor, then went on in a sarcastic whisper. “You think you’re too special to mix with us mere humans. Why didn’t you come to the banquet last year. Everyone thought you’n your folks were in a car wreck for godsakes!”

Roger was looking intently into her face as she spoke, at her mouth in particular. He touched a finger to his upper lip. “You’ve got a … thing. Something just flaked off it.”

“God!” cried Holly as she stopped and unslung her purse. Reaching into its depths she withdrew a gold enameled compact and snapped it open. “Shit,” she hissed, then began rummaging in her purse again, awkwardly, with only one free hand and a raised knee.
Roger offered to hold the compact, and both of her hands went into the purse. Soon she produced a small flesh colored bottle. Unscrewing its cap, she placed her forefinger over the top and shook it a few times, leaving a dab of its contents on her finger.

While she was doing this, Roger led her to the bottom of a nearby stairwell, where daylight was pouring through large windows on the landing above, and held the mirror at eye level — her eye level, an inch or two below his own. He gave his black, unruly hair a shake.

Holly, staring into the mirror, carefully patted the cosmetic over her blemish.

“Hot weekend, huh,” said Roger.

“Shut up.”

“Or is that one’a your hickeys left over from summer vacation.”

“God would you hold it still! And it’s not a hickey. It’s just a … skin infection, a cold sore.”

Roger pointed at the corner of her mouth. “There’s another one.”

“I know! Jeez!”

“Wha’d’a you’n Kirtland do. Paint each other with your tongues?”

“God!” She yanked the compact from his hands and gave him the make-up bottle to hold, then squatted down on the bottom step. Holding the compact on her knees, she sighed at her shadowed reflection in the mirror and continued daubing at her face.

Roger, too, sat down, close beside her. He took the cap from her and replaced it on the bottle. Patiently, he began reading its tiny label.

“R-rr!” Holly growled, patting her loafers on the hard floor. She reached into her purse for a tissue.

While she was applying a corner of it to her lips, Roger said, “If you’re so allergic why’n’cha just dump’im.”

Holly did not reply.

“Either that or make him wear a big rubber over his head.”

“God would you shut up!”

After several more exchanges of bottle, tissue, cap and mirror, she said, more calmly, “It’s not him. It’s me. I get’em from everyone, even my folks … ever since I was a kid. I hate it!”

“That why you’re trying to get into one of those fancy girl colleges … so there won’t be any guys around to zit up your face?”

Holly’s fist vibrated near her cheek as she yelled, “Would you shut the hell up! I mean it! I’m not even s’pose to be talking to you.”

“Why not.”

“You know why not!”

“‘Cuz’a Barb I suppose. Wha’d she tell ya. That I did some really mean thing to her. I didn’t. I dumped her! She’s the jerk!”

“Don’t even try to lie. She’s my best friend. I know what’s what.”

“No y’don’t! She’s prob’ly using you just the same as me. I bet she is!”

Holly turned her face side to side in the mirror, then, with a resigned smirk, snapped the compact closed and returned the other things to her purse. “We’re gonna be late,” she said, rising and hurrying down the hall.

“I just bet she is,” he repeated while trying to keep up.

“I know all about it, Roger. She was crying all over me last spring when — god I could just kick you! How can you treat people like that!”

“Wha’d she tell ya.”

“The truth!”

“Bull! She was just … practicing her dramatics — like she always did with me. She’s screwin’with you too!”

Holly stopped to thump her fist on his shoulder.

“Ow!” Roger slapped at her arm, missing. “Wha’d she tell ya!”

Holly was striding away.

“What!”
She halted again with knuckles on hips. “She saw you, doofus! Caught you red-handed with that … Donna Shrader! I mean, god, is that all the class you’ve got? Donna Shrader?”

Roger was shaking his head but before he could make an answer, Holly had skipped ahead of him, skirt billowing, to join several of her friends who were crossing the hallway in front of them. She continued in their company the rest of the way to the auditorium.

While turning a corner, Holly glanced back a moment and saw Roger many steps behind with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the floor.

Holly and her friends entered the dimly lit auditorium. Only one cluster of lights, high up on the ceiling, gave out an anemic glow.

“Subdued lighting,” murmured Linda in a sultry contralto. The three girls looked around at the shadowy corners of the cavernous room where bright red EXIT signs glared at no one.

Cheryl whispered: “Are we gonna have a meeting here … or buy pot!”

The girls laughed as they took seats with several others already occupying the rows near the stage. They glanced around at the thirty or so familiar faces. (It was the same NHS club from the previous year, minus the ones who had graduated.) Pushing down the seat cushions, they languidly reclined amid their early morning yawns.

Holly crossed her legs and slouched deep into the padding. With her eyes closed for a moment she mumbled, “Gimme a shove if I conk out, okay?”

Soon, a girl with coat and books in her arms hurried down the aisle and took up a position, unsteadily, in the space between the stage and the front row. Raking her blond hair to one side, she addressed the group of scattered heads. “Could we all …” (giggling) “could we all just … kinda get closer together. So we don’t have to yell?”

Holly and her friends did not move, but there was soft grumbling as others farther back changed seats. Looking idly around, Holly did not see Roger anywhere.

When silence returned, the blond girl, still with coat and books in her arms, continued, “I s’pose you all know me, Barb Taylor. You elected me secretary for this year’s NHS and so … I call this meeting to order, and all that.” She giggled again, reaching down for a fallen pen. “And I turn it over now to your president, Dale Chambers, to talk about this year’s … Career Day?” (She made high eyebrows at a large young man in the front row.) “And some other stuff. So … take it away Dale!”

The young man, straightening his glasses, arose and took the girl’s place in front of the stage.

As he began speaking, Barb clutched her burden of coat, purse, pen and yellow tablet and hurried over to Holly’s row, tiptoeing between several skirts and nylon-shimmering legs, then plopped down in the saved seat next to Holly, squeaking: “I don’t believe this. Twenty minutes ago I was still in bed!”

She dumped her coat and other things to the floor and ran fingers again through her lustrous hair. “I must look a mess!”

“I wondered why you weren’t on the bus,” said Holly.

Yawning, the girl replied, “… mom drove me. Haven’t even been to first hour yet. I don’t believe it,” she shook her head, “second week of school and already I’m in trouble.”

Cheryl, from three seats down, was whispering at her, “Barb … Barb! It’s okay. I told Donaldson you were busy down here this morning.”

“Oh thanks, Cher! I owe ya!”

A head suddenly appeared between Holly and Barb’s shoulders. It was Roger, leaning forward from the row behind. “Could you guys hold it down? People are trying to sleep.”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Barb hissed.

“Ignore him,” said Holly, “he’s been pestering me all morning.”

Roger pulled a pinch of Barb’s hair. “And what’s all this crap about Donna Shrader.”

“Oh! Just —!” She slapped his hand. “Shut up, okay? Dale’s trying to talk to us. Show a little respect. Jeez!”

Roger sat back in his seat and the audience was quiet for the rest of the president’s message. The vice-president and treasurer also gave reports and Barb was called back up, along with her tablet, to take down the names of volunteers to be escorts for the speakers during the Career Day presentations. Holly raised her hand for this, as did all her friends, but, glancing behind her, she observed Roger
slumped in his seat, no one on either side of him, reading a paperback copy of *The Canterbury Tales*. His hand was not raised.

Holly shook her head.

After the meeting, she accompanied her friends, Barb and Cheryl, on the return to their home-rooms. Far ahead of them was Roger, by himself, tapping knuckles on the locker doors as he walked, his book stuffed into a back pocket.

Barb scowled darkly at him. “It was months ago now, but I could still scream at him!”

“I know!” Holly sympathized. “And he doesn’t have the least remorse!”

All three of the girls had their arms crossed tightly in front of them, their long-strapped purses swaying in unison, like sabers.

Holly clicked her tongue. “And he made this really pathetic attempt’ta, y’know, deny what he did — blushing like crazy! — pretending he didn’t know anything about Shrader. Made me sick!”

Cheryl tipped her head toward the others. “What exactly did they do, him’n Donna.”

Holly threw attentive eyes toward Barb as well.

“Jeez …” Barb’s blond head shook vigorously. “I feel like puking whenever I think about it. And he’s just not worth it!”

Her friends nodded and were silent for a few steps.

“Yeah but … what …” Cheryl pursued.

“God!” Barb was crushing the overcoat in her arms. “They were in the back of his car, okay? That stupid … station wagon his folks have. It was too dark to see exactly what they were doing, but I saw a lotta skin!”

The girls stared, as if in awe, at the distant figure ahead of them.

At an intersecting hallway, the friends solemnly went their way while Holly continued alone down the quiet corridor, many steps behind Roger. Some of the classroom doors were opened and she glimpsed suddenly-turned faces regarding her as she passed by.

Roger soon arrived at the door of their home room and paused with his hand on the knob. He looked back at her, almost apologetically, but Holly (chin lifted) turned aside into a girls’ room and spent several moments examining her face in the big vanity mirror.

One day during the following week, Linda came up to Holly at her locker. “I am starved!” she wailed, leaning against the wall of gray locker doors. “I had exactly one piece of toast for breakfast!” She was flicking a purple lunch ticket with her fingernail.

Holly shook her head while placing books on her arm. “Hafta skip lunch today. I gotta make some stupid graphs for economics … forgot all about it last night.”

Her friend pouted a moment. “Can I bring ya something — if I don’t eat it all — you’ll be at the library?”

“Yeah could you? That’d be great!”

“Sure,” said Linda, pushing herself from the wall and hurrying after another acquaintance passing by in the crowded corridor.

Down the hall a short ways, Holly saw Roger kneeling at his own locker. He had extracted a brown lunch bag, but, oddly, seemed now to be replacing it.

Shaking her head, she closed the locker door and stepped quickly away.

Up on third floor, Holly was reaching into her purse as she crossed the quiet foyer in front of the library, then, shouldering the door open, held up a small card to the librarian. “Hi, Mrs Vance!” she whispered, cheerily.

The woman shook her white curls and made smiling eyes over her reading glasses. She raised a hand. “For goodness sakes, you don’t need to show your pass!”

“Thanks.”

The library was extremely quiet inside and nearly all the tables vacant. (It was the rule that only the students in the few ‘enriched’ classes were allowed to make use of the library during lunch period.)
Sighing, Holly selected a table at the far end of the room and got out paper, pencil, her economics text and a ruler.

After awhile there was a sharp rapping sound, like knuckles on a desktop. Looking up, she saw Roger coming toward her.

Her jaw stiffened, then the rapping was repeated.

Roger turned around to look toward the librarian who — no longer smiling — was beckoning to him with a harsh finger.

Holly watched as Roger paced back to the librarian’s desk, set his books down, and got out his wallet.

Soon, he was returning straight for Holly’s table. Without a word he sat down opposite her, slouched expansively in his chair, and began reading his Chaucer book; he was on the last few pages now.

As soon as Mrs Vance had disappeared into her office again, Holly leaned forward and whispered, “You don’t have to sit right there!”

His eyes stared at her a moment over the top of his book, then he said, “Thought you might like to know the truth about me and Barb, what really happened.”

“I know what happened! And I got tons’a work to do! So just split, okay?”

Ignoring her, Roger looked over his shoulder toward the librarian’s office, then leaned toward Holly, his book opened downward on the tabletop. “Last April?” he whispered, “After school one day? She gave me her books to hold while she went to the girls’ room.”

“I don’t want to hear this.” Holly was flipping through pages in a fat text.

“I looked in her notebook and know what I found?”

“I don’t care!”

“I found a neatly typed paper on Herman Melville; it had a great big A at the top.”

Head bent low, Holly was carefully aligning the ruler between two points.

He leaned closer to her. “It was word for word identical to the one I turned in.”

Holly scribed her line with the greatest unconcern.

“Only my teacher gave me an A-minus.”

He paused and Holly felt his breath in her hair. She looked up. “Are you through?”

“It’s the truth! And she’s probably doing the same thing to you: using you!”

“You’re so full’a crap! She gets straight A’s! I’m so sure she ever needs to cheat!”

“Maybe that’s how she gets her A’s.”

Holly sighed. “Would you please go away now. I’ve got work to do.”

“Not till you promise to talk to her about it. We’ll talk to her together. And just see how nervous she gets!”

“I’m not doing that, Roger!” She had failed to whisper this, and, immediately, Mrs Vance appeared at the office door.

Holly ducked her head and squeaked: “God, would you get out of here? You’re gonna get me in trouble!”

“Just ask her about it, okay? Or take a look in her notebook some time.”

Holly nodded her head and sighed. “Yeah I’ll be sure to do that.”

“Bet’cha anything you’ll find papers of your own there. I just bet!”

Another glance across the room showed the librarian standing at her cart of books, suspicious eyes peering directly at them over her Ben Franklin glasses.

Abruptly, Holly slapped together her materials and got up. Roger did the same and he followed her to the door. They both lowered their eyes in going past the librarian’s no-nonsense gaze.

Out in the foyer Holly smacked his arm with the ruler. “Would you just leave me alone! You’re the biggest … I!” She stomped away toward the stairs, Roger close behind.

“So, are ya?” he asked. (Holly was preceding him down the steps.) “Talk to her? You’d better … for your own good. She’s bad news, Hol, she really is. Or — ” He stopped suddenly, gazing down at her. “Or are the two of you in this together. Don’t tell me you’re dating Kirtland just to copy his papers.” He laughed. “That’ll do ya a lotta — ”
Holly charged back up the steps and smacked his thigh with the ruler as hard as she could. “Ow!” Startled, he grabbed her arm. “Stop it!” she cried. “Give it to me!” His books fell thuddingly down the steps as he tried to twist the ruler from her grasp. “Let go!” Her own books were tumbling as well. The crash of the falling volumes echoed in the empty stairwell.

While they were struggling, the sound of a woman’s heels tapped quickly in through the doorway of the second floor landing. “What’s going on here?” barked Miss Jackson, Holly’s eleventh grade history teacher, small but very stern, her hair pulled taught. “Let go of her!” Holly snapped her arm, and ruler, free of Roger’s grip and stooped to pick up her fallen books. “Are you all right, Holly?” the teacher asked, stepping closer. “Yes.”

“What’s your name. You. What’s your name.”

Roger was also kneeling on the stairs, retrieving his own books. “He’s Roger Waller,” said Holly, taking deep breaths. “He’s in one’a my classes.” “What was he doing. What’s going on here.” Holly sighed. “Nothing … we were just … we’re disagreeing about something.” “Did he hurt you.” Roger was on his feet. “It’s just between her’n — ”

“You be quiet!” Miss Jackson glared at him, then turned to Holly. “Did he hurt you.” “No, but he’s been pestering me. Ever since the beginning of the year.” They all stood facing one another on the landing, Roger rubbing his leg. Miss Jackson’s mouth became very small as her eyes glanced from one to the other. She pointed toward the other flight of steps. “Downstairs, both of you,” she ordered.

Roger was quick to obey, but Holly shook her head. “Jeez, it’s not that big a deal. He was just — ”

“We were just having an argument.”

They were marched directly to the administration office, where Mr Prockmeyer, tall and thin, was leaning at the high counter in front of the secretary’s desk. His legs were crossed at the shins, the toe of one polished black shoe pointed into the floor. A fist was in his cheek as he perused, viciously it seemed, a printed document.

Miss Jackson pointed at the line of chairs against the wall before going up to the principal. Holly exhaled deeply as she sat down, leaving two empty chairs between her and Roger. Her face felt hot and her fingers trembled as she held her stack of books on her knees, and the oddly antiseptic odor of the office made her slightly unwell. She noted that Roger’s head was bowed and the side visible to her was scarlet.

After a brief discussion with the principal, and a stony glance back at Holly, Miss Jackson left the office. Soon, Mr Prockmeyer came and sat down between the two students, in the seat next to Holly. “Well, Miss Hatfield,” he said, cheerily, as if about to say something funny, “this is a rare treat. Can’t recall the last time I had an honor student in here.” “He’s one too!” said Holly jerking her head toward Roger. “Oh really!” He turned to the boy. “And you are … ?” There was a pause during which Holly kept silent. “Rog Waller.” “Well, Rog, Holly … suppose you tell me what this is all about.” The principal, half-slouching, stretched out his long legs, crossing them at the ankles so that his gleaming shoes made a figure ‘V.’ He glanced down a moment and tugged his dark tie straight against a blazing white shirt. His thumbs settled themselves under a narrow, strap-like belt. “Don’t everyone yell at once.” “Jeez, it’s nothing,” Holly whined, rearranging some textbooks. “We were just having an argument.” “About what … if I may be so bold.”
She felt him grinning at her. Roger sat up straight and muttered, “It’s personal.”

“Oh is it,” said Mr Prockmeyer, turning toward him again.

“Yes … sir.”

Turning back to Holly the principal asked, “And do you also wish it not to be discussed?”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s cool. I can dig it. You’re entitled to your private differences — everyone is — as long …” The principal’s voice became sterner. “As long as you keep it private. You can play ‘smack-bottom’ with your ruler there all you want, but only as long as you do it in such a way that those who are responsible for your well-being can’t misinterpret your behavior. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes,” said the students.

“Good.” The principal’s hands slipped into his pockets. “But, just to make sure … you’re positive that no real harm was intended, by either of you?” He finished his question with eyes focused on Roger.

Both students replied in subdued affirmatives.

“Please forgive my concern but,” he sighed, glancing up at the plaques high on the wall, “with four teenage daughters of my own? You can imagine my instinctive interest in the matter.” He turned again to Roger’s bowed head. “And my depth of experience dealing with adolescent behavior.” His eyebrows were flared. “Don’t be deceived by my easy manner — what was your last name again?”

“Waller.”

“Don’t let my easy manner fool you, Mr Waller. If there’s anything untoward going on, you’ll find I’m your worst nightmare. Am I still making myself clear?”

“Yessir,” said Roger.

“Good. Now … don’t you guys have better things to do than sit here chatting with your friendly neighborhood tyrant?”

Smiling and inaudibly saying ‘thank you,’ Holly got to her feet and headed for the door. Before leaving she turned to add an apology but saw Roger detained by the still reclining principal. A very firm hand was gripped around the boy’s shirt sleeve. She could not hear what Mr Prockmeyer was saying, but Roger was nodding obediently.

Holly hurried back to the library where, after redeploying her books and papers, she stared at the unfinished graphs and rubbed her thumb nervously on the side of her pencil. She was still jittery, and her clothing was sticky with cooled sweat.

Soon Linda and a few other friends came and sat at her table. Huddling close together, their backs to the librarian’s office, they produced two half hot dogs and half a carton of warm milk.

Without mentioning her recent escapade, Holly and her friends giggled about dresses till it was time for fifth period.

Later, in the auditorium, at an after-school meeting of those who had volunteered to be escorts on Career Day, Holly whispered to Barb about her visit to the principal’s office. She was well over her trembling, and she made her tale as comical as possible. They laughed to pick apart Roger’s lie about the, allegedly, plagiarized paper.

“God,” Barb smirked, “he’s had, what, half a year to think up a decent fib, and that’s all he could come up with?”

“I know,” said Holly, “and his face was tomato-red the whole time. It was pathetic.”

“I could believe it,” Barb laughed, “if he’d copied one of my papers! I wouldn’t put it past him!”

While the girls whispered to one another, the other NHS members became concerned when, in assigning which students were to accompany which speakers, it was discovered that they did not have enough young men escorts for all the women speakers. (The club’s membership was approximately seventy percent female.)

“Well, so what,” Linda was yawning. “Girls can show around the women, why not?”
“Well, it would just look better,” said their president, standing before them at the foot of the stage. “Guys in tuxedos for the women: girls in formals for the men. It’s always been that way.”

“Yeah,” said Cheryl who was sitting next to the president’s vacated seat, “and we only need one more guy — Barb,” she called across the aisle. “Barb!”

Holly and Barb paused in their giggling and looked up with puzzled expressions.

“Barb, get out your membership list and see what other boys there are. We have to talk one more guy into helping.”

After slapping through several sheets on her tablet, Barb went down a list of names with her pen, making check-marks. “There’s only one more,” she chuckled, “Rog Waller.”

Holly laughed out loud. “Lots’a luck! Might as well ask him to jump off a building!”

“Well, he has to!” said the president, taking a step toward the girls. “We all have responsibilities here.”

“Amen,” said one of the girls.

“You’d just be wasting your time,” sighed Holly; her arms were crossed. “He thinks we’re all a bunch’a snobs; he won’t lift a finger to help.”

“Right!” said Barb, “and I oughta know, I went with’im for more’n a year — don’t ask me why!” She smirked. “He’ll just laugh in your face.”

“Well, hell, he’s got a responsibility!” the president poked his glasses back. “He doesn’t belong here if he won’t hold up his end!”

“He wants to be kicked out,” said Holly, “he’d like nothing better.”

“How ’bout this:” (Barb became serious.) “If he refuses to help? Let’s vote to expel him.”

Several heads elevated, then began to shake.

“We can!” Barb pressed. “We have the authority, just among ourselves.” She patted her tablet, inside of which was a copy of the Society Charter.

“Well, we’d … really have to think about that,” said the president, leaning back against the stage. “Believe me,” said Barb, “we’d be doing the right thing. This is an honor society, right? And he’s about as honorable as …” she looked at Holly, “as what …”


Sighing, Dale came forward again, spreading his arms. “Okay, we’re not going into that right now. We’ve gotta get this Career Day settled. And the first, logical, thing to do is just ask him.”

“Maybe he’d like being asked.” said another girl.

“Yeah,” said another.

Holly and several of her friends were shaking their heads vigorously.

“Barb,” said the president, “call him up tonight and ask’im.”

“God not me!” Barb crossed her arms fiercely and stared at the empty stage. “I made a vow never t’speak to that creep again!”

“Well, just this once.”

“No! And, anyway, I’m the last person he’ll listen to.”

“Well, then you, Hol. He knows you.”

“God!” Holly shot her eyes to the ceiling. “I’m the second to the last!”

“Come on, you have to.” He looked around. “Anyone else here know him? … Bryan? … Skip?”

Heads were shaking ‘no.’

He turned back to Holly. “Come on, I’m ordering you, okay?”

“Oo-oo!” said several voices at once.

“No, I mean it! This Career Day stuff is really important. The teachers and them’ll be watching us — and they talk to the college people. We can’t afford to screw this up.”

Holly was shaking her dark waves. “Well … Jeez, why don’t you just order him to do it then.”

“No!” said several others, “He’s gotta want to do it! Or it really will be screwed up!”

“Exactly!” said the president. “So … come on, just do it, okay? Holly? Just try. Please?”

“Jeez!” Holly whimpered.

“Thanks. Just … y’know, do your best. If he says no, he says no. We’ll go on from there.”
The rest of the meeting dealt with apparel details and schedules. Holly paid little attention to any of it. Mostly, she sat and stared at the swear words gouged into the armrest of her chair.

Later, at home, and as was sometimes the case on Fridays, Holly helped her mother prepare a semi-fancy supper which they served in the dining room, not only to Holly’s father and younger sister, but also to Dick Kirtland, Holly’s boyfriend. The Friday dinner was always a little rushed since she and her date would, afterwards, hurry to whatever ball game was being played that night.

Dominating the table talk were the many thoughts exchanged between Dick and Mr Hatfield as to the chances for success at the game. As a star running-back, Dick never failed to be optimistic, and he was right more often than not.

This was only the second such get together since the beginning of their senior year, and the two of them, Dick and Mr Hatfield, still had much of a summer’s worth of catching up to do. The women around the table were mostly left out of the discussion, except for Sarah, Holly’s ten year old sister who, this year, Holly noticed, had much bigger eyes for Dick than ever before.

“What’s a T-formation …?” Sarah asked, butting into the men’s conversation, “… something you do with cups and saucers?”

The men failed to get it, but Holly and her mother laughed at their puzzled looks.

After awhile Holly leaned close to her date and tugged his sweater sleeve. “Okay, that’s enough jock talk. We need you to start dropping hints about things that you’d like for a birthday present.”

“Oh really!” said Mr Hatfield. “When’s the big day?”

“Monday after next!” piped Sarah, “but we’re having the party on Sunday.”

“God! Thanks a lot, brainless!” Holly’s eyes flashed with sudden anger.

“Well … we are,” Sarah mumbled, glancing sullenly at the grown-ups.

Holly continued to hiss at her sister.

Mrs Hatfield tapped on Sarah’s plate of uneaten vegetables (then raised a stern finger at her elder daughter).

The father had turned to their guest. “It’s your big one-eight?”

“Yup,” replied Dick, slapping his abdomen. “Old enough to vote if they’d get their act together and fix the law.”

“Good for you!” said Mrs Hatfield, “So many kids nowadays could care less about who we put in charge of things.”

“Mom!” Holly whined, plopping her elbows noisily on the table to support her ear of buttered corn. “She means me’n my friends.” (Holly was crunching kernels.) “She hates the way we make fun’a Goldwater’n them.”

“Oh, hush!” said her mother, hefting a large bowl. “More potatoes, Dick? Finish’em up.”

He accepted gladly, and the gravy boat as well.

“Registered for the draft yet?” asked Mr Hatfield, receiving the gravy in turn.

“We’re not going to talk about that for heavensakes!” the mother scolded. “Anyway, you’ll be safe in college till you’re past the age for it, won’t you?”

“Well …” Dick took considerable time in swallowing his mouthful. “I’m kinda thinking’a goin’ rotcee.”

“What’s rotcee.” asked Sarah, her eyes still shifting cautiously.

Dick was chewing again and Mr Hatfield answered for him. “R-O-T-C. It’s a kind of officer training course in college. When he graduates he goes right into the army for a few years before getting a job. Or … the navy?”

“Marines. All the way.”

“Don’t brag about it!” said Holly. “Jeez. We always fight about that! The war’s stupid as hell and he can’t wait to go get all shot up!”

“Shush, shush, shush!” said her mother. “We’re eating. Anyway, by the time you’re out of college the fighting will probably be all over (please God). Have you picked a college yet, by the way?”

“Got a bunch of applications in. The Big Ten schools are pretty interested.”
“None of which are anywhere near where I wanna go,” said Holly, still working on her corn. Her mother snapped fingers at Holly’s elbows and the corncob was thumped onto her plate. “I don’t know why I should worry though.” She slapped her hands angrily in a napkin. “Bryn Mawr won’t take me anyway!”

“Oh, hush!”

Dick barked a laugh. “Gimme a break!” he said, “With your grades you can go anywhere y’want!”

Holly shook her head. “They only take perfect people! It takes just one … hint of something bad and you’re out’a the running. Just one!”

“But you never do anything wrong, sweetie,” her father chuckled, grinning at Dick. “I tell ya, she’s the boring-est kid I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh real boring!” cried Holly, “Would you like to hear how I spent the entire afternoon in the principal’s office today? Would you?”

All eyes turned on her.

“Really?” asked Sarah, eyes wide.

“You’re fooling us … aren’t you?” said her mother.

“No!” Holly was turning red. “He sat me right down, Mr Prockmeyer, and yelled at me for half an hour …”

“Oh, for what!” Dick shook his head. “Gimme a break!”

Her father was not smiling. “Is it …? Hol. Is it … something?”

“Yes! I hit a kid with a ruler and I got caught.”

“Oh, this is too much!” Mrs Hatfield spanked her napkin to the table. “You’re not serious!”

“The kid deserved it! He was …!” Holly stabbed a spoon into her mashed potatoes and left it there. She sighed. “It’s probably not going on my record, but if Prockmeyer talks about it to the college guys — if he even just laughs about it to’em — it’s all over, I’m out!”

Dick was staring at her. “What kid.”

Holly shook her head, making an angry smirk at her milk glass.

“Who!”

“You don’t know’im. He’s in my English class. He keeps pestering me … I just got fed up.”

“Who is he! I’ll kick the crap out of’im!”

“Settle down, settle down,” said Mrs Hatfield, “We’re still eating.”

“Who is he!” Dick grabbed her arm.

She stared straight into his eyes and spoke through clenched teeth. “Let go of me, Richard. You wanna get smacked too?”

He released her.

“It’s my problem, okay?” she said. “I’m handling it. I don’t need any help.”

“I’m not gonna stand by and let someone mess with ya!”

“You’d just make things worse.” She sighed. “How would I explain to the college people why he’s in the hospital and you’re in jail! You’d be a big help!”

The parents were staring at their red-faced daughter.

Abruptly, Holly stood up and began clearing dishes. “So whaddya want for dessert,” she ordered, “Neapolitan or chocolate pudding!”

“Dear, just settle down,” the mother called to her daughter carrying away the plates. “We have to talk about this. You’re so upset. You’re never like this.”

“And the worse thing,” Holly called back. She was rattling her load of dishes into the sink. “The worse thing is: now I have to call up the creep and beg’im t’come help us with Career Day. God it just …! Oh! Don’t talk to me! Anyone!” Collecting herself, she sighed once more. “So who wants what for dessert!”

Mrs Hatfield, with a firm hand, pulled her daughter from the dessert plates she had lined-up on the counter. “Go up to your room and lie down for a few minutes. If you can be reasonable, we’ll let you go with Dick, otherwise you’re staying home tonight.”

“Mom!”

“Do you hear me?”
“Listen to your mother!” the father boomed from the dining room.
“Go. Now.” Mrs Hatfield slapped Holly’s skirt and the daughter stomped away with hands on hips.

Going up the stairs she heard her mother’s astonished voice, “I’m so sorry, Dick. I’ve never seen her like this. Has she said anything to you … about …”

The slamming of the bedroom door shut out her mother’s words.

Holly dropped onto the edge of her bed and gripped her elbows. She pouted at the socks and shoes scattered on the floor, barely visible in the darkened room, and at the pile of school books on her dresser. She sniffled intermittently. Then, snapping on her study light, she grabbed the princess phone from her desk and reached into a drawer for the little community directory. She looked up the number for the Waller residence. There were three listed, one of which indicated two children: ‘Roger (17); Karen (9).’

Holly sat up straight on the bed, the phone in her lap, and dialed the number, noting that her fingers were trembling. She sniffled a couple more times and cleared her throat. A little girl’s voice answered, “Hello? … Hello, who’s there.”

Holly hung up the phone.

She sighed and set the phone back on the desk. Switching off the light, she sniffled once more and lay down on her bed, her back to the wall.

She could hear her sister’s voice downstairs, badgering Dick with more silly questions.

Holly wiped away itchy droplets collecting beside her nose.

Then her door was tapped on and her mother entered. In the darkness she sat down and patted her daughter’s hip. “Brought you some pudding … if you feel like it.”

Holly shook her head and touched the back of her hand to her upper lip.

“What is it, sweetie? This is so strange.”

“I know … it’s …” Holly shrugged and sniffled again. “I just had a really bad day. Everything went wrong. I’ll get over it.”

Mrs Hatfield placed the dessert bowl on the desk and sat quietly for a moment. “Are Dad and I supposed to call the principal or anything?”

“No. That’s all over with. It was nothing, really. I was exaggerating. He didn’t really yell at me, just … we just talked.”

“And who is this boy. Should we talk to his parents?”

“No, forget it.” Holly waved her hand. “He won’t bother me anymore. Or I, him.” She sat up suddenly and grabbed the pudding dish. In the darkness she made the spoon click against the glass and on her teeth as she devoured large spoonfuls.

Her mother patted Holly’s arm, got up, and left.

Later, after making bashful apologies to her parents and to Dick, Holly slipped on her coat and grabbed her purse. At the last minute, though, she dashed back to the kitchen and returned with a small box of plastic food wrap.

Sarah, sitting cross-legged in front of the TV set, looked up and asked, “What’s that for?”

“Shut up.”

Dick was also curious as Holly laid the box of CleerWrap on the dashboard of his car. “You’ll find out,” is all she replied.

On their trip to the school he asked again who the kid was that had bothered her.

Holly’s cold stare silenced him.

Their team won the game. Holly and her friends, squealing in the bleachers, jumped high to watch Dick’s number 22 diving through a wall of tacklers to score one of the touchdowns. There was much shouting and laughter at the drive-in afterwards. Then, later, Holly and Dick sang along with the car radio as they drove, alone, to the lakeside park just outside of town.
It was a balmy, Indian Summer evening. A radio commercial had been snapped off and all they could hear was the sound of unseen creatures. The windows were left open and bright stars peeked in at them as they snuggled together on the front seat.

Obediently, Dick made sure no part of him touched her face. “Oh, baby,” he softly growled into the back of her neck, under the warm bundle of rose-scented hair. “Please? Just one kiss, okay? Just one.”

“Mmm,” she purred, considering his request. “How about … a dozen, or a hundred … or as many as you want. How would you like that.”

Dick sat up and held her at arm’s length. “What?”

Holly reached for the box of food wrap. Her boyfriend watched as she pulled out a length and tore it off. “Scoot up,” she said, patting his back.

As he crowded himself against the steering wheel, she slipped her nylon-stockinged legs behind him and lay down full length on the seat.

“How!” he all but gasped.

“No. We’re just gonna kiss!” She straightened the corners of the transparent film and held it over her face. “I know this looks dumb,” she giggled, “but it really works. I was practicing the other night on my arm. The warmth goes right through but not the, you know, spit — the germs n’stuff. But you have to kinda lick it first,” (she demonstrated) “so it’ll be slippery.”

He was still staring at her.

“Come on! Just try it, okay?”

“I’m not gonna kiss you through a piece’a plastic!”

“Well it’s either this or put a great big rubber over your head!” She waited a moment, then sighed.

“Come on! You make me do dumb stuff.”

“God.” He shook his head as he leaned over her.

Holly closed her eyes and soon felt a warm softness on her lips, and gentle hands behind her head.

Many seconds went by as their lips slidingly explored each other’s face. She found though that the film would sometimes close around her nose and cause her a momentary panic for breath. But soon she learned how to deal with it and let herself become comfortable, pinned beneath his heavy warmth.

More time went by. She moaned and let her arms flop to the seat cushion on either side of her head. It was the first time she had been kissed without every muscle in her body tensed with the fear of infection.

Suddenly Dick yanked the plastic away with a curse. He made a snorting noise and rubbed his nose. Then he stared down at her.

“Di-ick,” she complained. “We just gotta practice a litt — ”

He grabbed her in his big arms and crushed his lips on hers.

When he released her, she kicked him back to his side of the car. “Dammit!” she yelled, reaching down for her purse. “It was working, dammit!”

“Okay, okay! Jeez.” She squinted to scrub under her jaw. “It was just an idea!”

“Well … figure something else out. Get a pill or something.” He straightened in the seat and turned the ignition key, making the GTO roar to life. “We’re all through for tonight, right?”
“I sure am!”

They drove in silence to her home. Neither of them thought to turn the radio back on. When they were parked in the driveway he looked down at her knees and said, “I’m sorry, Hol. God I’m a jerk.”

Holly was gathering up her purse, coat and the box of food wrap. “Me too.” She sighed. “It’s been a really bad day for me.” She cocked her head pensively. “But … there was a moment there.” She looked at him. “I really felt something! I know we’re right for each other! I just know it!”

His head was nodding. “But we’re not using that … stuff again, right?”

She nodded too.

They hugged each other in their usual manner: cheeks pressed together, then watched sadly as he backed the dark car into the street and drove away.

The following afternoon, Saturday, at her dress shop, Holly was sitting on the little stool behind the counter sewing a torn strap on an evening gown which a grabby customer had damaged. The store was empty and her portable radio was crooning tinnily beside the cash register.

When the door jingled, Holly looked up to see Linda and Cheryl laughing and looking around.

“Over here,” she called to them.

Both girls had tote bags in their arms, holding them up as they approached the counter. “We’ve been shopping,” they giggled.

“Duh,” said Holly. “How’bout spending some money here for a change.”

“You stuff’s so expensive!”

“I know, but it’s really worth it!”

They all laughed, then chattered about their respective dates of the night before. Holly was vague about hers, and her friends, exchanging crafty nods, avoided looking at the new crop of lumps under Holly’s make-up.

“Oh!” said Linda suddenly, “The reason we’re here. We saw Dale in the parking lot just now. He wants to know if you’ve talked to Rog Waller yet, y’know, about the Career Day thing?”

Holly sighed and yanked a thread tight. “No, not yet. I called last night but he wasn’t home.” She felt herself turning red.

“Call’im now,” said Cheryl, I promised Dale you’d do it right away. Linda hopped up on the counter and toed off her shoes. “Yeah, do it,” she said, “We’re here for, like, moral support, if y’need it.”

The girls giggled.

“God!” Holly’s blush was becoming uncomfortable. “I can’t do it with an audience!”

“Sure you can. You can do anything, college girl!” Linda grabbed the telephone from the end of the counter. She looped the cord over herself and plonked the phone down, with a ding, in front of Holly. Cheryl, meanwhile, had found the city phone book behind the counter and was looking through the W’s. “What’s his dad’s name,” she asked. “There’s like fifty Wallers here. Hol! Y’know’iz name?”

“You guys … !” Holly clicked her tongue. “Nathaniel R.”

“Here it is.” As the numbers were read out, Linda dialed the telephone. Holly set the dress aside, head shaking, and took the receiver. A woman answered.

“Hi, um,” Holly cleared her throat, “is Rog there?”

With a puzzled voice, the woman excused herself to get him. Holly felt her heart thumping and refused to look up at her friends and their muted giggles.

“Hello?” said Roger.

“Hi, um … this is Holly Hatfield — ’member me? — and I’m … calling on behalf of the National Honor Society … ?”

Her friends burst out in helpless sniggers.

Holly was shaking her arm at them. “And, the president — y’know, Dale? — he wanted me to kind of … ask if you’d consider being, y’know, one of the escorts on Career Day.”

The phone remained silent.

“So … would you? We really want you to.”
“No.”
“Please? We really need you. We’re short of boy escorts, and … I know you hate my guts and all that, but — forget about that — you’ve got, like, a responsibility to do your part, right? You know you do. So … come on. You gotta, okay? … Please?”
There was a long pause before he answered, “I don’t hate your guts.”
“So you’ll do it?”
“No.”
“Rog! Come on!”
“No thank you.”
Holly sighed. “Well … think about it, okay? I’ll ask you again on Monday.”
“Don’t bother.”
“Okay, fine! See ya!”
As she was pulling the phone from her ear she heard, “Hol! Wait! Don’t hang up!”
“What.”
“I … I just wanted to say … I’m sorry. Okay? For yesterday. Getting you in trouble and all that?”
He said this softly, as if not to be overheard by someone at his end.
Holly sighed again. “Well that’s just great, ’cuz now you’re gonna get me in trouble again when I tell’em you won’t help us. And if you really are sorry, you’ll just say yes.”
“I’m not that sorry.”
“Okay! I guess that’s it then!”
“I guess so.”
“Okay. Bye.” She hung up. “Jerk!”
Her friends were nodding in agreement.
They all chattered while Holly, her face now fully red, went back to her sewing.
As Linda was stepping back into her shoes she asked, “What did you mean, ‘… in trouble again.’”
“Nothing.” Holly shook her head.
Her friends stared at her.
“Jeez! We were just arguing about something, and a teacher made us break it up. It was nothing.”
As the girls were going out the door, Holly called to them. “Thanks guys! I really was dreading that phone call. Thanks for making me do it. At least it’s over with.”
“Hey you did your best. You were sweet as could be, considering. He’s a jerk, he really is.”
A smile remained on Holly’s lips long after her friends had left, but gradually it faded away as her eyes continued to stare at the telephone.

Sunday night, after supper, Holly sat at the desk in her room, pen in one hand, her cheek in the other, eyes half closed. Suddenly she stopped writing and pushed the Latin text aside. She got out the phone directory and looked up Roger’s name again, making a mental note of his address.
After some primping in the bathroom (the swellings around her lips, though smaller, still needed to be concealed), she went for a short drive in her mother’s Buick and soon was standing on the front stoop of Roger’s house waiting for her ring to be answered. She felt her heart thumping. In passing by the large picture window she had glimpsed several family members gathered round ‘The Ed Sullivan Show,’ and now worried at the commotion she was causing.
The door was tugged open by a young girl with big dark eyes. A woman accompanied her.
“Hi,” said Holly, “Sorry to come by so late, but, um, is Rog here? Could I talk to him real quick?”
“Oh, yes, of course. Come in. Come in.”
As Holly stepped into the pleasantly supper-scented home, the woman said to the girl, “Go get him.”
The girl was still staring, open-mouthed, at Holly.
“Hurry!”
As the girl dashed away, the woman called across the living room. “Nate, turn that down, we have company.”

Somewhere deep in the house came the sound of an excited voice, “Rogee! There’s a girl for you! She’s really pretty! Even prettier’n Barb!”

“Oh!” Mrs Waller shook her head. “Our youngest, Karen.”

Her husband, after punching off the warbling quartet on the TV, came and stood beside her.

“Hi,” Holly nodded to him. “I’m Holly Hatfield. I’m in one of Roger’s classes? I’d … just like to talk to him for a minute.”

“Of course.”

“And … I’d like both of you to hear it too?”

Mrs Waller made a look of concern. “Is it … something serious?”

“No, no! It’s just — it’s a good thing!” Holly smiled. “An opportunity.”

The little girl dashed back into view, hopping up and down and pointing at their guest. “See? There she is!”

Roger was following her, blushing, but alert.

“Oh,” Mrs Waller asked suddenly, “are you the one who called yesterday?”

“Yeah.” Holly nodded.

Roger’s parents exchanged looks, then the mother touched Roger’s shoulder. “He doesn’t get so many phone calls these days.”

“Mom!” said Roger. To Holly, he added, “I’ll get my shoes. We’ll talk outside.”

“She wants us to hear too,” said his father.

Roger stared at Holly who, nodding, smiled innocently at him.

“I’ll get my shoes,” he said.

“Nonsense,” said his mother, “we’ll all go in the kitchen. Would you like some coffee?”

“No-no,” said Holly, “it’ll only take a minute. I just want to ask a favor.” She looked at Roger (who was staring at the wall), then cleared her throat. “We’re both in National Honor Society? And we’ve got this thing called Career Day where we act as escorts for the speakers that go, y’know, from class to class talking about their jobs n’stuff? And … we need just one more guy to be an escort …”

Roger was shaking his head. “I already said no!”

“We’re mostly girls,” Holly went on, “and … well, we really, really need him. He’s the only boy left — the women speakers have to have boy escorts’n like that — and so … well he’s gotta help. He’s gotta do his part.”

“Forget it!”

“Roger!” the mother scolded.

He disappeared down the hallway and there was a thump like a baseboard being kicked.

“Roger!” the father added, then turned to Holly. “He’ll be glad to do it.”

“Great!” Holly smiled and clapped her hands. “Just — Rog?” she elevated her head, “just … we have a meeting Monday night, right after school, to get our assignments n’stuff? In the auditorium. Just be there, okay? It’ll be fun! Really!”

“God … I’m not … !”

“Roger!” said his mother. “Don’t make us ashamed of you!” She turned to their guest. “He’ll be there.”

Holly was nodding happily as she smiled at the parents and at the little girl who had climbed up on the back of the couch to watch with her big, unblinking eyes.

Before leaving, Holly craned her neck at the doorway where Roger had been standing. “Thanks, Rog … I’ll see ya tomorrow then okay? It’ll be lots’a fun! And it’s the right thing to do. You’ll feel really good about it, you’ll see.”

His parents and sister escorted Holly to the door, thanking her warmly for stopping by.

Walking out to the car she could not suppress an enormous smile. She danced a few steps before getting in.

While jiggling her keys, a dark shadow appeared on the passenger side, pulling first on the door handle, then rapping on the glass.
Holly rolled down her window and shouted, “Whaddya want!”
“Open the door!”
“No. I’ll see ya Monday.”
“Open the door!”
Clicking her tongue, she reached over and pulled up the knob. Roger climbed in.
“What,” she asked.
“Oh you’re so clever! I’m not doing it!”
“Yes you are,” she smiled insultingly. “I have two very strong allies.”
His head was swaying firmly side to side.
“Face it. You’ve lost.” Her smile dwindled and she sighed. “It’s not so bad. You’re just doing your duty. We all are. No one’s gonna laugh at you. It’s actually an honor, if y’think about it.”
He turned and looked down at her skirt. “I’ll do it if y’talk to Barb about … what I said.”
“Oh god! I’ve already talked to her about it. We laughed for a whole hour! Just give up on that!”
His arms clasped themselves around his chest.
Holly cocked her head. “Did you tell your folks about the talking-to you got from Prockmeyer?”
He made no reply.
“So that’s something else I could happen to mention to my allies if you try to weasel out.”
“God!”
Holly laughed. “Bet you hate my guts now!”
He made an odd sound and, staring at him, she clicked on the overhead light. Roger turned toward the side window.
“You’re not crying!” she asked, awed.
He turned back at her. The shadows on his face were deep and mean. He was definitely not crying.
Yanking the door handle, he got out and slammed the door. She watched as his dark shape disappeared around the far side of the house.
When she started the engine, a noisy, frantic song came on the radio:
… is it in his eyes?
Oh no, you’ll be deceived!
Is it in his …!

Holly slapped it off and drove away, rubbing the goose bumps on her arm.

The next day, during class and the several times they were at their lockers together, Roger completely ignored her. Then, at the NHS meeting after school, Holly saw that he had taken a seat on the outer edge of the group. The president thanked him for coming and Roger politely nodded, but he never looked toward Holly. He seemed to accept his assignment without complaint other than a very sour look when he learned that he would have to be fitted for a tuxedo.

Holly’s friends congratulated her for having such cunningly persuasive powers and later, huddled together, they all made giggled, unflattering, comments about him, though in this Holly seemed unaccountably reserved.

For several weeks after that Roger neither looked at nor spoke a word to Holly, not until the date set aside for Career Day. She came to school that day gowned in an exotic multi-colored wraparound dress, almost Polynesian in style, and her hair stood in tall bundles above her brow. (She had to sleep face down the night before so as not to damage the elegant set.) Holly had escorted a white-haired gentleman to one of the classrooms and introduced him to a series of interested student audiences, all of whom listened with more or less attention to his talk concerning the legal profession. During these comments, Holly would find an inconspicuous place in the back of the room and lean as lady-like as possible against the wall. By the end of the day her knees ached with her having never sat down, for the narrowness of the dress would not allow it.

After the gentleman’s last lecture, and seeing him safely to the teacher’s lounge, Holly hurried downstairs (pigeon-toeing in the tight skirt) to the large study hall room to catch the last session devoted to the Peace Corps. The talk was nearly over. Every seat was taken and several students were sitting on the low cabinets under the windows. Some also were leaning against the walls.

Way in the back, standing conspicuously by himself in his black tux, was Roger. This surprised Holly, even frightened her a little. She had not been aware that he was the one escorting the Peace Corps speaker (a middle-aged woman with unruly hair and leathery, sun-browned skin), and Holly’s first thought was to turn around and leave.

She noticed though that Roger, on seeing her, looked away in that same haughty manner he had lately been practicing on her. Riled by this, Holly strode up to him and stood defiantly erect at his shoulder.

Throughout the speaker’s concluding remarks she maintained her stiffened posture, but when the question and answer session began she placed palms behind herself and leaned discreetly backwards. Roger had done the same.

In the confusion of raised hands and shouted questions, Holly leaned toward him a moment to whisper: “Thanks Rog, y’know, for being such a good sport about this? I’m … kinda surprised actually.”

After a pause he whispered back, “Maybe I’m just waiting for a good time to retaliate … when you least expect it.”

“Roger! It’s over, okay? Even Barb feels paid back for what you did. Let’s all just … drop the whole thing.”

The speaker made a very earthy joke, and while the room exploded with laughter, Roger took a step closer to Holly, pressing his warm jacket sleeve against her bare, still suntanned arm. Though she kept her eyes aimed straight ahead, his breath could be felt on her temple.

“I’m not a good sport,” he whispered menacingly. “I can fight just as dirty as you. This is your only warning.”

Holly strained to keep still, trying not to show the ping of fright she suddenly felt.
Soon, the questions came to an end and Roger stepped forward to collect the speaker, while Holly remained standing at the back of the room. When the final bell rang, she made her way through the noisy throng to her locker. Many acquaintances chatted with her on the way but she answered them absently.

One morning, some weeks later, Holly and Roger were dispatched to another NHS meeting. As they were leaving their classroom, the teacher quipped, “Hurry back you two, you sure don’t want to miss our little test this morning!”

Only Holly smiled.

They walked abreast of one another down the quiet corridor. A large space was maintained between them and neither spoke until about halfway to the auditorium.

Holly had been watching him from under low eyebrows and finally said, “Roger, this is so dumb! I bet you’re not even gonna do anything! You just said you were, so I’d spend the rest of the year being scared.” She drifted closer to him. “Well, I’m not playing your stupid game, okay? Go ahead n’hurt me — right now if y’want. I refuse to be frightened.”

Roger still had not turned to look at her.

“And, anyway, there’s only two possible outcomes: either I’ll get even, or I’ll forgive you.” She sighed, drifting away from him. “Prob’ly the latter, ’cuz I’m so … damn sick of fighting. I hate it! We’ve both got better things to do.”

Roger was holding a paperback book in one hand and now pointed it at her. “It’s typical you’d ask for a truce while you’re ahead.”

“Roger! No one’s ahead! God, we’re all even, okay? It’s over! I’m just — even Barb doesn’t hate you anymore. Just think what you put her through! She’s willing to let it go, why can’t you.”

Roger shook his head.

They arrived at the short hallway that leads to the doors of the auditorium. Holly turned into it, but Roger kept going straight, toward the band practice rooms.

Holly clicked her tongue, “Wake up doofus! It’s this way!”

Roger made no reply and did not lessen his pace.

Barb and Cheryl hurried up just then. “God now what’s with the prima donna,” asked Barb.

Holly growled and shook her dark hair. “He’s such a big baby!”

During the meeting, Holly looked around occasionally but saw Roger nowhere. She became solemn with her interior concerns. On failing to respond to a question from one of her friends, she was laughingly ordered back to earth.

Afterwards, while returning to class in the company of her friends, Holly stopped suddenly and headed back toward the auditorium, calling over her shoulder, “See you guys at lunch!”

She jogged down the corridor, past the auditorium, and pulled on several locked doors of the practice rooms. There was only one that opened to her. She stuck her head in and called, “Rog? Roger! Come on now, it’s time to go!”

There was no answer. Letting the door bang closed, she turned and ran back toward her English class. The hallways were all eerily vacant, making the scrape of her low-heeled shoes loud and incriminating.

Breathing heavily, she opened the door of her room to find everyone, including Roger, in head-bent concentration, working with pen and paper.

Mr Bertram tapped on the blackboard beside the three essay questions written there. He had a severe look on his face as he said, “Nice you could join us. You’ve missed ten minutes already.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but the firmness in his face silenced her.

As she was hurrying to get out her own paper and pen she glanced back at Roger. He wasn’t smiling, but his head was elevated and inclined in a pleased and victorious manner.
The football game on the following Friday was the last of the season. Dick was very close to setting an important record and at supper that night he was nearly incoherent with the intensity of his determination. Holly had difficulty, in fact, trying not to make fun of him. When they got out of his car at the school, he rushed away to the locker room so fast she had to call him back for their usual hug for good luck.

She made her way into the bleachers and soon was shivering with Barb and her other friends, all of whom were currently widowed since their boyfriends were also on the team.

Barb giggled and said, “Is Dick psyched up for this?”

“Oh gawd!” said Holly, “He’s running around like he hasn’t peed in a week! He cannot sit still! It’s hilarious!”

Linda laughed. “Think what he’ll be like if he gets the record.”

“Oh don’t remind me! Holly wailed, “I won’t be able to keep up with him.”

“Keep away from him, you mean!”

“He’ll go berserko!”

Barb suddenly began to laugh.

“What!” said her friends.

“We shoulda brought … we shoulda brought all the rolls of CleerWrap we could find … ”

“Barb!” Holly had lost her smile.

“… and mummified her!”

“Barb! Shut up!”

The other girls, puzzled, tilted their heads at the two friends and asked: “Whaddya mean?”

“Nothing!” barked Holly.

“What, whad’ya mean,” they pressed Barb. “Come on, what!”

Holly thumped a fist on Barb’s jacket sleeve.

“Ow! Nothing.” Barb was rubbing her arm. “Bad joke, okay?”

“I still don’t get it,” said Linda, glancing at the two girls who were looking away from each other.

Holly cleared her throat. “But the worse thing … ” (she was smiling now) “ … worse thing’ll be if he doesn’t get it.”

“Amen!”

“I can kiss him goodbye for at least a week.” said Holly, not to Barb, but to her other friends. “He can get so owly sometimes!”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Barb, “I made Steve promise to give’im the ball every chance he gets … and … ” The girls looked up as the opposing team began running out onto the field, accompanied by muted cheers from the far bleachers. “ … and just look at the competition! Dick’ll run right over’em!”

The girls jumped up and shrieked as their own team took the field, all the players in bright, clean uniforms, padded grotesquely, and with their helmets under their arms.

Soon after the game got under way it became clear that Dick was, indeed, having no trouble breaking through the opposing defenses. Holly’s hands became sore from the endless clapping and after one and a half quarters of shouting, her voice, what was left of it, began to sound funny inside her.

When the speaker box on the scoreboard announced that Dick Kirtland had just broken the all-conference rushing record, the stands erupted with roars and the pummeling of bleacher seats. The girls could not hear their own screams amid the din.

After the crack of the halftime gun and the retreat of the players to the locker rooms, Barb grabbed her purse. “God my throat is parched!” she cried. “Who else wants drinks?”

She took orders and dollar bills from everyone except Holly who was frantically clawing the inside of her purse. “I know! I stuck a five in here somewhere!”

“Forget it, pay me back later!” Barb called as she rushed away.

The remaining girls sat close together, coughing and catching their breath. Couples wandering by on their way to the refreshment stand stopped to say hi and to congratulate Holly for the triumph of her boyfriend. She blushed with pride. Cheryl passed out the last of her roll of throat lozenges.
When they were left more or less by themselves and idly watching the patterns being made by the blaring band members on the field, Linda said, “I think I kinda get what she meant about the CleerWrap.”

“God!” Holly shook her head.

“Me too,” said Cheryl. “When you and Dick —”

“You’d better not breathe a word! I mean it. Dick’d kill me!”

“Don’t worry! And don’t be mad at Barb. Okay? God we’re all friends!”

“Yeah but she promised not to tell!”

After awhile, pulling her gloves tight, Cheryl sighed: “But … jeez, how can you stand it, Hol. Not kissing him — him! — I’d go crazy if it was me.”

Holly nodded somberly.

“Yeah,” said Linda, “Like having a million dollars but not allowed t’spend it. It’s so unfair!”

Holly exhaled with annoyance. “It may wind up costing a million dollars!” she said. “No kidding, my folks just throw money away for fancy medicines n’stuff — sunlamp treatments — every quack thing that comes along. I feel like a damn guinea pig!”

Her friends nodded with sympathy.

“The other day my mom heard about this new drug or something and said she was gonna make an appointment for me. I said, ‘Mom! Just forget it! Nothing ever works!’” Holly sighed. “She gets so excited! I think it hurts her more’n it does — Wha!” Holly had pulled her hand from her coat pocket. A five dollar bill was pinched between her fingers.

They all laughed.

“I knew I had it somewhere.” Holly stood up and straightened her ear muffs then dashed away down the empty bleacher seats. “I’ll help her carry the stuff back,” she called over her shoulder.

Down on the field, there was still a good sized crowd huddled against the concession booth. Holly walked all around it but could not find Barb anywhere. She glanced back up and saw her other two friends still sitting by themselves.

To several people who greeted her in passing she asked, “Have you seen Barb Taylor?”

“Yeah,” said one couple, the boy of which added: “She was heading toward the gym.”

The girl giggled: “Probably gonna bawl out Steve for that fumble. I’d hate to be in his shoes!”

They all laughed.

Holly ran to the battered concrete staircase that lead down to the locker rooms under the gym, but there was no one on the steps.

She looked around. In the quiet air all she could hear was the distant thump of the band’s big drum. Then she heard a familiar giggle.

Holly crept around the equipment shed and peeked at a couple clutched together against a shadowed brick wall. The girl was lying against the tall young man’s padded uniform, his arms were inside her long overcoat. It was dark and their faces were too close together for recognition, but the girl’s whispered voice was definitely Barb’s — and the “22” on the player’s sleeve was Dick’s!

Some time later, with amazement, Holly found herself back in the bleachers, bumped and jostled by exuberant peers. She stopped suddenly and discovered the five dollar bill still in her fist.

Thrusting the bill into her coat pocket, she hurried back up to her friends.

“Where’s the stuff?” they asked.

“It’s so crowded I couldn’t even see her!”

As she sat down, Holly noticed that she was no longer cold. While her friends were turned around talking to a group of boys, she touched the knuckles of one hand to her cheek and felt the heat of a furious blush. She turned up her coat collar and faced away from the glaring stadium lights.

Shortly after the start of the third quarter Barb arrived with their drinks.

“‘Bout time!” cried the girls, all except Holly.

“Sorry!” Barb apologized, removing covered cups from her overcoat pockets. “I got t’yakkin’ with a guy,” she laughed. “You know me!”

Throughout the rest of the game Holly listened to Barb’s unrestrained cheering, loudest, it seemed, when Dick was running with the ball.
Their team won, and at the raucous party after the game, Holly was relieved to note that Dick danced with no one but herself, never once looking at Barb, even when they were all singing around the record player. It occurred to her that only once before, on their first date, had he been so overwhelmingly attentive. He seemed strangely reserved too, almost blushing when congratulations were heaped on him.

As Dick was driving her home (there was beer on his breath now), his inhibitions had clearly vanished. He hooted at the car’s fabric ceiling and thumped the steering wheel. “Damn what a night!” he said.

Holly eyed him silently until he tilted a big smile at her, making her look down at her knees. “God I wish I could kiss you right now,” he said. “I’d give anything!”

She stared at him for a moment (he had returned to grinning at the windshield), then declared: “Go ahead. You’ve earned it, right?”

The car slowed. He was looking at her again, but his face had lost all its levity. “What … whad’ya mean.”

She took in a long, silent breath. “Kiss me. If you want.”

“Really? You mean it? Like … a real kiss?”

Holly nodded.

He was driving very slowly now. Cars were passing them on the highway.

“Oh! Y’mean with that … plastic stuff.”

Holly shook her head. “No. No restrictions,” she raised her shoulders. “Just, you know, raw skin, for as long as you want it.” Her eyes dropped to the hands in her lap gripping her little black purse. “My mom’s got a new … medicine, treatment thing for me. It’s foolproof,” she sighed. “So I’m … green t’go. If you still want to.”

He gazed a while longer, then turned off the highway and made the car rumble down several residential streets until coming to a house with darkened windows. He pulled to the curb and shut off the engine.

Holly slipped her trembling hands into the cold coat pockets and licked her lips. A distant streetlamp made glitters in Dick’s eyes as he climbed toward her.

Her own eyes closed and she was violently kissed. Her lips were kissed, her cheek, eyelids; his big hands clawed at her bosom and she did not move.

But when he began pulling up her skirt, she forced palms under his chest and twisted her face from his. “Don’t … spoil it,” she managed to say.

Abruptly, he lifted himself from her. “Oh god!” he cried. (Holly grabbed a tissue from the box on the transmission hump, slapping it on the slippery film covering her chin.) “Jeez, Hol!” he whispered. “How … !” He seemed to fall on her and pressed the side of his head against her breast. “Oh god!” he repeated.

With hurried motions, Holly patted her entire face with the tissue. “Umm … ” She cleared her throat. “I should get home and take that … medicine. It works better the sooner I take it.”

He sat up immediately and started the engine. Once it was roaring he reached around and pulled her legs from behind his back. His hands were very warm now.

He drove fast, recklessly. (She was reaching down by the brake pedal for her loafer.) “God!” he cried. “You just … you let me go on and on! I couldn’t stop! I just … god!”

Holly found that she was smiling. She had a moistened towelette now and wiped carefully under one eye. “So you … had a good time?” she asked.

“Oh baby … !”

“I did too.”

In her driveway, Holly tipped toward him for a lingering goodbye kiss — on the lips — then ran inside, throwing her coat in the direction of the couch and galloping upstairs, leaving both shoes on the
steps. In the bathroom she yanked drawers open and banged bottles together, assembling her skin medications.

While her head was in the sink, in a lather of Phisohex, her mother tapped on the door and entered.

“What in the world … ?” she exclaimed, stooping to pick up Holly’s blouse. “What did he do to you!”

“Nothing! We were … celebrating.” Her words were barely distinguishable through the suds.

Mrs Hatfield clicked her tongue as she knelt to turn on the bathtub faucets. “You silly child!” She said, then looked up. “It was just … kissing, right?”

“Yes!”

Later, after being immersed in the steaming tub and while her mother was scrubbing the back of her neck, Holly ran her tongue back and forth over the inside of her lips. She could feel already those hard little lumps which were precursors of the ugly eruptions to follow.

“Mom? You make that appointment yet? For the new medicine.”

“You said not to!”

“Could you — ow! Not so hard! — could you make it for, like … tomorrow?”

By the next morning tiny red sores had sprouted on her face. Holly was driven to the clinic where the dermatologist (clearly angered at having to come in on a weekend) scolded her without letup. He mentioned everything from psychological maladjustment to cancer in order to impress on her the delicacy of her condition. A merciless blush paved her entire body as he poked at the sores with his instruments. She stared at the rims of his safety glasses and listened to the squeak of his stretchy gloves. She lay on the examination table, under the hot lights, as still as she could. Like a cut-open corpse, she told herself.

Immediately after the appointment, while her mother was bringing the car around, Holly hurried down to the pharmacy and had the doctor’s prescription filled. She paced the ether-smelling aisles while waiting for her name to be called.

The new medication came in two forms, pills and ointment; she had gotten both. In the car going home, after glancing at the instructions, she began smearing her face and lips with the dark, grainy cream. “God it smells like tar!” she cried.

Only later did she discover the medicine’s painful side effects: the pills caused nauseaing stomach cramps and the cream made her skin so sensitive she could only wash with cold water.

All weekend Holly stayed indoors, most of the time in her own room, while the painful blemishes populated her face: large, dark lesions, filled with pus, all the way to her ears, her neck, and under her bangs. She had called in sick for her job and begged off every invitation from her friends.

At supper on Sunday night, her mother again grabbed Holly’s chin and turned her face to examine first one side then the other.

“Mom!”

“What were you kids doing!”

“Just kissing! Like everyone else does!”

“Well you’re not everyone else!” said her father. “We’re having a talk with him!”

“Jeez!” Holly shook her head. “He knows what he shouldn’t do! It was my fault … I couldn’t — what are you lookin’ at!” Holly kicked at her sister under the table, but only hit a chair leg.

Sarah stuck out her tongue.

“Hey. Hey!” said the father, “I mean it. Don’t you two start again!”

The sisters glared at each other.

Following Sarah’s ‘Come Lord Jesus …’ the family sat in uncomfortable silence while they ate.

Holly did little more than poke at her fish sticks.

“Try to eat something, sweetie,” said her mother. “You know they take longer to heal if your resistance is low.”

Holly took a bite.

Sarah’s lips were twisted with pre-teen disdain. “You’re not goin’ t’school like that tomor — ”

“Shut up! Just shut up y’little shithead!”
“Say-say-say!” shouted their father.
“Language!” the mother cried.
“I’ve had it with you.” The father’s face was crimson. “Both’a you! All weekend for goddamn!”
Holly, staring at her lap, sniffled. A moment later she set down her fork and left the table.
“Now where’s she going!”
“Sh! David! She feels like hell!”

Up in her room, in the dim light from the corner streetlamp, Holly sat on her bed and stared at her dressing table, the mirror of which had a pillowcase slipped over it. She clenched her hands in her lap and fought the urge to scratch her lips. She could not resist, however, and after just a few rubs felt warm blood on her knuckles. “Dammit!” she cried, reaching for the box of tissues. “Dammit.”

With the Kleenex pressed over her mouth, she lay down, face-up, on the bed. Sobless tears filled her eyes and tumbled down each side of her head.

Holly stayed home from school on Monday, and again on Tuesday. The damage seemed as great as on previous flare-ups, but, considering how thoroughly she had allowed herself to be infected this time, Holly had to admit that the medicine must be doing some good after all.

In the evenings her friends Cheryl and Linda took turns calling her. With each of them Holly giggled and made light of her ‘pizza face.’ But Barb, significantly, did not call.

Dick called only once, early on. He was no doubt waiting for her to make a return call, but Holly could only sit and stare at the phone on her desk. She could not shake the sense that, by keeping silent about him and Barb, she herself was the one being dishonest.

That night she again slept with a piece of oilcloth between the pillow and pillowcase and set her alarm early enough to allow for a long shower before deciding whether or not to go to school.

It was a sleepless night, but in the morning, even though her face was still sore (smiling was especially painful), she could see a definite improvement. Many of the small cankers were gone and the larger ones had paled to the point where a few coatings of make-up hid them almost completely.

She elected to go to school.

On the bus, Holly made herself sit down next to Barb as usual and nodded happily to the many kids who still made congratulatory comments about her boyfriend’s achievement, but she took no comfort at all in Barb’s assurances of how little the blemishes showed.

Once arriving at school, where she presented her mother’s indefinite note of excuse to the attendance officer, Holly felt surprisingly at ease behind her heavily made-up face, and no one seemed to notice any difference. That is, other than Roger who, passing by her at their lockers, smirked and shook his head.

Even Barb, by lunchtime had ceased looking at Holly’s mouth when she spoke. They and their friends laughed and joked with one another precisely as always except Holly found herself listening very closely to Barb’s every syllable.

It was odd, however, that she saw nothing of Dick despite her looking for him down every corridor.

After last period Holly secreted herself in the school library, assuming — or at least hoping — that Dick would appear and offer her a ride home. But, on hearing footsteps approaching her table, she looked up to see that it was Roger pulling out the chair opposite hers.

“Don’t sit there!” she hissed at him.
He sat down and folded his arms over his books.
“Don’t stare at me! God you’re a creep!”
“Something’s happened,” he said. “What.”

Holly looked at the page of her history book and opened her eyes wider, as if thoroughly unconcerned, then began writing in her notebook, her other hand placed palm-up in her lap.

“Why’d you let Kirtland do that to ya.” Roger looked around a moment. “I know he didn’t force ya. You’ve been saying lovey-dovey things about him all day. So … what. What’s going on.”

Holly tilted her head calmly from book to paper, her pen gliding effortlessly.
Roger looked around again, then, whispering, said, “You weren’t here to see it but … I know it has something to do with Barb … what she did on Monday.”

Holly’s pen made only the tiniest halt in its movements, but Roger pointed at it. A moment later he gently crooned, “You’re blushing.”

“Would you just shut the hell up! God!” She coughed suddenly on her screeching whisper. “Won’t you ever leave me alone?”

“Don’tcha wanna know what she did?”

“I don’t care what she did!” Holly re-crossed her legs under the table and noisily turned over a new page on her spiral notebook.

“Come on, aren’tcha at least interested? Worried? It has to do with Kirtland so there’s not another person in the whole school who’ll tell ya. Just me.”

He stared at her awhile longer, then sighed. “Okay. But if you change your mind, I’m right here.”

With this he opened a notebook of his own and got out a pencil. His fingers flipped through the pages of a trigonometry text. Leaning his head on his hand, he began working problems.

Dick never appeared.

As the time neared for the departure of the activity buses, Holly gathered up her things. Roger did likewise and they left the library together.

Walking down the barren, echoing hallways, Roger made a small laugh. “Well, here we are again,” he said, “hallway, library, auditorium … your car, my livingroom. We spend — the principal’s office! — we spend enough time together to qualify as a relationship.”

“God would you just shut up?”

“And you have such a wonderfully rich vocabulary.”

She kicked him in the leg. Not as hard as she could, but enough for him to keep a greater distance between them.

The smile returned to his face. “You really shouldn’t be mad at me any more. After all, we now have a common enemy — Barb. Oh, that’s right,” he added, “you still don’t know what it is she did that was so terrible. Well, trust me, she’s getting ready to take you down.”

They had arrived at their lockers and both spent a moment operating their combination dials.

“Tis your enemy,” he repeated, ponderingly. “I’m pretty sure you know that, but you’re just not … I think you just can’t accept the fact.”

Holly threw her books into the bottom of her locker and stomped over to him. Grabbing his upper arm with both hands, she banged him against the wall of metal doors.

“Okay, okay,” he said in surrender. “I’ll talk. Just don’t hurt me, okay?” He was smiling.

“I don’t wanna hear your stupid lies! I just want you to shut the hell up!”

“At lunch on Monday,” said Roger, looking down at the small, whitened fingers clutching him, “Barb came and sat at the varsity table. Y’know how she does? Squeezin’ in next t’Steve Bersky t’pick food off his tray. Laughin’n’stuff. Usually Kirtland laughs just as much as anyone. But not that time.”

While telling all this, Roger’s eyes were cast down, but now he looked up, making Holly turn away. “Poor guy,” said Roger, “it’s so obvious: Barb’s got him wrapped around her little finger, and he doesn’t dare show it.”

“Just don’t give me your lies! I’m not listening to this!” shouted Holly striding back to her own locker, arms wide and waving.

“Lies. Lies!”

“Lies, huh?” Roger called to her. “Go look in a mirror. There’s only one reason why you’d let’im do that to ya — you’re losing him … and you know it.”

Holly gathered up some books and yanked her coat from the hook. Throwing her locker closed, she ran past Roger, down the hall and toward the bus loading area.
She claimed a seat for herself near the back of the bus, and by placing books beside her — and staring steadfastly out the window — ensured that no one came to sit next to her. In the darkening twilight she focused on the dim reflections in the glass. Her image, she noted, was un-detailed enough to make her seem almost beautiful.

That evening Dick called her with many sweetly spoken apologies, not only for having stayed away, but for thinking she was actually mad at him. They laughed over their mutual misunderstandings, and the next day they got together many times between classes. They partyed with friends on the weekend and Dick’s continuing to pay close attention to her seemed no longer to trouble her. She even, though slowly, ceased making wary eyes at Barb.

By the end of the following week her cold sores had also vanished.

Over Christmas vacation she and Dick were together nearly every day and when classes resumed in January, Holly had all but forgotten about the panic she had felt. She was convinced that the dalliance between Barb and Dick, had it ever existed, had surely come to an end, that one of them — more likely both of them — had called it off.

On the school bus, she gossiped and giggled with Barb almost as much as formerly, and once, after Barb had gone forward in the bus to chat with another friend, Holly raised the cover of Barb’s notebook and scanned the opening lines of several graded assignments. There were no familiar sentences, and Holly blushed to have been taken-in even this much by Roger’s lies.

Of Roger himself, she saw very little. Whenever their eyes did meet, her blank-faced expression kept him silent.

One morning Mr Bertram dismissed the two of them to attend yet another NHS meeting. Roger, with book in hand, preceded her out of the room, this time not holding the door for her. She followed him down the hall for a few steps, then called out, “Got any more ‘tall tales’ for me?”

He made no response.

Soon, she was joined by several acquaintances and they all ignored the boy ahead of them with his hands in his pockets and a copy of *To the Lighthouse* under one arm. At the auditorium hallway she stopped suddenly and called down toward the band rooms. “Roger! Get back here!”

He continued walking away.

Growling (and to the giggling of her friends), Holly hurried after him and grabbed the back of his shirt. “You’re not doing this to me again! Come on!”

He stopped, but would not let himself be pulled away. He touched the side of her blouse to make her let go. “I’ll come with you,” he said, “if you’ll say this: ‘Barb’s a jerk.’ Say it.”

“Shut up.”

“Okay … just say: ‘Barb’s not the best friend in the world.’”

Holly stared at him, then at his shoes.

He held out a limp wrist to her. “Say it and you can do whatever you want with me.”

Holly sighed, looking around. “Okay, she’s not the best friend I’ve ever had.” She confided this to his shirt buttons.

He placed a hand on her back and they began walking toward the auditorium.

“But you’re still mostly wrong about her!” She stopped and made him walk in front of her. “And, yes, nobody’s perfect, okay? But she’s a heck’of’a lot better friend to *me* than you were to her!

In the auditorium he was ordered to sit in the row ahead of Holly where she could keep an eye on him. Her friends chuckled and asked if she was getting paid for babysitting.

Barb soon arrived to open the meeting (Roger did not look up from his book) and the president talked for awhile too about the upcoming NHS mixer, but the main address was by the principal, Mr Prockmeyer, who was one of the NHS advisors. It was his — and his wife’s — traditional duty to host a get-together for the society members in both this high school and the one in whose community he lived, the one attended by his daughters, the eldest of whom had been this year elected a member.

In his infectiously funny manner Mr Prockmeyer described the sort of entertainments they could expect to enjoy at the party. He emphasized the ‘tackiness’ of his ‘humble abode’ in terms that made
them laugh, for everyone knew his wife was from an extremely wealthy family and they lived in a mansion in the city’s ritziest suburb. He ended by asking for a show of hands of all those who wished to attend. No one, other than Holly, seemed to notice that Roger was the only abstention. He continued reading his book — angled to catch the feeble light — as if he had not heard the question.

So apparently engrossed was he that, at the end of the meeting, as Holly was passing through the doorway, she looked back to see him sitting all by himself in the front row, still reading. She shook her head and hurried to catch up to her friends.

Back in English class Mr Bertam interrupted his lecture a moment to wait for her to take her seat and inform her of the page they were discussing.

After several minutes — and a number of glances at the closed door — the teacher nodded at Holly. “Go see if you can track down your delinquent friend.”

Several kids immediately laughed.

“Jeez…” Holly made an ishy face. “He’s just …”

“Please.”

Shaking her head, Holly returned to the door and went out.

Roger was approaching down the hall, a couple of classrooms away.

She stared at him, fists on hips, and when he was close enough whispered harshly: “Damn you!”

He opened the door and held it for her, then followed her into the classroom.

The teacher, though he did not pause in what he was saying, glared at both of them from the blackboard.

The NHS party was held on a Saturday in early March. Late that afternoon Holly sat at the dressing table in her bedroom and put finishing touches on her lacquered fingernails, while doing so she occasion giggled into the phone receiver tucked under her chin. “No!” she declared suddenly, “I’m actually glad Dick won’t be there. This is the first time in weeks I’m getting dressed for something and I don’t have a gut ache!”

“What from?” asked Linda on the other end.

“Those new pills I got. They cost a fortune and, I guess they do help a little, but, jeez, they tie my stomach into knots. I hate’em!”

“Well, maybe you should take one anyway,” Linda chuckled, “Dick won’t be there t’zing ya, but what if y’want someone else to do it?”

“Oh I’m so sure!”

“Ya never know,” Linda went on, singingly, “I’ve heard that DeSoto High’s got some reeeal dreamboats!”

Holly paused from blowing gentle air on her fingers. “On the basketball court maybe — not in their upper ten percent. Just look at the guys in our NHS!”

“Do I have to?”

The girls laughed.

After a few more daubs with the ‘Hot Pink!’ brush, Holly said, “I guess we should be a little careful how we joke about it though.”

“Right.”

“Now that Cheri’s going with Dale and all.”

“She’s gonna be in seventh heaven tonight.”

“Her! What about him! They better lock all the broom closets!”

Linda cackled a moment then abruptly cursed.

“What,” asked Holly.

“Stop making me laugh! My eyelashes won’t stick.”

Holly smiled, then, recappping the bottle of polish, began waving her hands in the air.

“I’m serious, Hol,” her friend continued, “maybe you should bring some pills along anyway, just in case. What if there’s someone there who just, you know … blows you away.”
Holly sighed. “Oh and he’ll come right for me? With Barb there? You know she always gets first pick!”

Linda was silent for a moment. “Is that why you’n her … you guys don’t talk so much anymore. ’Cuz’a her blond hair’n blue eyes? She can’t help it if she dazzles everyone.”

Holly exhaled crossly.
“You’re actually prettier y’know, up close; but, from a distance? She’s all anyone ever sees.”

Holly sighed again.
“That’s fine,” said Linda, “if you’re just going for quantity. But, as far as, y’know, attracting the right guy? — my money’s on you, Hol.”

Holly was shaking her head. “You don’t have to cheer me up all the time. I like it. But you don’t have’ta — ’cept when I got the spots — then I need it like hell!”

The girls chatted and laughed a while longer. Just before hanging up, Holly said in a low voice, “Lin … ? God you’re my best friend ever.”

The next half hour was very hectic since, besides getting herself ready for the party, Holly had to help her parents who were preparing for their night out as well. While knotting her father’s tie she asked, “Why you guys have to get so spiffy? It’s just the Legion you’re goin’ to, right?”

“Well … we haven’t been there in a while, and, you know how Mom likes to dress up.”

There was sudden squawking upstairs and Holly’s mother appeared at the top of the steps. “Holly dear, could you take Sarah to her friends. I’m not going to make it.”

“Mom! I just got dressed!”
“I’ll go,” said her father, patting Holly’s arms as she tugged his tie into place.
“No,” said his wife, distantly, calling from the bathroom, “you have to go up in the attic for me!”

“Mom!” Mr Hatfield squeaked, “I just got dressed!”

Punching his father in the stomach, Holly crossed to the front door and began stepping into her shoes. “Get down here, brat!” she yelled, reaching for her best overcoat.

Soon Sarah was beside her, picking through the collection of boots and shoes on the mud rug. She had deposited a large grocery bag nearby.

Mrs Hatfield hurried down the stairs. “Have you got everything.” she asked the younger daughter.

“Jammies, pills … ?”

“Yeah,” Sarah sighed, kicking something.

“And your toothbrush? You’re not using someone else’s toothbrush again … do you hear me?”

“Yeah!”

Holly smiled while removing keys from her purse, and Sarah, still kicking things, followed her out to the garage.

While the car was warming up, Holly glanced at her sister hunched over the enormous brown bag on her lap and made a sneering laugh. “Such elegant luggage you have — part of a matched set?”

“Shut up.”

After driving a few blocks, Holly asked, “So what was all the yelling about.” Sarah made no answer.

“Mom used the word ‘trollop’ again. Were you in her make-up stuff?”

“Shut up!”

“What were you and your trashy little friends gonna do? Get all painted up and go out cruisin’ for some hot action?” Holly laughed.

“Just … !”

“Let me clue you in on something, dingaling, you’re wasting your time. Boys your age haven’t even discovered girls yet. They’re too busy playing marbles and … bubble gum cards. You can gunk up your face all y’want; no one’ll notice.”

“Shut up! Wha’dya call the crap you put on!”

Holly tipped toward her sister. “Look close, runt! You see any make-up?”

“When y’get those sores y’just shovel it on! Y’look like Frankenstein!”
“So? That’s different!”
“Hah!”
“Just … shut up. Where do I turn for what’s-her-name’s house.”

After dropping off Sarah, and noticing the time on the dashboard clock, Holly drove quickly back to her own home.

Letting the car idle in the driveway, she tooted the horn and climbed into the back seat. Soon her parents appeared and the father drove them, first down the street to pick up Barb, and then up the Beltline to the suburb of DeSoto Hills.

Mrs Hatfield softly gasped at the tall, imposing residences, spaced regally distant from one another on winding, wooded roads. Mr Hatfield kept chanting, “Where the hell is Windermere Way!” In the back seat, Barb and Holly giggled unhelpfully.

In time they found a long driveway guarded by bricked pillars, one of which bore the sign, ‘Welcome NHS’ers.’ The home itself, all but hidden behind a forest of pines, was huge and nearly windowless in its manifest affluence. At the upper end of the driveway two rows of parked cars and the muffled thumping of a rock band greeted the girls as they hopped out and waved goodbye to Holly’s parents.

“God,” said Barb, inhaling the chilly air and its scent of budding spruce trees, “this is … unreal! Wouldn’t it be great to live like this? Look! You can’t see a single neighbor!”

Holly gazed wide-eyed in all directions, nodding and holding her coat closed at the throat. Peeking into a yellow sports car, she saw upholstery that, in the twilight, looked like pure mink.

Barb shook her head as they walked to the front door. “My mom’ll never find this place when its time to pick us up.”

“Oh,” said Holly, “and then we’ll have to stay overnight. Wouldn’t that be awful?”

They laughed and pushed the doorbell. Then laughed again to hear the elaborate chimes play an actual melody.

The door was answered by a tall gowned woman who welcomed them on behalf of Mrs Prockmeyer and checked their names off on a list. She murmured several pleasant things while directing them to a room where they could deposit their coats and purses.

Primping before a wide mirror, the girls finally had a chance to admire each other’s gown: Barb’s daringly low-necked, black sheath, and Holly’s more conventional, puffy-shouldered top and petticoated skirt, all in pink and white. Then, with much giggling and clattering of high heels, they found their way to an imposing staircase which descended to an enormous oak paneled room, thundering with teenage music.

Linda came running up to them, and they all warbled to one another.

“Look at you!”
“Look at you!”
“This is so neat!” They gazed all around the wide room. “I can’t believe it!”
“And look! Guess what’s on this cracker! That’s honest-to-god caviar! I kid you not!”
Holly made a sour face, but took a nibble, then took the whole cracker.
“There’s a tableful of’em over there!” said Linda.
Holly noticed that Barb, neck-stretched, was scanning the far recesses of the room. All around were many unfamiliar faces, but they smiled to see, near the center of the room, Cheryl and Dale gyrating to the band’s thumping rhythm.

Holly left Barb to her haughty gazing and hurried with Linda toward the buffet, then halted. “What’s he doing here.” She was scowling at the suited form of Roger Waller. “He didn’t sign up to come.”

“I know,” said Linda, “he says he got a special invitation from Prockmeyer, but I bet he’s just crashing. It probably occurred to him that, y’know … you’d be here — without Dick.”

“Get out of here!” Holly laughed.
“I just bet! He looks at you … sometimes … ”
“I’m so sure! He hates my guts, remember?”
Linda was shaking her head.
“Well so what. Just — if anything, he’s still trying to get back at me — just ignore him. This place is huge; we’ll just stay away from’im.”

“That’ll be easy.” Linda chuckled. “He hasn’t left that table since he got here!”

Holly, making a look of disgust, slowly shook her head at the boy digging with both hands at the cracker plates. Looking away, she cast her eyes around the room and sighed, “So … what are the other guys like.”

Wordlessly, Linda pointed to a far corner where several dark-haired young men were laughing with hands on hips, their suit coats unbuttoned. One of them held his coat hooked on his finger and slung rakishly over a shoulder.

Holly started to giggle.

“What.”

“Well I seen them in a Sears catalog? Mens’ evening wear, perhaps?” She struck a manly pose then crumpled into laughter.

Linda was not smiling. “Wait’ll y’get closer,” she whispered, “One of’em talked to me earlier. God my mouth wouldn’t move!”

A song came to an end and one of the tuxedoed band members went to a microphone and spoke something that was too garbled to understand, then an even faster tune was played. Suddenly the floor became crowded with dancing couples.

Barb was running up to them. “You guys! You guys!” she squeaked.

“What.”

“We have to go over there!” She pointed in the direction of the handsome young men. “There’s three guys over there just made for us! Come on!”

Linda took a step to follow, but Holly waved a declining palm. “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t bring my charge card.”

“What?” said Barb.

“Forget it,” said Linda. “She’s gonna be faithful fanny tonight. Let’s go.”

Smirking, Holly turned and headed for the hors d’oeuvres table, the side of the table furthest from Roger. While she was making a selection she sensed him approaching her.

“Black ones are best,” he said. “There was food in his mouth.

“Amazing there’s any left!” she replied without looking up, “Don’t your folks feed you?”

He stood uncomfortably close to her with two crackers balanced in one hand and a tiny goblet in the other. “Can I get y’some punch?”

“What kind is it?”

He looked down at his glass and shrugged. “Purple.”

When she sniggered and stepped away, he added, as if reassuring her, “There’s no booze in it!”

Slowly, she made her way around the table, Roger intermittently catching up to her and making trite comments. Then, taking another step, she nearly bumped into someone: a young man whose arms immediately came up to steady her on her tall shoes.

“Excuse me!” he said. “Didn’t mean to knock you down!”

“No … that’s okay … I’m fine … ” she stuttered, looking up to glimpse a shatteringly handsome face.

“Are you … Holly?” he asked with a serious look.

“Y-yeah … yes.” His eyebrows, it seemed, were making her heart melt.

“Your friends sent me to deliver this urgent message.” He held up a folded slip of paper. “I’m s’pose to wait for an answer.”

Glancing sternly across the room, Holly took the paper and opened it. In a blotchy, wavering script, which definitely was neither Barb’s nor Linda’s, were written the words, ‘Dance with this guy. Or else!!’

“Not bad news, I hope,” he said, lofting again those endearing eyebrows.

Her heart had begun to pound. “I’m … supposed to ask you for a dance.” She tried to outstare him, but his dark, bottomless eyes would not be budged. She looked down at the note again. “It doesn’t say though what you’re s’pose to do.”
He took a step back, sighing. “I only do what’s right,” he said, “I see you’re with a friend. Maybe we can have a dance later on?”

Holly spun around to find Roger at her elbow. She pushed him away with quick fingertips while stepping closer to the young man. “Holly Hatfield,” she said, opening her arms and pointing a toe.

“Grant Talbot,” the young man replied as he stood up straight. “Would you …? Like to dance?”

Raising her chin, Holly gazed across the room. “Well, maybe as far as the punch bowl?” She looked awkwardly about herself for a moment, trying to find a place to tuck the note (the girls had left their purses in the cloak room).

The young man, unbuttoning his suit coat, held open an inner pocket. “Please,” he said, and she giggled to place the note within the pocket’s warm silken lining.

Re-fastening his coat, and coming once more to attention, he held out his hand to her.

She laid fingertips in his palm and followed him to an open patch of gleaming parquet where they proceeded to stoop and wag their bodies in unison with the dozens of other couples.

Roger, she noticed, watched them for awhile, then returned to the buffet table.

Several dances later, the three girls and the three handsome young men were gathered near the base of a small, carpeted stairway.

“Where’s this go?” asked one of the boys, and Grant (hand on hip and a polished shoe on the bottom step) said: “Up to the library and some guest rooms.” He turned to the girls. “Wanna see?”

“You a tour guide?” Barb smirked.

“He knows his way around here,” said one of his friends. “See that girl in blue.” He pointed to a tall, poised young woman surrounded by admirers of both sexes. “That’s Liz Prockmeyer; she use to go with Grant.”

“Wha’d’ya mean, ‘use to’?” said Grant.

“Anyway, he practically lives here.”

Barb, meanwhile, had come forward and looked up the dark staircase. Absently, she said, “I’d like to see it — the library.”

Soon the group of them were all upstairs, exploring the wide, quiet corridors, peeking into large rooms containing beds and bookcases.

Holly stepped into a tiled chamber and began to blush as she slowly recognized the feminine, porcelain appliances sprouting from the glittering floor. “You guys! You guys!” she squealed running back out to the hallway, then suddenly halted. “Where’d everyone go?” she asked Grant who was leaning against the doorjamb.

He sighed. “Oh, they wanted to see the other floors.”

“I do too!” She looked around for the stairs.

“I want to show you something first. Come here.”

He led her to a closed door at the end of the hall.

“Look inside,” he said, smiling.

She turned an ornate handle and slowly pushed the wide oaken door until light from the hallway shone dimly on a vast interior.

Grant reached in and touched something that made the ceiling glow an intimate, creamy white.

It was a bedroom, wide and low, with a gigantic bed mounted on a paneled foundation of some kind. The room also contained many pieces of elegant, padded furniture, even a fireplace. The toes of Holly’s pink shoes nearly disappeared in the plush pile of the carpet.

“Cozy little nook, huh,” said Grant, his arm expanding toward the wall of tall window panes, all making dim reflections of the room’s furnishings. “It’s too dark now, but in the daylight you can see all eighteen holes of the Lake Isle course from here.”

Holly’s mouth was hanging open and she stooped to seat herself on a chair of polished, inlaid wood near the door.

“No,” he said, tugging her arm, “I gotta show you this.” He guided her across the room to the immense bed. The carpet, snagging at her tall heels, made her grab his arm for support.
“Ever heard of ‘water beds’?” He smiled with his hand on the small of her back. Her mouth had fallen open once more.
“Inside — instead of a mattress? — there’s a big bag filled with warm water.” He stooped to pat the coverlet. “Feel it.”

She reached down to touch the fabric with her fingertips. “No,” he growled, “*feel* it!” Clutching her around the waist, he threw her onto the bed so that she landed seat first with her ankles resting on the edge. Her hands shot out to steady herself, then, modestly, patted down her petticoat. He had pulled off her shoes and hopped onto the bed himself, making the two of them bob and tip like rowboats on a choppy lake.

“Grant!”
“Isn’t that great?”
“We’re not s’pose to be here!” She wailed, but not too loudly.
He continued to bounce, smiling at her. Holly tried to crawl back to the edge but he grabbed her firmly under the arms and pulled her toward the center of the bed.

“Grant!”
“Just — jeez! Just sit *still* a minute!” After a short struggle, he released her, adding: “They don’t mind. They love it when people are impressed by their stuff. They *asked* me to show people around.”
He rocked side to side, causing Holly eerily to lift and sink.
“Isn’t that the sexiest feeling?” he murmured.

Still steadying herself with her hands (and relishing the luxuriant warmth beneath her), Holly let herself be gently tumbled, as if she were a small thing balanced on the sinews of a prowling cat.

Grant had reclined to one elbow but was still making the bed pitch and rise. His legs were crossed at the ankles, and Holly saw that his shoes had made several black streaks on the turquoise coverlet. She tried to get to her knees but his continued motion kept making her topple against him.

Suddenly he placed a palm on her belly, and pushed her fully onto her back, then threw a leg over hers. Leaning darkly above her, he pinned her wrists to the warm, swaying fabric.

She stared fiercely up at him. “What are you doing.”


“No!” She began to squirm. “Lemme go! Right *now*!” Her eyes were shut tight not to see his heavenly, yearning eyebrows.

“Please … Holly … God you’re so *fine*!”

He had lowered himself onto her. He was moving on her. She could feel his hand on the front of her dress, his peppermint breath on her cheek. She twisted and tried to bury her face in the smooth bedspread.

Suddenly he paused.
“Beat it,” she heard him say.
“Beat it!” he repeated much louder.

Holly looked up to see Roger staring down at them.

“Hol,” he said, “the band’s gonna play that waltz now, so … are ya comin’?” He put the last of a cracker into his mouth.

“She’s busy,” said Grant, his hand was no longer on her breast.
“Holly.” Roger had a hurt look on his face. “You promised.”

Abruptly, and with a kick of her legs, Holly pulled herself out from under Grant. She scrambled to the edge of the bed and all but fell on the floor.

Grant did likewise, though with more grace. “God!” he muttered, straightening his suit coat on his way out the door.

Sitting on the foot of the bed, Holly touched her hair several places while looking away from Roger who, bashfully patting crumbs from his hands, sat down on the bed as well.
Feeling the lift of the wave he produced, Holly stood up and began tugging the sides of her dress. “Sorry if, y’know ...” Roger placed the shoes side by side before her. “... if I spoiled something.” He sat back down on the edge of the bed. He was blushing.

“Forget it,” she sighed.

“It’s just ... you sounded like y’weren’t ... like y’didn’t want him doin’ stuff.”

As she began to step into her shoes, he raised his hand and she grabbed it a moment to steady herself.

“Thanks, okay?” She was smirking. “You saved me, okay?”

She stepped back and pushed her pink and white skirt against her knees to check if the panty hose was twisted.

Roger cleared his throat. “They really are gonna play a waltz. Mrs P said so.” He was staring at her legs. “So ... do you wanna? Dance?”

When she didn’t answer, he grinned to add, “It’s the only dance Barb could ever teach me. Waltz. I’m kind of a klutz.”

Holly had crossed to the large, floor to ceiling windows and turned herself side to side checking her attire in the colorless reflections. Then she bent forward to inspect her hair and face. She sighed. “Okay. Just one though. It’s not like you saved my life or anything! In another second I would’ve —”

She turned and looked at him, then marched over to where Roger was still sitting on the bed, bouncing moronically.

Standing over him, hands on hips, she said, “How did you happen to be walking by when all this was going on. You’ve been glued to that ... cracker table all night. Answer me!”

Roger shrugged. “I saw all of you going up the stairs.” He shrugged again. “I was ...”

“You creep!” She thumped his shoulder with her fist. “You damn creep! You paid him to do that! Just so you could ...!” She slapped the side of his head.

“Ow! I did not!”

She kicked his leg and headed for the open doorway. As she stepped into the hall, she stopped and looked back, “And that stupid note? That’s your sloppy handwriting! God, you’re — I’m telling Prockmeyer! Right now!”

Holly hurried back and forth in several directions until she found a stairway down to the main ballroom.

The band, indeed, was playing a Strauss waltz — which sounded comical on electric guitars — and while her heels clicked over the hard floor she spotted Grant dancing with the haughty girl in the blue dress.

They seemed to be laughing at something but immediately hushed themselves as soon as he caught sight of Holly — and her look of wrath.

A short distance away, Mr Prockmeyer was dancing with his wife and grinning broadly in all directions.

Barb and Linda were also waltzing decorously with the handsome young men they had been with all night. Holly stormed up to them. Staring at Barb, she demanded, “Call your mom. I wanna go home right now!”

“Now? Are you kidding?”

“Barb!”

“What’s happened,” asked Linda, holding a palm up to her partner. “Why didn’t y’come down with Grant.”

“Nothing. Just ... Barb? Please?”

“No! They’re serving dinner in a minute. Go sit down somewhere and cool off. This is the best party you’ll ever go to. Enjoy it for godsakes!”

With an angry frown, Holly marched over to the wide, curving stairway and ascended. She began searching the hallways for a bathroom door, finding several in fact, but from all of them, when she rapped (and while swaying side to side with increasing urgency), came the reply: ‘Just a minute!’

Blushing, she grabbed her coat and purse from the cloak room and let herself out of the house.
The night was crisp and clear with a tiny moon just above the treetops. The air felt good on the sweaty film coating her flesh. She left her coat unbuttoned and walked with quick strides down the long, winding driveway, her tall heels scraping on the concrete.

Reaching the road sooner than expected, and still feeling flushed, she continued down the wide sidewalk to her left. (In her mind she was wording a very stern letter which would be mailed to this address, first thing tomorrow!)

After many paces she came to a branching road and turned left again. This stretch was also very long and contained so many curves that, when she arrived at the next intersection, she wasn’t quite sure which way to turn to go around the block.

While considering this, she heard a vehicle behind her slowing down. She waited for it to pass by, but it came to a full stop.

Holly turned left again and hurried along the sidewalk. Soon, headlights were turned on her, making long, gangly double-shadows of herself on the pavement ahead.

She walked faster, and somewhat awkwardly for her bladder again felt uncomfortably full.

Stealthily, she reached a hand into her purse and withdrew a nail file, holding it like a dagger. Her heart was pounding.

The car — it was a gray station wagon — never passed by. It remained several car lengths behind her. At the next corner she halted directly under a streetlamp and turned to face the vehicle which, abruptly, pulled to the curb on the far side of the road and extinguished its lights. A window was rolled down and Roger’s face poked out.

Exhaling, Holly spun around without a word. (The nail file still in her sweaty hand.) She continued walking, across the street and down a steep grade, glancing everywhere for pedestrians or at least a lit window somewhere. The headlights came back on and Roger’s car approached.

It came up even with her, still on the far side of the street, and Roger called out, “Wanna ride?”

“No!” There was a pain in her chest.

“God we live seven miles from here and you’re not even goin’ the right direction.”

Holly slapped her skirt. “I’ve already got a ride! Someone’s picking us up later. I’m just … I just came out for a walk. Can’t I do that at least? Jeez.”

“If you wanna go right now, I can take ya. I’m goin’ that way.”

“Not for free’a course,” he added. “It’ll cost y’two bucks.”

“God just … shut up!”

She turned to the left again into what should have been the road back to the Prockmeyer estate, but after going several steps Holly saw that it was a cul-de-sac.

The car was still following her. Without stopping, she looked around in the bright moonlight for anything familiar between the tall, shadowed homes.

As she paced around the paved circle at the end of the road, Roger’s car also made a turn, but going the opposite direction, and splashed her eyes with headlights a moment. Back at the corner she looked all around, trying to recall which way she had come. She had been walking downhill, but here the road sloped upward in both directions. Crossing her legs at the ankles, she strained her knees together.

On the far side of the road, the station wagon had come to a quiet halt, lights off.

Shaking her head, she made her heels scrape angrily as she walked around to the passenger side of the car and pulled on the door handle. Before getting in, Holly opened her purse, tipping it to catch the interior light, and pulled out her wallet. “Two dollars?” she confirmed.

“Yup.”

She handed him a dollar bill and four quarters, then climbed in, banging the door closed after her. “Do not touch me!” she ordered. “And don’t say a single word!” She raked a hand through her hair. “If anything happens — Linda knows you left right after me! I told her to keep an eye on you!”

He nodded, pulling the lights back on. “Why her and not Ba — ”

“No talking!”
Soon, they were on the Beltline and heading back toward their own community. They sat far apart on the front seat and for several miles neither of them made a sound. Then, sighing, Holly allowed herself to recline against the seat and removed one of her shoes, warming her toes on the instep of her other foot. Discreetly, she pressed her knees together and moved back and forth on the seat.

Glancing out the side window, she muttered: “So … this is how you ‘get even’ with people, huh?”

“What’d’ya mean.”

“Career Day? You think getting me raped is …”

“Holly … I didn’t do anything!” (He changed lanes.) “I saw you were in trouble. I just …”

“And you very cleverly surmised I’d be skipping my medicine tonight and just … ripe for bein’ slobbered all over by your partner in crime! So help me …!”

“Holly! Jeez. I didn’t … I never even seen that guy before!”

“And — as usual —” Holly raised her palms for emphasis, “’screwed that up too! Pulled out your … hero act about ninety seconds too soon. He hadn’t even kissed me yet! Dingaling! So all next week there won’t be a single mark on me for y’ta gloat over!”

Roger only shook his head.

Holly studied him a moment. “And maybe you were hoping Dick’d go knock all his teeth out and wind up in jail? So I’d have something else t’cry about?”

She noticed then that the car was going much faster. Turning to look out the rear window, she added: “And now you’re trying to get us arrested? So I’ll have to call my folks from the police station — or hospital! Brilliant.”

The car slowed.

Lying back contentedly, Holly refrained from making any more comments. (Her thoughts had all returned to her, now, very full bladder.)

Roger, also in complete silence, drove straight to her home and pulled gently into the driveway. She made wide eyes at him, as if surprised that he had not needed to ask for directions.

“Looks pretty dark,” he said, tipping to look up at the second story windows.

“My folks are out,” she sighed. Then, contritely, angled her head at him. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Sure.”

When she got out, she held the door open a moment. “If you’d like to make an apology, I’ll consider it.”

“Hol, I didn’t do anything! I swear.”

She slammed the door, and after a short hesitation the car backed into the street and drove away.

“Creep,” she muttered while hurrying in little clickity strides to the front door.

Her legs raised and lowered themselves as she pawed through the contents of her purse. The interior panic became so insistent she had to sit down on the stoop to continue searching for her keys. Then she remembered. They were still in the ignition of her parent’s car! “Dammit!” she cried aloud, crushing her legs together. “Dammit!”

She got up and yanked on the doorknob to verify it was locked. She rang the bell several times — listening to it’s distantly forlorn ‘dinnng-dong’ — then hurried around to the back door, which also was shut and locked. “Shit!” she hissed, kicking the storm door closed. “Shit!”

She looked up at the windows; all the sashes were closed. She ran to the curb and looked down the avenue toward Barb’s house. It, too, was dark, no cars in the driveway. The torment within her was making her tremble. She dashed back to where she could sit down and think for a minute.

While she was squatting on the back stoop — hands on abdomen, spitting swear words (and contemplating the dark bushes along the back fence, against which the pinkish whiteness of her gown would be radiant!) — a sudden glare of headlights illuminated the space between the houses.

“Oh thank you!” she cried aloud, hurrying around to the driveway, waving her arms at the car pulling to a stop in front of the garage door. Then she saw that it was Roger’s station wagon.

The window rolled down and he said, “Can I drive y’someplace else?”

Pinned in the bright beams, Holly cowered against the wide garage door and tried to stand erect.

“Wanna, like … get somethin’ t’eat?” Roger further asked.
Holly stumbled to the side of his car and hopped in. After closing the door, she tightly crossed her legs and leaned forward, her purse and fists in her lap.

“We could, like — ”

“Just go!” She barked at the glove compartment.

While backing out, Roger commented, “We have to stop at my house first though. I gotta pee like nobody’s business!”

Holly made no objection.

He was chuckling, “Those black crackers really did something to me.”

After they had gone several blocks, she cleared her throat and asked: “And just how did you know I’d be locked out: snooped through my purse in the cloak room? Saw my keys were gone? What.”

“Naw, I just …” he shrugged, “the windows were still dark. I just came back to make sure y’got in all right.”

Nothing more was said until the car pulled to the curb in front of Roger’s house. “‘Member this place?” he asked with a smile.

There was no response.

As they hurried to the door, Holly looked through the picture window and saw Roger’s sister lying, chin in hands, on the living room carpet in front of the TV set. It’s black-and-white glow made the walls flicker a pale blue.

Roger tapped on the inner door and there was an immediate thumping sound, then the door was tugged open by the little girl with the big eyes.

“Hi, squirt,” he said, “you remember Holly don’tcha?”

While the girl stared, Roger smiled at Holly. “Karen,” he said, then pressed the door closed with his backside. “Follow me,” he added as soon as they had stepped out of their shoes. He led her down a short hallway, past a kitchen door where a man with an opened newspaper was getting to his feet.

“It’s just me,” said Roger as he stopped and pointed to a door at the end of the hall.

Holly dashed into the little bathroom and closed the door, her legs dancing frantically while she slapped around for a light switch.

There were sounds of distant interrogation coming faintly through the door, but the rapturous squealing in the bowl drowned out the words.

Relieved, Holly washed her hands and checked her reflection in the mirror, pulling together a few loose strands of hair.

When she emerged she discovered the little girl’s face peering at her around the kitchen doorway. It quickly disappeared to a tiny squeal of, “Here she comes!” and from the far end of the hall, Holly could hear tinkling piano music and the voices of Marshall Dillon and Miss Kitty.

Presently a woman appeared. “Holly, right?” she said, “So nice to see you again.”

Holly nodded.

“Won’t you have some coffee with us, or … cocoa? Rog’ll be back up in a minute.” She turned to her husband at the kitchen table. “You remember Holly, don’t you?”

“Of course. Sit. Sit.” He gave her his seat while he and the newspaper retreated to the far end of the table.

“No, um …” Holly looked around a moment then pointed at the phone on the end of the counter.

“Could I make a quick call?”

“Sure.”

She dialed her home phone number and waited while the daughter, kneeling on one of the kitchen chairs, gazed wide-eyed at her. The little head and its tumble of brown hair twitched side to side like a sparrow. From the other room there were several loud gunshots.

“Kari,” said the mother. “Go turn off the TV.” Little footsteps pattered away.

Holly sighed, listening to the long, burbled rings. The TV was hushed, the sock feet padded back.

After hanging up the phone, Holly turned to ask, “Just one more? I’m trying to track down my folks and, um … do you have a yellow pages?”

“Yes,” said Mrs Waller from the stove. “Sweetie, can you — ?”
Little Karen was already dashing to the cupboards where she dropped to the knees of her jeans and flung open one of the doors. She came back up with the big directory gathered heavily against her red short-sleeve blouse.

“Thanks,” said Holly and the girl raced back to her chair, pink socks flashing.

While paging back and forth in the book, Holly made a chuckling sound. “Where would I find ‘American Legion’ do you suppose — under ‘restaurants’? — it’s where my parents went.”

The newspaper rattled behind her. “The one on Portland?” said Mr Waller. “By the funeral home?”

“Yeah, I think so.”
“It should be — hon — on the … the babysitter thing.”

His wife stepped over and opened a cupboard door above the telephone. She ran her finger down a list of numbers. “Here it is,” she said, stepping to one side, and read out the numbers while Holly dialed the phone.

When it was answered, Holly requested her parents be paged.

While waiting, she sighed and stared at the wallpaper, dotted with tiny pastel flowers. The phone remained silent for an uncomfortably long time. Behind her, she heard cups and silverware being placed on the table, and the daughter demanding to help. “I can do it!”

She also heard Roger come up a stairway and snap off a light switch. He brushed by behind her; his suit coat was off, but he was still wearing a white dress shirt and dark tie. He sat down at the table.

Everyone was silent as Holly shifted her weight from one stockinged leg to the other.

“Sorry, ma’am,” the phone reported, “No answer.”

“Thanks. I’ll … I’ll try again later.”

“You bet.”

As she hung up the phone, Holly turned around and dropped her eyes from the four faces regarding her. “I … guess they didn’t go there after all.”

Roger set down a cup. “Or maybe they left already. Call your home.”

“I did.” Holly sighed. “Prob’ly, they met some friends’n went to their house or something.” She looked at the clock on the wall. “They never get home this early.”

“Well,” said Roger’s mother, “come and have some cocoa. You’re sure welcome to stay here as long as you want.”

“Thank you,” said Holly, stepping toward the chair she had been offered.

“And just look at that gorgeous gown!” Mrs Waller remarked as if she’d only just then seen it.

“That must have been some party!”

Roger snorted. “Bunch a snobs!”

His mother waved a dismissive hand at her son. “Ignore him,” she said, then smiled. “Really, you look just darling.” She turned and hugged her daughter a moment. “Doesn’t she.”

Karen nodded with her big eyes bobbing up and down.

“Thanks,” said Holly. She sat down across the table from Roger and quietly sipped the hot chocolate.

Mr Waller leaned forward. “Rog says something … bad happened? So you had to leave early?”

“Dear, we don’t have to talk about it now,” said his wife.

Roger, with a mouthful of coffee cake, mumbled, “Some jerk tried to rape her!”

“No.” Holly, wearily, shook her head. “It was just …” She looked at Roger from under her eyebrows. “Some guys were playing a trick on me, and … I got really mad. Spoiled the whole evening for me.”

“Ohh,” said Mrs Waller.

Mr Waller moved in his seat. “I thought it was just going to be honor students there.” (Roger snickered.) “And still that kind of stuff happens?”

Holly was glaring at Roger.

Karen sat up on her knees and pointed at their guest. “You get red in the face more’n Barb does!”

“Karen!” cried Mrs Waller.
The mother reached down to pat Holly’s hand. “I’m so sorry.” Then turned back to her daughter. “It’s not nice to say things like that, sweetie, personal things. Say you’re sorry.” “No, forget it!” Holly laughed. “You should hear the things my sister says!” They talked for awhile about Holly’s family, making her admit that she has known Roger since fourth grade and that Barb is her best friend. “Was her best friend,” Roger corrected. “Well, we don’t have to talk about that either,” cautioned his mother. “You know, honey?” Mr Waller said to his wife. “We should go to the Legion tonight. We haven’t been there in months.” Mrs Waller tapped her mouth with a napkin. “We do have two excellent babysitters — or are the two of you planning to go out?” Holly shook her head. “I’d … like to stay near a phone?” “Great!” said Mr Waller, looking up at the clock. “We’d better get moving then, it’s already ninety-three.” “You’re sure you don’t mind.” There was seriousness in the mother’s voice. “No, go ahead.” Holly made a cheerless smile at Roger, then glanced at his sister. “It’ll be fine.” Mrs Waller was staring at her son. Roger shook his head. “She thinks I’m still tryin’ t’get even for that Career Day thing.” “Oh for heavensakes!” the mother laughed a moment, then looked at the frown on Holly’s face, then, sternly, at her son again. Roger’s hands were in the air. “I didn’t do a thing! She’s just paranoid. And anyway she’s all convinced I’m this big … pervert or something.” For a long moment, the mother’s eyes shifted back and forth between the boy and girl, both of whom were taking sips of their hot chocolate. Then Mrs Waller turned to consult her husband, but he had already left the room. Sighing, she carried a handful of dishes back to the sink. While the faucet was running she asked, “And … why would she think that?” “’Cuz Barb’s been tellin’her some big lie about me!” “Well … Roger,” Mrs Waller spoke very distinctly, “we’re not going to start accusing people behind their backs. But … but what I can say …” she had returned to the table and placed a warm hand on Holly’s shoulder. “ … really, dear, Rog is as good as they come. I know I’m his mom, but … I just don’t see how anyone could be more honest and responsible than him.” She patted his shoulder too. “He’s a little ornery sometimes, but he’s never … hurt anyone, and never will.” After Mrs Waller disappeared into the hallway, Roger, his face crimson, took another quick sip and mumbled, “She likes sayin’ stuff like that.” Karen was still kneeling on her chair. She leaned forward, elbows on table, her chin in her hands, and looked from Holly to Roger and back again. “You guys kiss’n stuff?” she asked. Holly clicked her tongue. “Karen,” Roger scolded. “What! Do’ya?” Holly sighed. “Little sisters are all alike.” “No, we don’t,” said Roger. “She doesn’t like to kiss.” “Like Barb?” “No. Barb didn’t like to kiss me. Holly doesn’t like kissing period.” “Why.” “Never mind,” Holly sighed, raising her cup and looking absently around the room. “Why, Rog.” Holly glared at him. “Come on! Why.” “Because … she’s … just waiting for the right guy … and I’m not him.” He smiled at Holly. “Not even close.” The sister’s eyebrows were tented. “Really?”
“Karen!” said her mother, coming back into the room. “Don’t you be a pest tonight. You don’t always have to be the center of attention. They just want to have a nice quiet evening. Don’t spoil it. Bed by ten.”

“Mom!”

“You listen to me!”

“Karen!” her father added, stepping in with overcoat on and helping his wife into hers.

The mother chuckled. “I guess you know where to call us if you have to. Holly, we can ask around for your folks if you like — Hatfield, right?”

“Mm-hmh,” Holly nodded, “Dave and Amy. And … thanks, I … I really am in a hurry to get home.”

“I know, I know.”

They began to leave, heading for the basement stairs.

“Car’s out front,” said Roger, and the parents turned around to go toward the living room.

“You all be good now!” called Mrs Waller from down the hall. The father had paused at the kitchen doorway and pointed a silent finger at his son who, also without a word, nodded.

At the closing of the front door, Holly muttered, “Your folks are so subtle.”

Roger laughed. “Quick change artists too! Never seen’em get dressed for anything so fast.” His hands were clasped around his cup. “After what Barb did? They were scared I’d never like another girl. They think I’m trying to be friends with you.”

“Aren’tcha?” asked Karen.

“Nope,” said Roger.

“Then …” her small shoulders came up, “how come you guys’re … t’gether.”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said Holly, arms crossed and letting herself thump backwards in her chair.

Roger leaned confidentially toward his sister. “I kinda bullied her into coming home with me.”

“How?”

“To get even … she’s kinda mean to me … sometimes. She hit me with a ruler once.”

Holly pushed herself away from the table and stood up, shaking her head. “Do you tell your sister everything?” She picked up several empty plates and headed for the sink.

“Pretty much. She always finds out sooner or later anyway — don’tcha.”

Karen giggled.

Roger arose and brought over the rest of the dishes. “She’s like you: she understands everything … although this time … ” He was contemplatively wetting a dishrag at the sink. “ … at the party? You sure got everything wrong this time — heads up, squirt.” He tossed the rag to his sister.

“Ro-gee!” Karen squeaked, then began wiping the table.

After drying his hands, Roger went over to the telephone and dialed a number. He leaned against the cupboard to put the phone book away. “Your folks aren’t home yet,” he said, hanging up.

Holly was at the sink, running water on the dirty dishes. She was giving him a sour, suspicious look.

“By the way,” Roger added, “when I was downstairs I called the Prockmeyer’s. Y’know, so they won’t be worryin’about you?”

“Jeez!” Holly slapped her skirt. “So now everyone knows I left with you! Thanks a lot!”

“I didn’t wanna do it.” Roger was kneeling at the cupboard to put the phone book away. “My mom made me.”

Exhaling hotly, and wiping her hands in a towel, Holly grumbled, “Where does this thing go!”

KAREN dashed over and took the towel from her. Then, silently, hung it up under the sink, along with the cloth she had used for the table.

Holly watched all this with arms severely crossed. When she looked back at Roger, who was still on his knees, she saw his eyes snap away from gazing at her legs.

“So …” said Karen; her arms were intertwined behind her back, “… wha’d’you guys wanna do.”
“What I wanna do,” Holly pressed palms to her midriff, “is just go home and get out’a this … straight jacket!”
Roger was getting to his feet. “You can put on one of my mom’s bathrobes — Karen, show her.”
“No, never mind.” Holly said, pointedly.
“Or just lay down for awhile?” he added.
“God you’re really eager to get me undressed and into bed!”
Roger chuckled.
“And how come you know so much about me: my phone number? Where I live … ?”
Roger’s chuckle had turned into a yawn. With a hand over his mouth, he strolled out into the hall.
“Know thine enemy …” he said, then, from the other room, sleepily added: “Kari, where’s the … the TV thing — I see it.”
Karen grabbed Holly’s hand and drew her, through another doorway, into the living room where Roger was kneeling in front of the television set, turning knobs. “Y’like Tarzan movies?” he asked.
“Yuk!” said Karen.
“Ditto,” Holly added.
“Good! That’s what we’re watchin’ then.”
“Rog!” Karen snatched the TV listings from his hand.
Soon they were all seated on the couch, each yawning in reply to Roger’s yawns, while the drums and the screeches of jungle animals played scratchily to them in black and white.
Holly sat at one end of the couch with her legs femininely crossed, while Roger took a seat on the adjacent cushion. Karen squeezed herself in between them and wiggled petulantly with arms over her chest.
Roger smiled. “I love the Jane in these early ones,” he said.
“You would!” barked Karen.
When a commercial came on, Roger yawned again and pulled off his tie, tossing its long dark length on the coffee table. Unbuttoning his collar brought a look of obvious relief.
Karen leaned close to their guest and asked if she wanted some potato chips. There was a grateful nod and Karen dashed away.

While she and Roger were alone in the room, Holly looked idly around, trying to ignore the Doublemint Twins on the TV screen, prancing around in their oversize Minnie Mouse shoes.
The room was lit by a small table lamp on the spinet. The drapes were hanging open beside the picture window where, occasionally, through its dim reflections, headlights could be seen driving by.
After another yawn, Roger said, “I also like the way Tarzan hardly ever says anything, the way he can squeeze difficult concepts into just a few words. Sort of like poetry.”
Holly continued to stare at the window, at her own uncolored image; and at Roger’s more distant and darker reflection in the glass.
He continued: “I wish I was romantically reticent like that, but … y’know, if you don’t have the muscles for it? Y’come off more like some … illiterate twerp.”
Holly made a quick laugh. “You said it; I didn’t.”
Ignoring this, Roger added, “Kirtland has the build for the strong silent type … too bad he’s such a blowhard.”
“Shut up.”
“Where is he, anyway. Shouldn’t he be over here knocking my teeth down my throat or something?”
Holly sighed.
“Why didn’tcha call him t’come get’cha.”
Sighing once more, Holly informed him: “He’s at a poker game. And you’d better hope he stays there. He really will beat the crap out’a you if he sees us like this.” She threw her eyes to the big window again.
Karen returned with two glasses of clear, effervescent fluid, ice cubes in both, and a plastic sack under her arm. She sat and hoarded the treats with Holly, periodically throwing a pout over her shoulder at her brother and making her big eyes small.
Some time later, while the safari men were shooting at hoards of yelping natives, Karen held out the half empty bag of chips to Roger. He accepted, and a little later was given the rest of her Bubble-Up to share.

During the last scenes of the film, when the elephants were all trumpeting their way to rescue Tarzan, Karen sat on Roger’s lap and tried to learn how to tie his tie. Holly watched as Roger gazed down at his sister’s small knotted brow, his eyes as tender and tolerant as a lover’s.

“Grr!” said Karen, yanking the tie straight, then replacing it around her brother’s upturned collar and trying again.

Roger was whispering, “Over, under, around … ”

“I know, I know!”

Holly got up and went to the telephone for, perhaps, the tenth time that evening. She dialed her home and listened to the distant, unheeded ringing; then went into the bathroom. On the way, she heard giggling coming from the other room and a pair of hands clapping.

Behind the closed door, Holly dallied and poked about for some time, snooping. When she stepped back out, Karen was standing before her with a small plastic box.

“Do you know anything about make-up?” Karen asked with wide eyes.

“A little.” Holly was about to switch off the light, but left it on. She stepped aside as Karen walked in and began plying the lid off the box.

“I got these from Paula, she’s my friend … her sister threw’em out, so some’a the bottles are kinda dried up n’stuff.”

The box was filled with tiny containers of creams and polish, lipstick tubes and other cosmetics.

Holly made a voice as though she were interested. “Well, let’s see what we’ve got here.”

Karen scrambled up onto the vanity, by way of the toilet seat, and knelt with hands on her thighs, looking into the box with Holly. Then the girls looked at themselves in the mirror.

“Well you have to wash your face first,” Holly giggled, “You’re full’a potato chips!”

They lined up all the bottles in front of Karen’s knees and Holly answered her ‘what’s this for’ questions. Then, turning the girl’s head this way and that, decided on a course of action.

Karen sat very still in front of the mirror, watching her reflection from the corner of her eyes as the various cosmetics were being applied. Suddenly she froze. “Close the door, close the door!” she squeaked. Holly glanced and saw Roger coming down the hall way. With her toe, she gave the door a push. It closed but did not latch.

“Go away,” yelled Karen, “we’re busy!”

“Mom know you’re doin’ that?” Roger asked from the other side of the door.

“I’m gonna wash it off!” Karen’s face began to turn an even deeper red than the blusher Holly had just applied.

Karen turned toward the door again. “Don’t tell her, okay? Please?”

There was a long delay before Roger answered. “Okay, but I get to see ya when you’re done.”

They listened to his retreating footsteps.

The girls continued working on Karen’s face. “You’re really good at this,” Karen giggled, “I don’t look like me anymore.”

“Yes you do, just … brighter.”

Several minutes went by then Karen looked up. “You got a sister, right? Rog says she’s a year older’n me.”

“Mm-hmh. Sarah. She’s ten, I think — turn this way.”

“I wish I had a big sister.”

Holly smiled at the seriousness in the girl’s face. “Don’t be too sure. I think your brother’s nicer to you than any sister’d be.”

“Yeah, but he can’t do this kind’a stuff. And Mom gets all mad when I ask her!”

Holly smiled. “Do you and Rog always get along this well, or are you guys just … putting on an act for me.”

“Wha’d’ya mean.”
“Oh, you know, y’haven’t yelled at each other all night. I mean, really yell. Like you really mean it.”

Karen thought a moment. “No I don’t think we ever yell, like, y’know, like that. Mom yells at me, sometimes. An’ Dad. And Debbie’s brother — she’s my friend too — I hate him! — and Marthie’s sisters? They’re twins, they’re only two years older’n us’n they always think they own us or something!”

“Sit still, you’re making smudges.”


“Not a word.”

Soon, after final touches with the comb and some bobby pins, Karen leapt off the vanity and ran into the living room.

When Holly arrived Roger was on his knees in front of his sister, his mouth open.

“What!” Karen was repeating. Then she turned to Holly. “He’s just staring at me!”

“Don’t move!” Roger ordered as he got up and ran down the hall to one of the bedrooms.

Holly noticed that the TV set had been turned off and there was music softly playing. It was an orchestral waltz.

Roger soon returned with a camera and a box of flashbulbs. “Over there.” He pointed to a bare stretch of wall and Karen obeyed instantly. “Stop giggling.” He was on his knees, looking through the view-finder.

Karen tried to keep still in her jeans and red blouse. Her face and arms were as pink as her faded socks.

“Your eyes are huge!” Roger declared, still with the camera stuck to his face.

The room blazed with light.

He took several more, from different angles, then, looking at the side of his camera, said, “I’ve got one left.” He pointed at Holly. “Go kneel down beside her.”

Holly had been leaning against a closet door with an indulgent smile on her face. She straightened up, snapping her lips tight and shaking her head.

“Holly!” Karen wailed, her hands waving. “Come on! You gotta!”

When she still resisted, Karen ran over and grabbed her hand. Holly allowed herself to be tugged down and posed on one knee, the girls’ arms around each other’s back. The camera flared.

Karen ran to her brother, grabbing the camera. “Now I’ll take one’a you guys!”

“Ohh no you won’t!” said Holly, getting to her feet.

“Come on!”

“No! He’d blackmail me forever with it.”

“Please?”

Roger took the camera back. “She’s right, squirt — I mean, Miss Squirt — she’s already got a boyfriend. Besides, that was my last picture.” He took back the camera and began folding up the box of flashbulbs.

Karen looked from one to the other. “Come on!” Her large, dark eyes glared at them. “Why can’t you guys be friends.”

Her brother fiddled silently with the box while Holly brushed creases out of her skirt.

Then, smiling and still on his knees, Roger set down the camera and held out his arms to his sister.

“Would you care to dance, mademoiselle?”

The ‘Blue Danube’ was still playing quietly on the stereo in the corner.

“No. Dance with her!” Karen shouted as she turned and ran to the bathroom.

“She’s not crying, is she?” Holly said, coming forward to look down the hall. She saw Karen climbing up on the vanity and grinning at her reflection. “Guess not!” she laughed.

From behind her, Roger muttered, “And thanks so much for turning her into a vainglorious snob.”

As Holly spun around to respond, a bright flash seared her vision.

“Roger!” she cried, stumbling and trying to see around a big white smear in front of her eyes.
He was laughing. “Perfect shot! Now you’ll get to see what you look like when you’re hopping mad. It’s your best look! I love it.”

Square-jawed, Holly strode to the couch, shoving Roger out of the way, and slumped down, arms crossed.

Roger quietly returned the camera to his room.

He was gone some time. Holly stared at the dark TV screen and listened to the soft music. There was a gentle tinkling of bottles in the bathroom as well. Then she heard the phone being dialed and a very large yawn. The telephone was hung up.

Soon, another waltz began to play and she heard giggling coming from down the hall. Turning around, she saw Roger and his sister crowded together at the bathroom mirror. Karen was putting rouge on his cheeks with the blusher brush.

Later, with lights turned out in the kitchen and hallway and the sound of squealing faucets coming from the bathroom, Roger returned with two more glasses of pop and set them down on the coffee table in front of the couch. Before sitting down, he asked, “Would you like to dance? You said you would … at the party … just one, you said … ’member?”

Holly sighed, her arms still crossed. “No thank you.”

He sat down beside her and handed her the half empty bag of chips. As she munched a few, Roger looked at the TV listings, then at his watch. “There’s a blood’n guts war movie on — I’ve seen it though — or … the Bowery Boys, or … ‘Voodoo Woman’ … or the news … that’s about it.”

Holly was leaning back, gazing at the white plaster ceiling, her hands and the drink resting among the fluff of her taffeta lap. Roger dropped the listings on the table and lay back too.

“S’pose the party’s over yet?” he asked.

“Who cares.”

Roger yawned again. “I was thinkin’ … I didn’t actually talk to Mr Prockmeyer. It was a lady — not his wife, one’a the other ladies — and I only said you had left the party, you weren’t feeling well’n stuff, and then she said, like, ‘Yes, sir, I’ll tell him right away.’ She prob’ly thought I was, y’know, your dad or someone? So … anyway there’s no reason for’em to think you left with me — oh, unless your friend, whatsername? If she blabs it around. But she won’t, will she? Anyway, they’ll probably just assume you called your dad to come pick’ya up.”

Holly said nothing, but her eyes were narrowed with thought.

Roger continued: “What kind’a car does he drive, your dad. In case anyone asks, I can just, you know, I can say like I saw y’getting into his car when I was driving away or something.”

Holly nodded. “Impala, blue and white.”

Roger reclined into the cushions and sipped his drink. Holly did likewise, and many minutes went by while they took turns reaching into the chip sack between them. The sweeping ballroom music continued in the corner of the room, making the toes of Roger’s black socks sway back and forth in time to the waltz. Holly, with difficulty, was able to keep her nyloned legs motionless.

Soon, a steamy warm little girl in Yogi Bear pajamas trotted into the living room and climbed into Roger’s lap. Karen’s hair was damp and all her make-up had been washed away. She kissed her brother on the cheek. But when she reached toward Holly, who instantly turned away, Roger pulled her back. “No you don’t!” he said. “She’s my date; you can’t kiss her.”

“Ro-gee!”

“I mean it, squirt.” He laughed. “She doesn’t kiss on the first date.” He held his sister tightly in his arms. “You can blow her a kiss, okay?”

Smirking, Karen kissed her fingers then blew on them toward Holly.

Holly nodded its acceptance, smiled and blew one back.

“Now beat it,” he said, showing Karen his watch. “If Mom and Dad walked in right now, we’d both catch heck!”

With a sad look Karen slid off his lap and began walking solemnly away.

“G’night, Kari,” said Holly with a big smile.

“G’night.” Karen kept her doleful look and continued to walk away.
A moment later, however, Holly felt something warm on the back of her head and the sound of a kiss.

“Karen!” Roger scolded.

There were naughty giggles and the sound of little feet skipping down the hallway.

Roger and Holly resumed sipping their drinks and listening to the hushed music until he said, “She ordered me to marry you.”

Holly crunched a large potato chip.

“She never said that about Barb,” he added. “And I was with her — and she even pretended to like me.” He yawned. “Kids. Somehow or other they can just see the goodness in others. Or lack thereof.”

Making no reply, Holly swallowed the last of her drink and stood up. Grabbing Roger’s empty glass from the coffee table as well, she went into the kitchen and turned on the lights. After depositing the glasses in the sink, she tried calling her home again; then, sighing, sat down at the table and looked through the wrinkled pages of Mr Waller’s newspaper.

The waltz music came to an end and the house was silent except for the soft muttering of the refrigerator.

A long time went by. She got up and called home again, still with no response, then, snapping off the lights, carried her purse and overcoat out to the front door, setting them on the piano bench near where her pink high-heels were now standing neatly side by side on the mud rug beside a young man’s scuffed oxfords.

Across the room, Roger was sitting slouched on the sofa, tipping to one side with his head angled awkwardly against one shoulder.

As Holly took a seat beside him, she pushed his head back up but it tumbled down again. Sighing, she laid his head on her shoulder and sat still, listening to his short, regular breaths.

The house creaked a few times. Something rumbled softly in the basement followed by the sound of rushing air coming out of the register beside the TV set. After awhile the sound ceased and the house was quiet again. Holly sighed once more, then noticed her head was resting on his. He seemed very warm. She closed her eyes, slowly, and listened to the sound of her own shallow breathing.

After some time there was another house noise, a small tap over by the big window. When it was repeated, she lazily turned to look, seeing the reflection of the little piano lamp and her and Roger’s reclining forms. Then her heart thumped. A face — not a reflection — a face just on the other side of the glass was looking in at them. It disappeared and several seconds went by before Holly could make herself react.

“Oh god!” She jumped up and ran to the door, pulling it open and banging her way around the storm door. “Dick!” she cried.

A man was striding across the lawn toward a light-colored sedan parked at the curb. She paused, the car was definitely not Dick’s black GTO. Rain was drizzling and the grass sparkled in the light from the corner streetlamp.

Puzzled, and standing on the wet stoop, Holly stared as the man hurried around the car and opened the door on the driver’s side. When the interior light came on, she could see that he had a passenger, a girl with blond hair who was staring back at her. The girl’s face was in shadow but — now recognizing the car as the tan Plymouth owned by Barb’s parents — she screamed again: “Dick!”

Standing on tiptoe, clutching the cold, rain-wet railing, she screamed his name once more as the car squealed away.

Holly watched until the tail lights were gone from view. She charged back into the house, snapped on the kitchen lights, slipping a moment in her wet stockings, and dialed the telephone.

“Hello?” it was answered.

“Is Barb there.”

“Oh, Holly!” said Mrs Taylor. “I was wondering what became of you! Your … friend got you home okay then?”

“Yeah. Is she there?”
“No, dear, she left in the car as soon as we got back.” A chuckle followed this. “The little dickens! She said she was going to go pick you up. I see now that was just an excuse to sneak off to Steve’s again! That girl! Have you got his number? Just a minute, I’ll get it.”

While the phone was quiet, Holly hung it up.

Wiping her eyes, she stormed back to the couch where Roger had collapsed onto his side. She grabbed his hair and shook him awake.

To his dazed eyes she demanded, “What did you tell Barb!”

“Hunh?”

“When you called the Prockmeyer’s!” She sniffled. “You talked to Barb. Right? Right?”

“What … what’s going on.” He blinked his eyes, then squinted, examining her face. “You cryin’?”

Holly flicked quick knuckles under her eyes. “You told her to come’n …!” She gasped. “… and Dick and …!”

Holly’s eyes crushed shut and she felt tears tumble down her face. She ran to the bathroom and slammed the door. Sitting on the edge of the tub, she cried fitfully into a wad of toilet paper (the Kleenex box having been emptied by the cosmetics session).

There was a tap on the door. “Hol … what’s goin’on. What’s wrong. Should I — no, shh-shh, go back t’bed. Nothing’s the matter. Go.”

There was silence for a moment, then Roger said: “I’ll try your folks again, okay?”

She heard the phone being dialed, then, after a moment or two, there was a sudden cluster of voices in the house. Holly stopped her crying and stretched her neck.

Someone was speaking in a hearty voice: “Everything standing wide open!” This was immediately shushed by a woman’s voice, adding: “Come in, come in! Get out of that rain!”

Holly rushed out and found Roger in the living room and four adults standing on the rug by the front door, all of Roger’s and Holly’s parents. Their expressions of good cheer faded as they stared at the red misery on Holly’s face.

“Oh — honey!” Mrs Hatfield cried, coming forward. “What is it!” She threw angry eyes at the boy standing by the couch.

Holly dived into her mother’s arms. As she did so, she glimpsed Mr Waller striding past them toward his son. There was the sound of a scuffle. “Nothing!” cried Roger. “I didn’t do … I was …”

Holly let out a loud sob and buried her face in a fur lapel.

“Oh for godsakes!” bellowed her father as he put arms around his daughter and wife, as if to protect them from the entire world.

Mrs Waller, after softly closing the door to the hallway (and shooing Karen back to bed), strode up to where her son and husband were still struggling. “Nate!” she whispered loudly. “Nate, don’t you dare! Roger? What is it. Tell us what — ”

“Nothing! I … !”

Mrs Hatfield eased her daughter out to arm’s length, “Holly dear, what happened. What did he do!”

Holly let her face swarm with sorrow as she cried: “Take me home! I just wanna go home!”

Her father growled, “Damn right, we’ll take y’home!”

“Did he touch you!” her mother asked sternly. “Did he touch your face!” The mother’s cold gloves were turning her daughter’s head side to side.

Holly pulled herself free and ran to the piano bench. Grabbing her coat and purse, she banged out the door, in her stockings, and ran across the cold, wet lawn to the blue and white Chevrolet. She opened the back door and threw herself lengthwise onto the cushion.

Soon, her parents arrived. The mother tucked her daughter’s legs further onto the seat and dropped the pink shoes to the carpet, then shut the door. The driver side door was yanked open. She could hear her father swearing. He shouted something toward the house.

“David!” cried his wife, slamming her door. “For heaven’s sake! Get in’n drive.” She leaned over the back rest. “Honey … just … tell us if we should to take you to a doctor.”

“No! Take me home!” Under her arm, she blinked her eyes rapidly to keep them wet.

The father’s door slammed as well. The engine cranked and the car vaulted from the curb.
After awhile a hand patted her waist and her mother said, tenderly, “Is it … did he hurt your feelings, sweetheart? Did he say something …”

Holly made only a loud snuffle.

Back home, before anyone could interrogate her, she ran up the stairs to the bathroom. She spent a long time in the tub, motionless in the scalding water, then, listening for silence in the hall, dashed to her room and got into bed. The lights were out and her eyes were closed when her door was tapped on.

She fell asleep with surprisingly little effort.

The next morning, among the bustle of her parents getting ready for church, the mother looked in and asked if she would like to join them. A shaken head was her only answer.

Later, in the quiet house, Holly steeled herself to call Dick and attempt an explanation of some kind, but was told that he was still asleep. His mother laughed in saying this and playfully scolded her for ‘keeping him out so late last night!’

A half hour later, when Holly called again, Mrs Kirtland’s voice had become very cautious, saying only that he was ‘out.’

Holly’s tears returned in full. She huddled under the covers for many minutes, patting her eyes with a corner of the bed sheet and staring up at the pale blue princess phone on her desk.

Then it rang.

Her heart pinged as she reached up and gaily answered it.

“Oh thank god!” cried Linda, “I’ve been so worried about you! You’re okay, aren’tcha? I called and called last night and nobody answered. I didn’t know what to think!” She paused a moment, listening. “Are you okay? Hol?”

“I’ll live,” Holly muttered.

“What happened. Where’d you and Roger go.”

“God does everyone know about it?”

“Well … he left right after you did … and what that Grant guy said … we just assumed — you’re sure you’re okay … you sound kind’a funny.”

“I’m fine. My life’s ruined! But I’m fine.”

“Oh, Hol! Tell me everything!”

Holly slid deeper under the covers, snuggling with the phone receiver, and related the events of the previous night. She told of Roger’s collusion with ‘that Grant guy’ — “Don’t believe anything he ever says! — or Roger!”

She told also of Roger’s sinister pursuit of her in his car and dwelt at length on the perverted, almost incestuous, way he and his sister touched one another while their parents were gone.

Linda gasped with horror.

“Then!” Holly sniffled, “then he called Barb — at the party! — and told her t’bring Dick by and …!”

“Your Dick?”

“Yes! She got him out of his poker game — three guesses how she knew whose house he was at — I didn’t even know! Then she drove him right to Roger’s house! He looked in the window and saw us sitting on the couch. We were just sitting! I was waiting for my folks for godsakes!” Tears were tumbling from her eyes.

“Oh, Holly!” Linda’s voice was unsteady.

“I screamed at him to let me explain, but he wouldn’t even look at me! He just … drove away. With Barb! I’ve been crying all night!”

“But …” (A sound of puzzlement had come into Linda’s voice.) “Just out of the blue? Barb and Dick?”

“No! They’ve been — for months! Behind everyone’s back!”

“But … you never said anything. You —”

“I never knew for sure!” Holly’s chest gasped for air. “But Roger did! He spies on everyone! And he used it for this … he orchestrated the whole damn thing!”
There was a short pause, then Linda declared, “Career Day!”
“Exactly!”
For several moments the phone remained silent, except for sniffling between the two friends.
“Oh, Hol. You’ve just gotta … I don’t know … you can’t let it get you down, okay? They’re jerks! All of’m! Don’t spend another minute on’em!”
“Two years, Lin! What’m I gonna do now!”
Holly sobbed for a considerable time, wiping her hands and her face in the bed linen. Eventually she mumbled: “I’ll call you as soon as I can talk straight, okay?”
Linda agreed and very softly hung up her end of the line. The dial tone buzzed loudly in Holly’s ear.
After returning the phone to her desk, Holly lay still and stared at the ceiling. Tears continued to leak out of her eyes.

When the parents returned from church, picking up Sarah on the way, the presence of their elder daughter at lunch was insisted upon. Holly took a quick shower and came down in her bathrobe and slippers, staring at the floor.
“Sarah,” said Mrs Hatfield, “you may finish your waffles in by the TV.”
Eagerly, Sarah grabbed her dishes, but then halted a moment, staring at her sister.
“Go on,” said her father.
The mother refilled the coffee cups. Before sitting down again she untied the swinging door and let it close, muffling the sound of cartoon antics in the other room.
“Dear,” she said, looking closely at Holly’s face and its lack of blemishes. “just tell us — you don’t have to say anything you don’t want to — but just … ” (she patted the daughter’s hand) “… just tell us if there’s anything criminal involved, and we’ll let the police handle it, all right? No one will know about this but just us.” She grabbed her husband’s hand as well.
“And you’re sure you don’t need a doctor or anything,” the father added.
Holly sighed and stared down at the syrup pooling on her plate. “It’s nothing he can go to jail for.”
“What did he do, sweetie?”
“He wrecked my life!” She slapped hands to her face, and both arms were patted by her parents. She sniffled. “He made it so Dick would see us — together! — and now he’s … ” Her face went ugly and red trying to say the word ‘gone.’
The mother gasped, throwing arms around her daughter. “No, honey … don’t, don’t.” She hugged tightly for a moment, then, still holding her, asked: “But … his parents told us how he’d … driven you home from the party? And you were grateful and — ”
“That was his plan! All along! Ever since … !”
The parents sat back, staring at their daughter.
Holly made an elaborately wet inhalation and pressed the cuff of her robe to her nose. “Back at Career Day?” (she said this with great sarcasm) “I was ordered to like … trick him into being one’a the escorts, okay? And so — he said he was gonna get even! — he said it like he really meant it, but, ever since, he’s been this … goody-goody nice guy — just waiting for a chance to wreck my whole life!”
“But what did he do! Exactly.” Her father’s face was darkening.
Holly was pushing the lapels of her lavender robe together. “So when we got to his house — while I was in the bathroom! — he calls up Barb and has her get hold’a Dick and come look at us through the window! And we were just — !”
“Your Barb?” The mother cocked her head. “Barb and Dick?”
“Yes! That was his plan too! Getting them together. It’s been going on for months!” Holly had to pause to catch her breath. “But we were just — we were just sitting there, on the couch — waiting for you guys!” Holly looked up at the refrigerator. “I was waiting, he was … pretending to be asleep. So innocent, so — ” Her face crumbled.
Abruptly the father’s chair scraped backward. “Maybe he can’t go to jail, but he can get a black eye, can’t he?”

“David!”

“Well he’s not gonna break my girl’s heart! Look at her!”

“Sweetie …” the mother soothed, “if it’s just a trick, just a … misunderstanding, Dick will — just talk to him, dear. He’ll understand, he’ll see …”

“He won’t. He won’t!” Holly cried.

“What’s going on?” said Sarah. She was standing just inside the door with an empty glass.

“Go back out.” Her mother flicked a finger at her.

“I need more milk!”

“Later!” said her father. “Go!”

“Wha’d she do? Dick get her pregnant?”

Holly leaped up and charged for the door, pushing her sister into the cupboards. There was a crash, glass shattering on the floor.

Before Holly had reached the top of the stairs she heard a familiar bawling.

The next morning, Monday, while Barb chattered in the back of the bus with her many giddy friends, Holly stared out the window in her seat behind the driver. Everyone, it seemed to Holly, was looking at her, but no one spoke.

The same was true in the hallways at school. When she arrived at her locker, head bowed and hanging up her coat, a cluster of acquaintances gave ground so that she was alone with Roger who was standing by his own locker a few feet away. He came up to her.

“Holly, you’ve gotta call my folks. They …”

“Don’t talk to me!”

“Holly!”

“Not here! God everyone knows already!”

Throughout first hour and the rest of her classes that morning, Holly never looked up from her desktop, never raised her hand. She saw nothing of Dick.

When Linda came to collect her for lunch, Holly cried to her, “God this is hell! I wish I was dead!”

“I know, I know.” There was sincerity in the pat of Linda’s hand.

Holly sniffled. “Everyone thinks I did something wrong!”

“I know … it’s just … it’s just the way it looks! Everyone assumes! Y’know? Assumes the worst.”

Holly was shaking her head, throwing books into her locker.

“Hol … just settle down, okay?” Linda stared wrathfully at several gawkers passing by. “We’ll go to lunch and just sit by ourselves.”

“No, you go!”

“What are you gonna do.”

“Nothing. I’m just … ” she sniffled, “I’m going to the library. I wanna be alone!”

Linda gazed at her friend for awhile, then, touching Holly’s arm, hurried away.

After a few minutes in a nearby girls’ room, time enough for the halls to empty, Holly hurried upstairs to the library. She gave Mrs Vance a weak smile and strolled, with books clasped to her bosom, to the far end of the room. She halted on seeing Roger occupying one of the tables. Turning around, she headed back the way she had come, past the librarian’s puzzled look, and back out the door.

Roger caught up to her at the stairwell. “Hol … listen.”

“Get away from me!”

“You’ve gotta talk to my folks.” He grabbed her arm. “They think I raped you or something. They won’t believe a word I say!”

“Neither do I! Lemme go!”
“They don’t believe me about Barb anymore either! It’s like … they think I’m an actual criminal or something!”

“That’s exactly what you are!”

“So … will ya? Talk to my folks? Please? Your dad or someone called yesterday. God I’m grounded! They took away everything! My license — Holly!”

She had dashed around a group of startled sophomores coming up the stairs, ran down a short hallway and into another girls’ room.

She sat in a stall with her arms around her books for the rest of lunch hour.

The balance of the day was long and fretful. While hurrying through the hallways she both hoped and dreaded to see Dick, but he never appeared, nor did Barb.

In last period, a few minutes before the bell, Holly’s teacher came to her desk and whispered for her to take her things and report to the principal’s office. Holly glimpsed many turned faces and opened mouths while she headed for the door.

The hairs on her arms rose up pricklingly as she hurried down the long, silent corridors. At the administration office old Mrs Lyme, stapling papers on the tall counter, said, “Hi, Holly. Go right in.” She pointed to the door marked, ‘Amos Prockmeyer, Principal.’

Inside, she found Roger sitting on a chair in front of the principal’s desk. His head was bowed and he did not look up when she entered.

Mr Prockmeyer, seated at his desk, in bright white shirt and tie, was leaning forward saying something to Roger but snapped back when Holly opened the door. Without a word, he pointed at the empty chair next to Roger and waited for her to sit down.

“I was just asking your friend here,” said the principal, “if he has anything he’d like to say to me concerning the departure of you two from the party the other night. Apparently, he has little more than childish excuses to make. I’m hoping your response will be more … adult?

Holly, seated, with books in her arms, looked at her knees. “I’m sorry. It was — even after being assaulted — it was … rude’ta just leave.”

The principal looked angered a moment, then turned to Roger. “See? She has a conscience. Is it too much to hope that some might have rubbed off on you?”

“I’m sorry. Sir.”

Mr Prockmeyer sat back. “My wife and I were frantic when you two were discovered missing at the dinner table.” He was looking at Holly. “A search of the house turned up nothing, and we couldn’t believe you’d just … go away and not tell anyone.”

“I did!” cried Roger, “I called as soon as I got … !”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, so you say.” He was holding a palm at Roger. “Regardless! The custom is to excuse yourself before you leave. If you learn nothing else from this, learn that!”

Mr Prockmeyer straightened in his chair. “Then, I was informed by my daughter’s friend what the two of you had been doing up in the main guest room.” His voice became harsher. “We saw the mess you left!”

Holly snapped her eyes up. “He was in on it! That guy, Grant. He was in on it! Him’n Roger, it was all their stupid … !”

“Were you in that room with your accomplice here.” The principal was staring at Holly but had thrust a harsh finger at Roger. “He admits you were. What do you say.”

“Yes. But we didn’t do anything! It was — ” (she too was pointing at Roger) “The two of’em, him and that … guy, they just cooked it all up’ta make it look like I was cheating on my boyfriend!”

The principal’s palm was up once more, and the dismissal bell had begun its long ring out in the hall. When it finished, Mr Prockmeyer turned to Roger. “Did you?” he smiled. “Cook it all up, as she says?”

“No!” (Unable to look into the fierce eyes, Roger was addressing the principal’s blue striped tie.) “I was just … tryin’ta help. She was yelling’n stuff. I thought she was in trouble — I shoulda just let her get raped.”
“By whom?”
“That guy … Grant what’s’is name — the jerk that’s screwin’ your daughter!”
Holly’s eyes snapped to the principal, who made no movement whatever.
Roger, arms now crossed, was staring down at his small pile of books on the carpet.
After a moment Mr Prockmeyer sat backing his chair, dropping hands into his lap. “Three dif-
ferent people, three different versions. Man I hate this job! Honor students notwithstanding; you all just lie through your teeth!”
“I’m telling the truth!” wailed Holly.
“Quiet! Not another word, either of you.” Mr Prockmeyer pushed his chair away from the desk and sat with hands on his knees. “The only thing that’s saving you is that … Grant-what’s-his-name is a jerk! But so help me if I see either one of you in my office again, I’m going to throw the book at you! Am I making myself clear?”
“Yessir,” they mumbled.
“Go catch your bus. And before you go to bed tonight make sure there’s a formal apology in the mail, one from each of you to my wife.” He stared at them. “I’m serious about this. You’ll do it if you want to remain in NHS. Now get out’a here.”
Holly stormed back to her locker, furiously ignoring the loud multitudes crowding the hallways. Roger was barely able to keep up with her.
While she was twisting the combination dial, Roger stared at her from his locker. “So … y’gonna call my folks … and tell’em the truth?”
“Have you ever told me the truth!”
“I’ve never lied to you.” He tipped his head, pleadingly. “So … are ya?”
Holly yanked her coat off its hook, kicked her locker closed and hurried past him down the hall.

Weeks went by.
During this time Holly’s social life slowly deteriorated. She saw nothing of Dick, or Barb, or many of the friends and acquaintances which she had formerly taken for granted. Only Linda continued to allow herself to be seen with Holly, and since Linda’s boyfriend was a close friend of Dick’s, Holly was careful never to ask too much of their friendship.
Nevertheless, she did not lack for attention. Now that Holly was no longer linked with one of the largest young men in their class, and assumed to be associated with one of the smallest, there were many venturesome and opportunistic boys who came forward willing to donate to her their personal regard. She found polite refusals for the first few of these but when the offers continued, like scavengers on a carcass, she became sharp and insulting. Soon, she was left in peace.
Her scholastic achievements, high as they already were, improved noticeably. She found herself devoting whole evenings — entire weekends after quitting her job — to the pursuit of good grades. Her mother often urged, or bullied her to call up a friend and go out and have some fun. Holly never did. One day she brought her phone back to the telephone company and when the next bill came, smiled into her milk glass as her father, at the dinner table, chuckled over the supposed error the phone company had made in undercharging him.
With her sister, Sarah, the mutual contempt Holly shared with her devolved to a profound and heavy-browed silence.
Roger, she avoided everywhere and refused even to respond to any of his requests.
One evening, on being called to the phone downstairs, she was asked by Roger’s mother if he had indeed apologized to her. It was apparently a condition for the repeal of his punishment. The tone of the mother’s voice made clear how ashamed and angered she was, both for what her son had done and for continuing to lie about it. Holly could almost feel sorry for her. Nevertheless, since the kid had never, even remotely, shown any regret, much less made an actual apology to her, Holly took some pleasure in reporting as much.
After a moment of strained silence, Mrs Waller declared, “He will, tomorrow!”
Standing at their lockers the next morning, Holly stared at Roger and waited for him to say something. He gave her a dark look and strolled away.

More weeks passed and Holly’s mother, conscious that her daughter was doing nothing in preparation for the senior prom, crept into Holly’s room one evening — which was a perilous thing to do whenever the typewriter was being banged upon — and asked, almost pleaded, that she let her cousin James take her to the prom.

“He’s home on leave all this month,” said Mrs Hatfield, sitting on a corner of Holly’s bed. “He really wants to. I talked to him today.”

Holly wrenched the platen knob and continued typing.

“You’ve always had a crush on Jimmy, and in his uniform …”

“Mom!” Holly said spittily, a pencil clenched between her teeth. “I’m not a chaawity case! I just don’t wanna go!”

“But why not, sweetie? You’re breaking my heart! You can’t be ashamed of how you look; you haven’t had a single spot in weeks! You’re just so gorgeous …”

Holly yanked the pencil out. “Mom! I’ve got, like, tons’ a work to do! Look at this! And this! And that!” Holly pointed at her desk and at the stack of books on her dressing table piled in front of the mirror where her cosmetic bottles used to be. “God I’ll never get it all done!”

Her mother got up and shook Holly’s shoulder. “Oh shush! You know you don’t have to do all this … extra credit stuff! You’re just making work for yourself!” She knelt down beside her daughter.

“Why, sweetie? Please tell me. What’s hurting you?”

Holly threw the pencil at the typewriter. “I just don’t wanna go!”

“But why!”

“’Cuz everyone’s a damn jerk! They can all go t’hell!”

There was a creaking sound and Holly turned to see her father leaning against the door jamb. “It’s that Waller kid,” he said. “Ever since that night. God if there was any legal way to put him behind bars that’s just where he’d be right now!”

His wife, still kneeling on the carpet waved at him. “Go away,” she said, “You’re not helping.”

Sarah had come into the room as well and pointed at Holly’s dressing table. “Mom?” she asked, “can I have the rest of that real French perfume you gave her?”

“No,” said Holly.

“She never uses it anymore and it’ll just get all …”

“No, buttbrain!” Holly yelled.

“Say-say-say!” said the father.

“Out!” shouted Holly. “Out, right now, everybody! Out’a my room! I’m gonna start throwing things!”

“Sweetie …”

“Leave me alone!” Holly’s hands went to her face and soon the door quietly closed, leaving her by herself.

The prom came and went. Linda, carefully, never alluded to it at lunchtime while she and Holly sat at a table by themselves, but the concern in Linda’s voice was always present.

“Hol …” she said one day, “… god you’re gonna crash right in your soup!”

“Shh,” Holly giggled, “you’ll wake me up.”

“Every day you’re like this! Don’t you ever sleep anymore?”

“Just in study hall, the rest of the time I eat No-Doze.”

Linda sighed. “Couldn’t you ease up on the studying. These last quarter grades don’t count for anything anyway … and it’s too late for the graduation speeches, even if you do wind up ahead of Dale or Pam.”

Holly sighed and sipped her straw.
“And that lady from Bryn Mawr looked like she wanted to adopt you on the spot! Enough already!”

“I know,” Holly laughed, then plopped her cheek onto one hand. “It’s just — I don’t know — it’s like an addiction.” She mumbled while tapping floating peas with her spoon. “Like Cinderella: she knows she’s gonna die at midnight so, till then, she parties like hell.”

“How?” Linda looked closely at her friend. “You gotta get some sleep. I mean it.”

Holly nodded.

“Come on, pick up your tray,” ordered Linda. “We’re going to the biffy up by the band room — the one that always smells like Lucky Strikes. You can zonk out and I’ll finish proofing your stupid term paper. Come on.”

Later, while Holly was letting herself tumble into sleep on the plastic couch in the girls’ room, her feet on her friend’s lap, she managed to say, almost in tears, “Lin? I don’t deserve you.”

She did not hear the reply.

Holly stayed up all that evening typing the final draft of her term paper only to remember, after finishing — and about twenty minutes before her alarm was set to go off — that the due date for the paper had been changed to the following day.

“Idiot!” she wailed, falling backwards on her bed. But she took care not let her eyes close, for, if she did, she would be certain to sleep through the alarm.

After a bracing shower and a sugary breakfast, she was just going out the door when her mother came pummeling down the stairs. “Don’t forget this!” she cried waving the blue folder containing Holly’s term paper.

Holly smiled. “No. I forgot. The whole school’s going to Theater in the Round today. Paper’s not due till tomorrow.”

“And you stayed up all night working on it anyway?”

“I forgot! I just — but at least I’ll be able to sleep through ‘Richard the Third’ Oh, I’m looking forward to that!” She laughed. “I’ll get Lin to clap my hands for me.”

Her mother shook her head as Holly dashed out to the bus stop.

In English class Holly sat at her desk with her head propped on her hand and doodled aimlessly in her notebook, trying to stay awake. Mr Bertram was reading the announcements in his gravelly early morning voice. He mentioned that everyone was to begin boarding the buses at 10:45. Holly glanced at the clock and attempted to calculate how many minutes away that was from the current time, 8:27. She quickly gave up and Mr Bertram’s voice droned on and on.

The room was unusually warm that morning. Holly struggled to keep her eyelids from falling shut and the regular, slumber-like breaths coming from her nostrils felt wet and sticky on her hand. Her palm covered her frequent yawns — huge, teary-eyed yawns, so large the entire world seemed to go silent.

At the end of one such yawn, the girl ahead of her tapped her arm and pointed at the teacher.

Holly looked up, brightly alert.

“You can go now,” said Mr Bertram, indicating the door with his thumb.

Holly’s eyebrows crinkled for a moment, then she saw Roger opening the door.

She hopped up and followed him out.

The cool air of the corridor flowed over her sleepy-hot face. She halted a moment, realizing she had forgotten her purse, but then continued on.

Roger, with hands and paperback book in his pockets walked ahead of her, never turning around or slowing down.

Before going very far she called out to him. “Still grounded?” she asked with no hint of sympathy.

“Shut up.”

“All you have to do is just say you’re sorry. Is that so hard?”

He still had not turned around.
She ran a few steps to catch up to him. “Your big revenge kind of backfired, huh.” She yawned. “Member? For that Career Day thing? How you were really gonna get even?” She ran a few more steps to catch up again. “True,” she continued, “I’m down one boyfriend, but I see now that was more Barb’s doing than yours. And, anyway, from the way I hear they’re treating each other these days, I’m well rid’a both of’em.” She yawned again and let him outdistance her.

Just before reaching the auditorium, Roger turned abruptly and headed down the stairs toward the gym.

“Where are you going?” Holly scolded him from the top step. “God you’re so juvenile! Get up here!”

Roger turned and looked at her. A dirty smirk came across his face. “I will if you’ll tell my folks I apologized.”

“I’m not going to lie for you! Just say you’re sorry and I’ll be glad to tell’em!”

He turned and continued walking down the steps.

“Roger!” she called out, then looked sheepishly at an open classroom door, and the angry-looking teacher inside. “Roger!” she repeated in a squeaky whisper. “Get up here! I mean it! Jeez, you make me sound like my mother!”

Roger stopped and with a grin on his face came back up the stairs. She made him precede her to the auditorium.

Inside, she sighed happily. “Good. First ones here.”

As they were seating themselves — he in the front row where she pointed, she behind him — Holly yawned once more and said, “Tell Linda to let me sleep through the meeting, okay? And … I’ll think about lying to your folks. Deal?”

He had begun reading his book and made no effort to reply.

She kicked the back of his seat cushion. “Jerk!” she muttered. Crossing her arms and legs and allowing another yawn, she gratefully relinquished control of her body. A body which, of its own accord it seemed, slouched luxuriantly into the padded chair and fell sound asleep.

She had a dream, the episodes of which flashed by like cars on a highway, but as Holly snapped awake the final scene was burned clearly into her mind. She saw herself in the auditorium, this auditorium, on the cement floor between the first row of seats and the base of the stage, curled into a fetal position. She was naked save for a multitude of red spots covering her body, bright red, glittering spots, like fresh bullet wounds. Standing on the seats all around her were solemn young men and women in black gowns and mortarboard hats. Their mouths were all open and they were, oddly, yodeling some kind of irritating, tuneless chant.

As Holly recognized the shiny beige contour of the seat ahead of her, she became aware of the tardy bell ringing out in the hallway. It was the same sound the solemn yodelers had been making.

She began to stretch and her elbow hit something soft. It was Roger in the seat next to hers. He was just tipping away from her and pulling an arm from behind her back.

She turned a vicious face on him, inhaling to shout a stream of vituperation. But something hit the back of her throat and she began to cough.

While she was making choking sounds and slapping hands at everything, Roger got up and moved one seat away.

Holly cleared her throat. “What — what were you — ” She coughed. “What were you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“You were doing something! Your hands were all over me!” She looked down at the wrinkles in her outfit.

Roger had opened his book and was pretending to read.

“Creep! Did you touch me? Did you touch my face?” Holly’s fingertips began feeling her lips and chin. “Did you?”

“No, I didn’t touch your holy face!”

Glancing around, Holly saw that she and Roger were still the only ones in the auditorium.
“Don’t sit there,” she ordered. “This row’s for my friends.”
Roger made a small laugh. “As if you even have friends anymore!”
“Move!”
“Go to hell!”
Holly looked down at herself and picked at some sweaty areas of her blouse. She gave her skirt a tug. “How long was I out,” she asked, stretching out a toe for the loafer that had slid under the seat ahead. “I can hardly move.” She looked at the clock over the exit sign, but the glare from the ceiling light made the hands indistinct. She turned toward Roger. “What time is it.” She gasped suddenly. “God! You did do something! You’re red as a beet!”
“I didn’t touch you!”
“What time is it!”
Without looking at his watch, he replied, “Twelve-thirty.”
“What time is it dammit! Gimme your watch!”
As he held up his arm, he informed her: “That was the bell for late lunch. You slept through all the other ones.”
Holly cocked her head to read the upside-down watch dial. It showed 12:33. She threw his arm back at him. “Very funny.” She stretched her neck high and peered at the clock on the wall again, then looked back by the entrance doors. “Where is everyone.” She turned to Roger, who had returned to his book. “Hasn’t anyone showed up yet?”
“Not a soul … but then I’ve been asleep most’a the time.”
Holly stared at him, at his blush and the odd crease mark on his forehead, the kind that forms during deep slumber. She looked down at herself. Pulling up a sweaty sleeve she found several such lines on her upper arm. She stared at Roger. “God! Wha’d you do! Where is everyone.”
“Downtown I s’pose. The play starts at noon.”
Holly’s mouth hung open a moment.
Roger turned a page. “The NHS meeting was down in the gym this morning,” he said. “I think they were doing a walk-through of that thing on Friday for the new members.”
Holly jumped to her feet. She banged past his knees, stumbling out to the aisle, then stopped and looked back at the floor between the rows. “Where’s my purse! Wha’ja do with it.”
Before Roger could answer she remembered and dashed up the aisle to the exit.
Out in the hallway, she ran from one wall clock to the next. They all showed twelve, thirty-five.
“God!” Holly wailed as she sprinted down the empty corridor. All the classrooms she passed had closed doors, the windows of which revealed dark interiors.
The same was true for Mr Bertram’s room. Looking through the tiny pane of glass in the door, she saw there were no books on her desk. The door was locked. Her heart was hopping up and down inside her ribs, and her breath came in panicky little gasps. It occurred to her, irrelevantly, that she was no longer sleepy. She kicked the bottom of the door and hurried over to her locker.
The hallway was empty except for a solitary figure coming toward her, rapping his knuckles on the locker doors.
Holly found that her books were not in her locker either, nor was her purse. She slammed the door as Roger approached.
With hands on hips, Holly shrieked at him, “What were you doing all this time! God! Four hours?” There were tears in her eyes, she could feel them slicing across her face as she yelled.
Calmly, Roger replied, “What was I doing? Getting even.” He smiled broadly. “Guess how many people are gonna believe we were sleeping.”
Holly had made a fist and thumped his shoulder as hard as she could. There was no attempt to avoid it.
“What did you do to me!”
“Nothing!” he said, rubbing his arm and walking toward the door of their classroom. “I didn’t have to. You’re gonna be the biggest joke around here since … me.”
He also tried turning the doorknob. “Look,” he said, pointing through the little window. “Our books are stacked on that thing behind Mr B’s desk. Looks like our stuff … you got a red purse, right?”

Holly came over, pushing him aside, and looked in herself. Indeed, her purse and several books were neatly piled on the file cabinet under the chalk board.

Roger, now leaning rakishly against the wall and gazing at her, said, “I suppose the kids in second hour had to move’em so they could sit down. Can you just imagine what everyone was thinkin’? Staring at our books. And knowing we like to sneak out’a parties toget — ”

“Shut up!” Holly was nearly sobbing.

Roger held out a handkerchief to her. She turned away and ran an forearm under her nose, then hurried for the stairs. Roger followed.

“Where we goin’,” he asked, running beside her. “I’ve got a dime for the phone if you wanna call your dad and have him yell at me some more. He’s done that — god would’ja slow down! — he’s done that several times now. It’s easy to see where y’get all your pious language.”

Down on first floor, Holly strode past the pay phone and into the administration office.

“Holly!” cried the secretary, jumping up from her desk.

“Hi, Mrs Lyme,” Holly sniffled. “Could I get … ”

“Just a minute.” The secretary ran over to the principal’s office and poked her head through the open doorway a moment.

Roger, panting to catch his breath, came close to Holly’s shoulder and whispered, “Now we’re gonna die.”

She banged her elbow into his side.

Mrs Lyme returned with a stern look on her face. “Please go in. Both of you.” Then she headed for the row of filing cabinets but turned suddenly. “Um … excuse me.” She looked at Roger. “What’s your name again?”


The secretary nodded as the students headed for the principal’s office.

“Isn’t it neat,” said Roger, “how nobody knows me. But everyone knows you?”

Mr Prockmeyer, seated stiffly at his desk (suit coat off, white shirt, red tie), glared at them as they entered. There was only one chair in front of his desk, which Holly took. Roger brought a second chair from the back wall and sat down very close to her, on the side away from the door.

The principal inhaled ominously. “I was just on the point of calling the police and have them begin searching for you two. Good thing I didn’t. From your looks I gather this isn’t a case of abduction or assault.”

“No sir,” Roger quickly answered.

Mr Prockmeyer shot eyes at him, then sat back. His gaze drifted over to Holly. “Mr Bertram was in here several times this morning, more frantic each time. I couldn’t convince him, but I had a hunch you were in no real danger … you weren’t, were you?”

“No. I’m fine.” Her hands, and voice, were trembling.

The principal sighed and stood up. He came around the front of his desk and leaned against its edge, arms crossed. Just then, the secretary stepped in and handed him two folders. He set one down and began leafing through the other. Mrs Lyme closed the door on her way out and the office became very quiet.

The principal cleared his throat. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t I say something bad would happen if I ever saw you in my office again?”

“Yeah, but we weren’t doing anything,” said Holly. “It’s really silly. I was up all last night, and I was dead tired, and at the, you know, the meeting? — the NHS meeting? — I fell completely asleep, completely. I just now woke up.”

Still looking in the folder, he replied softly, “I happen to know you were absent from that meeting. I was there, Miss Hatfield.”

“No! I was in the auditorium! I thought the meeting was there! Like always!”

“And, Mr Waller, did you also believe it was in the auditorium?”
“No. Mr Bertram told us to go to the gym.”

Mr Prockmeyer looked over the top of the folder. “So … why weren’t you at the meeting.”

Roger nodded toward his companion. “She ordered me to go with her.”

“No! I thought …!” Holly slapped her skirt. “… in the past he’s … he’s gotten me in trouble by skipping out’n I thought … I thought — this is so complicated! — I thought he was doing it to me again! So I …”

“That’s enough,” the principal said gently from within the folder. “I get the idea. You sat in the auditorium for half a day waiting for the meeting to start.”

“No! I was …”

His palm silenced her. “And you?” He turned to Roger. “You never once, in all that time, mentioned anything about being in the wrong place? Am I understanding this correctly?”

“No!” cried Holly. “I was asleep!”

“We both were,” said Roger. A frightened look was beginning to form on his face. “We —”

“I’ve been working and working on this term paper and …”

“Okay! Just stop, all right? I get enough asinine excuses from my own kids.”

Holly’s mouth jerked open and closed several times while the principal looked through the folder some more.

“Mr Waller,” he said after a time, “I see here you’ve been accepted at Cornell … as of last week?”

“Yessir.”

“Very commendable. But did you think that, with this acceptance under your belt, you could screw up all you wanted to in these last few days of high school and not have it affect your college career?”

He looked up, sharply. “Did you?”

Roger shrugged. “Sort of … sir.”

Mr Prockmeyer exhaled and dropped the folder, loudly, on his desk. “I’ll be sending them a letter and, I dare say, they’ll be sending you one as well. I can almost guarantee you won’t be spending the next four years anywhere on the East Coast. Miss Hatfield.” He had picked up the other folder and was leafing through it.

Holly glimpsed Roger turning away to face toward the window, his hands, in his lap, made themselves into fists.

“Here I see,” the principal continued, crossing his ankles. (His lustrous black shoes were only inches from Holly’s and Roger’s pigeon-toed loafers.) “I see you’re pending acceptance from …” He was counting something. “four — at least four — different colleges. Just look at all these letters of recommendation! ‘Best student I’ve come across in many years.’” he read, then turned to another page. “‘ … a rare combination of ingenuity and initiative … ’ ‘This girl is going places.’”

The folder was snapped closed suddenly and slapped down on top of the other one. Holly jumped in her seat.

“God help me,” the principal stared at her, “I have to write to every one of’em.”

“No!” cried Holly. “I didn’t do anything! I just … I just …” Her face was contorted in an ugly sob. “Please! I didn’t …!” She sniffled.

Mr Prockmeyer was shaking his head. “No,” he said softly, leaning toward her with his hands gripping the edge of his desk. “I can’t help you. I don’t know what you were up to all morning — I don’t want to know — but I will not be made a jackass in my own school, Miss Hatfield! I will not be lied to. And I’m not going to let any of these colleges think they’re getting something they’re not!”

Holly slapped her hands to her face and shuddered.

“They, may be willing to give you the benefit of the doubt — in all fairness, I’ll only report the facts, as I know them — but, generally, when a principal has misgivings about his own students … well, that usually carries a lot of weight.”

Holly was bent nearly double in her despair.

“Um,” said Roger. “You’re … kinda making a mistake.”

“Oh?” The principal turned fiercely toward him.

“Yeah. She … she really was asleep all morning and … if y’can wait till tomorrow? She’ll prove it.”
Holly didn’t look up but she stopped her crying, as much as possible, and listened.

“See,” Roger went on, his knees were apart and his fingers plucked nervously at the chair’s upholstery. He was addressing the edge of Mr Prockmeyer’s desk. “Holly, she’s got this … allergy sort of? She gets sores from kissing n’ stuff? So she never lets anyone kiss her. Not even her boyfriend. But tomorrow morning …”

Holly sat up straight, her fingertips crawling over her face like bugs.

The principal’s eyes widened, watching her.

“… tomorrow morning … just — “ Roger raised his hands suddenly and a sneer had appeared on his lips. “— while she was asleep? I was — all over her! Slobbering! Face, arms, neck … everything!” He was smirking like a gangster. “Call her in here tomorrow. She’ll look like a rusted truck!”

Holly had jumped up, a shocked look on her face.

“Worse. She’ll prob’ly need skin grafts.” Roger had crossed his arms confidently over his chest.

“So … see? She had t’be asleep to let me —

Holly’s scream silenced him.

Roger glared at her. “I told’ja I fight dirty … goddamn piece’a shit!”

Holly was frozen in place, hands fisted, whitened. She grabbed her chair as Mr Prockmeyer reached out to her.

Roger was turned toward the window and did not see her raising the heavy oak over her shoulder.

“So … ” he said with satisfaction, though his hands were now gripping fistfuls of his trousers.

“… now we’re even!”

The chair came down. It was partially deflected by the principal and only banged against Roger’s shoulder. She heard his bark of pain, then she tore out of the office, past the wide-eyed secretary and across the hall to the nearest rest room.

Her blouse was ripped off before she reached the vanity. Tiny buttons pattered on the floor behind her. She turned faucets and yanked paper towels. (In her mind was the image of Roger’s tongue and lips leaving saliva trails all over her face and neck, chin, ears, eyelids! — skin grafts! Four hours!)

Her stomach wrenched itself tight, making her stoop as she went down the line of sink basins spanning soap dispensers till she found one not empty and filled her palm with the pink syrup.

There were no stoppers in the bowls and she used her hands to splash scalding water, direct from the faucets, onto her face and shoulders.

Mrs Lyme hurried in and gasped to see Holly bent over the vanity, slapping and squealing in the steamy howl of the faucets, the straps of her brassier dark with splashed water.

“Oh dear … oh dear!” she stuttered helplessly. “Can I … is there anything I can do. The nurse left on the busses with the —

“Call my — ” Holly coughed and spat out a mouthful of suds. “call my mom … tell her … God! … tell her …”

“I just got off the phone. She’s on her way down … she’s bringing some kind of medicine — isn’t that too hot for you!”

“Can you get my purse? It’s locked up in Bertram’s — there’s some pills — ow! Ow, ow, ow!”

Holly began slapping the wall, her eyes squeezed shut.

“Here!” Mrs Lyme rushed forward to snap a fresh towel from the dispenser and handed it to Holly. The coarse paper was gouged into her eyes. Holly wheezed and squeaked, and fell to her elbows on the vanity. “God!” she cried. “God!”

“I’ll … I’ll, go get the keys,” said the secretary rushing away.

Some time later, Holly emerged from the lavatory, cautiously, one hand behind her back holding her blouse closed, and dashed upstairs to her locker. Her other arm clutched the retrieved purse and books to her bosom. The rushing air felt icy on her scrubbed skin and damp clothing. Her underthings were soaked, her skirt hung heavy with its load of runoff water, and its hem, in several places, had twisted wrinkles where she had wrung out the worst of the moisture.
Running up the steps caused her to burp as well. The pill she had swallowed when Mrs Lyme returned with her belongings was accompanied with many gulps of water, using her hands as a makeshift cup. (When her stomach was empty the pills always caused havoc down there.) And the air she had swallowed with the water did not help.

Reaching her locker she immediately slipped into her overcoat. It gave little warmth, but at least it kept her button-less blouse from falling off her shoulders. She turned up the collar to keep the wet hair away from her neck.

She was no longer crying. Her eyes, however, still ached from the suds, and occasionally her chest made little gasps of residual hurt.

Holly selected several books and returned to the administration office where Mr Prockmeyer was standing at the counter talking on the phone. The secretary came forward. “Feel better, dear?”

Holly nodded.

Mrs Lyme gestured toward the principal who, though not interrupting his conversation, was staring at Holly. “He’s talking to the lawyers,” Mrs Lyme whispered, then went to lay a slip of paper in front of him.

He clicked a pen and signed the paper.

The secretary gave it to Holly. “Sick slip for tomorrow,” she said. “But you sure don’t have to come in if, you know, you don’t feel like it.”

Holly nodded once more and put the paper in her purse. “My mom get here yet?” she asked, gloomily.

“No, not yet.”

“I’ll … go wait by the steps.”

As she turned to go, the principal slapped a hand over the phone. “Holly,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea about your … condition. I’ve just talked with your mother. She told me the whole history: you and him. I’m so very sorry about all of this! I feel it’s all my fault. I had plenty of warning about that kid. I just … he fooled me. He really did.”

Holly paused at the door a moment, eyes lowered, then, nodding, went out.

She walked around the corner of the administration office to the wide staircase, four or five steps high, just inside the main entrance. The stairs were empty except for Roger sitting on the top step close to the office windows. On the floor beside him was his black jacket with its sleeves tied together to make a large bundle. It contained books and sacks and other items, apparently the contents of his locker. He did not glance at her. He just sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands on his ears, staring at the portion of muddy steps between his shoes.

Holly went to the wall opposite, her books in her arms, and leaned on the banister. She stared at him, but he never moved. Occasionally, she had to bend forward and rub her abdomen. The pills were making their presence known. She made a weak smile at the secretary, standing cross-armed like a sentinel at the office window, staring down at Roger.

Soon, a familiar station wagon drove up outside. At this, Roger began to stir himself. His mother hurried in, glancing a moment at Holly, then went to her son. “Is this … true? What he said. Did you … dear god … Roger! Did you … ?”

“Yeah, yeah. I really did. Is the back open?” He stooped to pick up his possessions.

“Roger!” There was crushing heartbreak in the mother’s voice as she grabbed the sleeve of his shirt. His eyes refused to look at her. He stood facing the entry with the parcel in his arms.

Mrs Waller threw her eyes at Holly. “You’re the one … he …”

Holly nodded.

“Are you — will you be all right, dear?”

The hurt and sorrow in the mother’s voice made Holly’s face go ugly with restraining her own tears. “I don’t know,” is all she could say.

“Oh, sweetie … I’m so sorry about this …” The mother was crying. “ … and from the time before …?” she sniffled, “I’m just so sorry!” She looked at her son again. “I just can’t … understand —”

“Gimme the keys.” Roger was shifting his bundle, impatiently.
Mrs Waller withdrew a ring of keys from her purse. “Where’s — where do I go — the principal.”

Roger pointed up at the office window.

She climbed the steps and hurried around the corner, the click of her low-heeled shoes prominent in the empty foyer.

Holly, patting her eyes with a coat cuff, grimaced on a sudden stomach cramp and slumped down, close to the wall where the stairs were not so muddy. She watched Roger navigating his way through the big glass doors.

Outside, he opened the back of the station wagon and threw in his things, then got in on the passenger side. His head returned to a bowed incline, as if praying, and he sat very still.

Before long, a blue Buick appeared and Holly ran out to meet it. The car had stopped in the middle of the driveway; she yanked open the door and hopped in, tossing her books into the back seat.

“Are you all right, sweetie!” her mother cried.

“No!” Holly yelled, sniffling. “I need a hospital!”

The can of ointment was lying on the seat and Holly immediately began smearing her face with the Smelly cream.

The mother stared at her daughter. “What’d he do!”

“Everything! Just go!”

But the car continued to idle.

Holly looked up at her mother staring at the gray station wagon. “Go!”

“Is that him.” The mother’s voice was filled with anger.

“Yes!” Holly was coughing on the sharp fumes.

“Am I … supposed to see someone. I talked to someone already. I think it was …”

“Just go! Emergency room!”

Mrs Hatfield drove away.

“We’re going to the clinic first,” she said, turning back onto the main road. “Doctor Crane said he’ll give you a few minutes.”

“Mom, we don’t have time! What if I get cancer! — skin grafts!” Yanking tissues from the dispenser, Holly began wiping her fingers. “Four hours he was on me! I’m gonna look like …!” An ugly sob overcame her and the tissues were crushed in her hands.

The mother, staring at her daughter a moment, looked back at the highway. “He’s going to give you some … special antibiotics. Here, take my scarf.” She pulled a brightly colored kerchief from her head, exposing a mass of graying and hastily pinned curls.

Holly folded it into a triangle and stretched it around her wet tresses, knotting it with a vengeance under her chin.

Her mother sniffled. “Oh, honey … I’m just sick! I’m just sick! How could he do that! Didn’t he know about your …”

“He knows all about it, Mom! He did it on purpose!”

“But why … what on earth did you do to him?”

“Nothing!”

“Then … why does he keep … ? I don’t understand …”

“He’s a creep! A goddamn fu … insane creep!”

At the clinic, the dermatologist stepped away from his scheduled patient a moment to examine Holly’s face and shoulders, which, even under the dark cream, had by then turned a uniformly painful red from all the abrasion. He shook his head a moment, then, with a swab of alcohol and pinching a tuft of skin on her upper arm, gave her a shot. “There’ll be some nausea … maybe quite a bit,” he advised. “Drink lots of milk. Take a hot bath — no more scrubbing! — and go to bed.”

Holly nodded to all of this and hurried with ducked head beside her mother back to the car. The cold wind in the parking lot lashed icily at her wet clothes.

All evening the medication’s side effects tormented Holly. After the scalding bath, she was buried in her bed under a stack of quilts. She sweated and groaned, her vomit resembled curdled cream. She was unable to find a position in which her bowels did not feel as if they were tearing themselves apart. In pain and anger she screamed at her sister when she brought up yet another glass of warm milk.
Holly’s restlessness seemed to subside, however, when she listened to her father’s shouting into the telephone downstairs. The words were indistinct, but their sound slashed and stabbed on her behalf like centurions fighting to their death.

Comforted by this, and her body still short of sleep, Holly eventually fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

On awakening the next morning, she closed her eyes and her lips moved prayer-like for a moment before she dared touch fingers to her face. She sat up, then dashed into the bathroom.

Squinting in the glare of the lights she looked closely in the mirror.

There were no spots! Not a one!

Even after washing away the residue of oily cream, her skin gleamed. It was still scarlet from being rubbed raw the day before, but there were no bumps, no blemishes, no blood. Her heart pounded with thanksgiving.

Soon, her mother appeared, cringed a moment, then threw arms around her daughter, sobbing.

Holly cried too as the rest of the family crowded around, although Sarah stood back and only stared from under her eyebrows at the weeping grown-ups.

Holly was eager to get to school. Skipping breakfast, she bathed and had her mother do something with her hair.

On the bus and, later, in the hallways at school, she was besieged by crowds of acquaintances asking what had become of her the previous morning; what had she and Roger been doing?

Holly was prepared with phrases of explanation and told them the truth, although with considerable chagrin to admit of her sleepy cluelessness (and having to explain about her weird allergy), but she made very clear Roger’s intentions and culpability.

Linda was waiting for her at her locker, and they threw arms around each other.

“God,” cried Holly, “it’s all over the whole school already!”

“Face it,” said Linda. “You’re a sensation! Everyone’s blabbing it to everyone else! But, Holly, you look great! No spots at all! The redness, that from the medicine? Looks like y’been in the sun too long.”

Holly nodded. “It’s something new the doctor gave me.” She grinned a moment. “Thought I was gonna die! But it really worked. When I woke up I couldn’t believe it! Not a single bump! God I was happy!”

Linda’s eyes were wet. “I called your mom last night. She cried for ten minutes straight, like you’d been run over by a bus or something. Finally, I got her to tell me what happened. But — god! — I swear, when I see that … Roger, I’m gonna kick him right in the nuts! I could kill ’im!"

“Well … I don’t think we’ll be seeing much’a him anymore. Prockmeyer booted him right out. He’s gone. Emptied his locker’n everything.”

“Good riddance! He should get more’n that though!”

“Well …” said Holly, “… he has to live with the fact his plan completely flopped!” She was pointing at her face. “And … y’know,” her voice went softer, “he’s, like, totally ruined his own life — and he knows it. When his mom came to pick him up yesterday? No kidding, he looked like he wanted to kill himself. I wouldn’t be surprised if he does!” She shook her head. “He’d just been accepted at Cornell too. I could almost feel sorry for him — dumb cluck.”

As she closed her locker, Holly hefted her books and received another hug from her friend who said, joyfully: “But you’ve still got a life. Don’t stop smiling, okay? Show everyone you got guts! See ya at lunch.” Linda hurried away and Holly stepped into the girls’ room across the hall. The mirror still showed no evidence of beginning sores. She beamed back at her reflection.

In English class, the morning chatter was hushed when she entered and walked up to the teacher’s desk. Mr Bertram signed Holly’s sick slip without comment, other than to look at her with an expression of deep sympathy. She placed her term paper in the basket with the other colored folders.

Before taking her seat, she verified that Roger’s desk, on the far side of the room, was empty.
Gradually, during the day, Holly became less of a celebrity and fewer and fewer classmates begged her for details. Although Barb, while passing by in the hallway, gave her a look of what seemed to be genuine compassion; and, later, as Holly and Linda waited in the lunch line, Dick came up and offered to ‘kick the crap out’a the kid!’ for her.

Every chance she got, Holly would hurry into a rest room and check her face, but there was never a blemish.

After study hall, in yet another girls’ room, while Linda was relating a funny story from inside one of the stalls, Holly looked very closely in the mirror. She rubbed her tongue back and forth against the inside of her lips and cheeks, marveling how there were not even any of those painful little lumps clustering deep inside the flesh that, within hours, always preceded the sores and lingered on for weeks afterwards.

Holly stared and stared, and suddenly the pink in her face turned a deep crimson.

“… and then you know what happened …? Holly?” Linda called. “Hol-ly! … God if I’m talking to myself …?”

“No, I’m still here. I’m listening.”

Throughout the rest of the day, Holly wandered from class to class with an air of preoccupation. Then, after the final bell and on her way to the buses, she abruptly stopped and headed back to the administration office.

The secretary’s area was empty and she ventured to look in at the principal’s open door.

Mr Prockmeyer (gray tie today) was leaning forward at his desk with the phone receiver pressed to his ear. He looked up and happily waved her in.

She sat down in front of him for several minutes while he continued to listen on the phone, nodding occasionally and repeating, “Yes, yes I agree!”

Finally he hung up, grinning, and wiggled a finger in his ear. “That was about you,” he said. “Or, about your incident at least.” He held up a list with many items on it. “Nine out of ten want your assailant to burn in hell; the rest want me to really get tough with him.”

Laying down the paper, he tilted his head and looked with kindness into Holly’s eyes. “How you doing? You sure don’t look like a rusted truck.” He smiled.

“No.” Holly fiddled with her purse. “It’s … this new medicine. It’s really working, except for the redness — and stomach aches!” she grimaced.

Mr Prockmeyer nodded. “And how are you doing … emotionally.”

“Okay,” she nodded.

“Again …” the principal sighed, “… I’m so sorry I yelled at you the way I did. I’ve since spoken with several of your teachers and the nurse. There was just nothing in your folder about your … malady, or the hours and hours you’ve been spending on your assignments. These details are every bit as essential as your academics. I completely missed that.” He paused and smiled at her. “You’re a very brave young woman. You have no reason whatever to feel … bad about anything. Hold your head up high! Every kid in this school admires you immensely. I’ve been listening in the halls.”

Holly was nodding and moving uncomfortably on the hard chair. “Um … I was just wondering,” she had dropped her eyes, “what’s going to happen to Roger. He’s expelled, right … or suspended?”

“He’s out on his ear! He’ll never set foot in this school again! Don’t worry about that for a minute.”

“How much … or — will he be able to graduate?”

The principal sat back suddenly, his eyebrows leveling at Holly.

“I mean, there’s only four weeks left, four and a half … and he gets lots of A’s …”

“I know.” Mr Prockmeyer patted a folder on his desk. “He has all the required credits. Special arrangements will be made for taking his finals, which I’m sure he’ll pass.” The principal sighed. “I can’t legally prevent him from graduating. So it galls me, but I’ll have to give him a diploma. You won’t see him at the ceremony though. His name won’t even be mentioned.”

Holly nodded and tugged at her skirt.
He leaned forward again. “You feel sorry for him, don’t you.”
“Yeah, sort of. Could he, like, get into one of the general colleges, like the U downtown, do you think?”
“Holly! How can you be so sweet!”
She turned scarlet, even her arms.
“Yes. I suppose he could. We’ll be asked for a recommendation of course and I’ll have to tell the truth. Including the fact that he has absolutely no remorse! I tell ya, I nearly threw that chair at him myself! The brazen … filthy words he used talking about you. I was staring into the face of a cold-blooded Criminal! I’ve never felt like that before — and I’ve had all kinds in here! I felt dirty after he left!”

Mr Prockmeyer paused to catch his breath. “But, if you wish it, I’ll tone down what I say and … indicate that perhaps he could make good use of a second chance. Is that what you want?”
“Yes … please?” said Holly, lifting her books off her lap.
“So be it.”
Holly stood up. “Thank you …” Her mouth was open to say something further, but she turned and headed for the door.
“I am in awe of you, Miss Hatfield,” the principal said, rising. 
Holly made a meek smile over her shoulder and hurried away.

The buses were long since gone, but instead of going to the library and waiting for the activity bus Holly decided to walk home; by taking short cuts through several backyards and a playground it was only a mile and a half. The air was warm despite an impertinent breeze; she folded her coat and carried it on top of the small pile of her books and purse. The streets were empty except for tots playing on the sidewalks, squealing in the freedom of another springtime.

She stared at the ground as she walked, at the pavement, at the black wet earth where last year’s grass was worn away. In occasional puddles she watched pieces of sky and budding tree limbs drifting past.

At home, she noticed that the door to her sister’s room was closed and there was a sound of sniffing and kicked furniture within. Holly closed her own door and sat on her bed. Many minutes later, she looked down at herself, laughed, and laid her books on her desk. She changed into jeans and a sweater and sat down to start her homework.

Soon there was a timorous knocking on her door. “Holly dear,” said her mother. “Can I come in?”
“Sure,” Holly said, brightly.

Mrs Hatfield came in and knelt to look up into Holly’s face. “Oh!” she said. “Oh isn’t that wonderful!” She hugged her daughter. “Thank you, Dear Lord,” she moaned into Holly’s shoulder. “I called Dr Crane this morning and thanked him too! So should you!”
“Mm-hmh,” Holly agreed.

The mother looked up. “Have you taken a pill yet this afternoon?”
“No. I was gonna skip it. Can’t take the gut aches.”
“No! You have to! Till the bottle’s empty he said.” She got up. “I’ll bring you a glass of milk.”
Holly sighed and when the milk arrived she got a capsule out of her purse, but as soon as her mother had left Holly returned the pill to its bottle and drank the milk.

At supper, her father was happy as well about Holly’s complexion, although there was a trace of regret when he mentioned having to call the attorney back and cancel the lawsuit. He laughed. “I guess Dilby and Swartz’d have their hands full making a judge believe you’ve been mistreated. You’re just a living doll, sweetheart! The redness is only on your cheeks now. Right where it should be.”

“Daddy!” Holly grinned and shook her head bashfully. She could not help noticing, however, that her sister, sitting across from her with hung head and a very glum look, had said nothing at all the entire evening.
Mrs Hatfield pulled out an envelope from under her plate and gave it to Holly. “This came for you yesterday, but I didn’t have the heart to let you see it … in case, you know … it was more bad news. But I’m sure it’s not. I’m sure!”’

Holly had caught her breath, seeing the Bryn Mawr banner in the return address. She slit it open with her table knife and began reading.

The parents were silent, but Sarah snorted at the cooling food on her plate.

After scanning the first paragraph with an expressionless face, Holly returned to the beginning and with much animation read aloud:
Dear Miss Hatfield,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted for admission in the fall semester …

She smiled radiantly at her parents. The mother’s eyes were closed and her fists were in her lap. The father jumped from his chair and pressed his cheek against Holly’s. “I knew it, sweetheart! I knew it!”

Her mother did likewise on her other side.

Across the table, Sarah’s pupils were just barely visible below a knotted brow.

Mr Hatfield went to the cupboard and got out the wine and wineglasses while his wife read the letter to the family and patted Holly’s arm. For many minutes there was laughter and high spirits around the table, except for Sarah.

Some time later, after they had resumed their supper, Holly let her eyes rest on her sister who was sitting back from the table, staring down at her lap.

“Apologize, dear, and go on with your meal.”

Sarah pulled her knees up to her forehead and sobbed silently under her arms.

“Wha’d she do?” Holly asked after awhile.

“Aren’t you sorry? Right now!” yelled Sarah from under her arms.

“Drop dead! Jerkface!” Sarah’s eyes shot up. “I didn’t take anything!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Sarah screeched, her red face elevated on a stretched neck.

A raised sock foot kicked the tabletop, and Sarah received a loud swat on the rump from her father.

In her room, Holly went first to the closet and got out her largest shoebox. She opened it and dumped her pink heels onto the bed, untangling them from the tissue paper. Then she pulled out the middle drawer of her dressing table, the one containing all her cosmetics, which, in the past several months she had made very little use of, and hastily packed the contents into the shoebox. From the wallet in her purse she withdrew a twenty dollar bill and placed that in the box as well, then laid the tissue paper on top.

Snapping a sheet of paper from her notebook, she leaned over her desk and wrote:
Runt,

Put your white pumps in here and hide it in the back of your closet — Mom never looks in shoeboxes with shoes in’em.

The money’s cuz 4 years ago Barb and I swiped 33 cents from your piggy bank.

Love,

Jerkface.

Holly placed the paper in the box and put the cover back on. At the door she listened a moment to the dinner noises downstairs, then tiptoed across the hall to Sarah’s room where she set the box on the chair of her sister’s dressing table (Holly’s old one) and slid the chair under the table.

Returning to the kitchen, she was greeted with her sister’s scowling look; Sarah had a fork in one hand and chicken grease on her lips. “Anything missing?” she growled.

“Shush, shush!” said her mother.

Holly sat down and tossed her hair back. “Yeah, there is as a matter of fact.”

“What!”

Holly grabbed the bowl of mashed potatoes and began scooping some onto her plate.

“What!” repeated Sarah.

“You won’t remember this, but when you were born? And Mom brought you home from the hospital? I thought you were the most … precious little thing I’d ever seen. A real, live baby — with fingers’n everything — right in my own house. I was like seven or eight.” Holly patted a depression in her pile of mashed potatoes with her spoon. “One day Mom let me change your diaper, she was on the phone or something and you were crying in the crib, but you hushed up as soon as I started taking the pins out. You looked at me real funny-like — yeah, like that kinda.” Holly nodded at Sarah’s pout. “Like you were thinking, ‘Who the heck is that.’ Mom’d always been the one to change you before. You didn’t smile and you didn’t cry, you just lay there … trusting me.” Holly looked down at her plate; her voice became softer. “Then, I don’t know, a sort of really … hot, feeling came into me and I just knew — I just knew — I was gonna be the best sister there ever was, ever!” Holly looked up at Sarah. “I guess that’s what’s missing.” She paused to clear her throat. “Gravy please?” Holly pointed at the gravy boat beside her sister’s elbow.

Sarah stared at her.

“Gravy please?” Holly repeated gently, holding out her hand.

Sarah’s eyes swiveled suspiciously from one parent to the other as she passed the gravy to her sister.

Mr and Mrs Hatfield were staring at their elder daughter.

When supper was over, and while her sister was banging plates into the dishwasher, Holly sat on her bed upstairs reading the acceptance letter over and over. After awhile the smile left her face. With tilted head, she sat there a long while watching the twilight slowly darken on the other side of the curtains.

Abruptly, she got up and dashed into the bathroom for a few minutes of primping, then grabbed her purse. She refolded the letter while trotting down the stairs.

“Okay if I take the car?” she asked her parents who were sitting on the couch in front of the TV.

“Of course, dear!” said her mother, making her knitting needles pause a moment.

Holly grabbed her jacket and tennis shoes from the front closet and tiptoed over the shiny wet kitchen floor, stopping a moment at one of the cupboard drawers to snap a sheet of plastic wrap from its roll. Sarah was in front of the refrigerator, on her hands and knees with a kettle of hot water and a rag (another one of her punishments).
“Missed a spot!” Holly giggled, leaping over her sister’s legs and thumping sock footed down the basement stairs.
Sarah made no audible reply.
Before reaching the bottom, Holly stopped suddenly. She crept back up and sat on the top step, carefully folding the sheet of plastic and pinching the corners double so it would be easy to unfold again. She made it small enough to fit into the envelope.
As her sister worked her way nearer the steps, Holly leisurely put on her sneakers and tied the laces. “Sare,” she asked, “you got a boyfriend yet?”
“Shut up.”
“When you’re trying to decide which guy to go with?” Holly tilted her head (patting the drops on her ear with a sweater cuff), “Don’t listen to your friends, okay? Or Mom’n Dad, or me or anyone, even your own heart. Especially, don’t listen to the guy! Words don’t mean a thing. And, anyway, everyone lies!” Holly looked at her sister. She was pushing the cloth back and forth in small, pensive strokes.
“All you can do,” Holly went on, “is just watch everything and be really, really patient. The guy that hangs around the longest? He’s the one y’want. It doesn’t matter what he looks like, or even if y’hate his guts. If he’s there — after all the bitching! — if he’s still there, grab’im. That’s my advice.”
Sarah was wringing out the rag in the kettle as Holly stood up. “Be back in a little bit, and … I’ll probably be staying up late tonight, if, y’know, if you wanna talk about anything … boys or make-up or anything.”
Sarah was still squeezing drops of dirty water from the twisted rag. Her big sister stooped over and kissed the top of her head, then danced down the steps.

Soon, Holly was standing on the front stoop of Roger’s house, listening to small, thumping feet running to answer the doorbell. She clenched her teeth and tried to make wrinkles in her forehead.
The door was pulled open.
“Is Roger here,” said Holly as sternly as she could. “I have to talk to him. Now!”
Without a word, little Karen dashed back into the depths of the house, while Holly, uninvited, stepped inside and placed hands on her hips.
Roger’s parents appeared. Their eyes wide, staring at her unblemished face.
“I have to talk to Roger,” said Holly.
Mrs Waller looked at her husband a moment. “I … ” she tilted her head at Holly, “ … I’m not sure that’s a good idea, you know … if there’s going to be a lawsuit or —”
“No. Forget it.” Holly was shaking her head. No lawyers. I’m fine now.” She unzipped her jacket.
“It’s just — it’s occurred to me that — never once — through all of this — all these weeks — never once has he apologized to me, for anything. And I’m not leaving till he does!”
Immediately, Mr Waller turned and strode down the hallway.
“Of course!” the mother nodded. “Of course, dear.”
Karen had climbed up on the piano bench and knelt there watching the grown-ups with her big eyes.
Roger was quickly produced and placed in front of Holly by his father’s large hand. “You apologize,” he said, “right now!”
“Okay I’m sorry.” Roger shrugged, his hands in his pockets.
His father swatted the back of Roger’s head.
“Oh! I’m sorry!” He came to attention, hands at his side. “I’m really sorry. I’m a jerk, okay? I won’t ever do it again.”
“Oh that’s so sincere!” Holly thrust the envelope in his face. “Look at the return address,” she ordered. “I’ve been waiting half my life for this letter and y’know what it says?”
He dropped his eyes.
“Just take a guess, a *wild* guess!”

His shoulders came up. “Like … turned down …?”

“No! I’ve been accepted, but that’s not the point! — And probably all the other colleges’ll take me too — But … Rog! How can I go there *now!* Now that some … jerk’s life is totally wrecked just to get me there!”

Puzzled looks rose up all around while Holly glanced down to toe-off her sneakers. “And so — big surprise! — guess where I’ll be spending the next four years. At the U downtown, running into *you* every day!”

“No. I … I’ll go someplace else — I’ll join the army.”

“Roger!” barked his mother.

“The army?” said Holly. “Oh, brilliant! You’re going to the U even if I have to drag you there every day in my mom’s Buick!”

Now everyone was startled.

Maintaining her scowl, Holly opened the envelope and pulled out the transparent film. While unfolding it, she went on: “Prockmeyer says the U of M is the only place that’ll take you now, so you’d better not screw *that* up.”

With the plastic smoothed out, Holly touched the center of one side with her tongue and held it out to Roger. “Hold this and lick your side of it like I did. Do it!” she commanded.

“W-why. What’s it for.”

“Just do it! It’s part’a your apology.”

“I said I was sorry!”

“That’s not enough. Not *near* enough!”

Roger stared at her through the wrinkly film, his hands stretching the plastic tight.

“Lick it and hold it over your face.” She began removing her jacket.

Karen, with a look of mild fright, hopped off the bench and ran to her mother’s side.

Roger obeyed and Holly, after dropping her jacket to the floor and the letter and her purse on top of it, walked up to him. “Not too tight,” she cautioned him. “And don’t let it get in your nose.” She reached up and draped her arms over his neck. “You can close your eyes if you want.”

He did, and she kissed him.

A long kiss.

Long enough for the stiffness to come out of his body and for his hands to let go of the film and slip around her back. She was crushed against his chest.

Holly’s arms fell limp down his back and all but the toes of her lavender socks came off the floor in the force of his embrace. The plastic tickled her cheek as their faces smeared together.

“Mom?” said Karen. “What’re they doing!”

There was a sound of receding footsteps.

“Mom, I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I,” sighed Mrs Waller. “Come help us make cocoa.”

“Mom!”