

SEMI-FORMAL, 1948

A junior-high school party and dance at the country club. Most of the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds are inside the mysterious building for the first time. Along one side of a wide entrance hallway, some bulky objects have been loosely covered with thick tarpaulins. The heavy canvas seems out of place amid the expensive furnishings. The hallway opens into the club-room with its shiny wooden floor. Near the bandstand is a Wurlitzer with bubbling lights. The young people are surprised and pleased that no nickels are needed to play the selections on the machine. The music is Artie Shaw, Guy Lombardo, "Begin the Beguine," "Green Eyes" and others. The girls wear formal dresses and corsages bought for them by their mothers. A few of the boys sport rented tuxedos, but most are in dark suits with sleeves that reach almost to their knuckles. The boys do not know how or when to ask a girl to dance, so a chaperone crosses the floor, takes one of the boys by the hand, and leads him onto the floor. He doesn't want to but she insists. After long minutes, other couples join them, swaying awkwardly and not in time to the music. Several of the girls must dance with boys who are embarrassingly short. Two of the boys, fearful of dancing, and bored, crawl behind the tarpaulins and discover the slot machines rumored to be there. They begin to insert nickels into a machine and pull the lever. After only two or three tries, they hit the jackpot. Hundreds of nickels scatter and roll noisily across the dance floor. Most of the young males cry out in glee, drop to their knees, and scramble to gather up the coins. The girls are left standing in mid-dance. They look down at the boys, then at one another with expressions of chagrin and resigned hopelessness.

THE SALESMAN AND THE COLLEGE BOY

Easter holiday week, 1955. A college student wearing a sharkskin wool suit, his only suit, has been hitchhiking for two days. He has been rained on and the wool is steamy. A car pulls up beside him and the driver offers him a ride into Memphis. The man is cheerful and talkative. He travels for a plywood company and his business card is made of paper-thin laminated wood. He spells his name the same as the poet. He has just had an unbelievable week of sales and he

can't wait to get back home to his wife and family. And to his collie, who smells pretty gamy when he's wet. He asks the student if he could stand some food. The student says he isn't really hungry, but something in his voice is askew. The salesman pulls in at a truck stop. At the counter, he orders three hamburgers and two chocolate milkshakes. When the waitress brings them, the salesman sets the double platter in front of the student. The student says, Thanks, but I can't accept this, I can't pay. The salesman smiles broadly and says, This is America, so I guess even a college boy has a right to be rock-bottom stupid if he wants to. But if you pass out or maybe even die on me, I'll be late getting home. So if you want to ride with me, eat those burgers. The second shake is optional. I'll drink it, if you decide you don't want it. The boy eats and drinks, and is pensive.

AFTER SCHOOL,
WALKING HOME

A hot West Texas afternoon, almost summer. Two or three children stand near the porch of a white frame house. Book-satchels hang before them in their hands. There in the open sun a white bulldog lies prone, his stubby legs splayed and flat against the ground. A short chain is fastened to his studded collar at one end and at the other to an iron stake. No grass grows in his worn circle of dust and sand. His square jaws grasp the side of the neck of a large, loose-skinned mongrel. This dog has been made to lie with his muzzle pressed against the sand. He whimpers occasionally but no longer tries to struggle. Every minute or so, the bulldog seems to relax his jaws but instantly re clenches them, gathering in more of the folded skin. His indifferent eyes are bordered with pink flesh. Blood thickens on the mongrel's coat around the bulldog's mouth. The mongrel cannot move his head. His eyes close and open slowly, looking first at one child, then another. His whimpering is the only sound. No grownups are in sight. Not wanting to, the children watch.

— Jim Linebarger

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