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SOPHOMORE SLUMP

By JERILYN ROBEY

One afternoon about a month ago I was studying, or perhaps I should say lounging, at my desk. I had on only a slip and blouse and I was relaxing while smoking the remains of my last Winston. I was really feeling proud of myself, because I could inhale well enough to fool even my closest friends and my roommate, who didn't know that I really didn't know how to smoke well at all. I blew the last puff through my nose and then doused the cigarette.

This was quiet hours for Cameron Hall and the busy clack of a typewriter and the giggle of the girls down the hall reminded me of it. The noise in this dorm made it absolutely impossible to study at any time, but it was really great for thinking and dreaming, which I was usually doing anyway. Once I had gotten so mad at all the noise that I had bought a pair of earmuffs and worn them conspicuously in the hall during quiet hours. I never felt that I actually belonged in this school. Pure rationalization, I thought, of course it was something deeper than that, something about my personality in general that they seemed to dislike. Funny, though, at home I was the most outgoing person of my small crowd. It was always me who was asked to go to the football game with one of the girls, or to a concert with another.

Last year at Ivy College I had been what is termed a superior student. I hadn't had many dates, but I had really slaved over my studies, and it had paid off. My name was on the dean's list, and I had made several honorary clubs. I had thought at the beginning of the year that being so smart, on the outside at least, would get me into the swing of this school and make me feel like I really belonged, but on the contrary, I ended up by vowing to myself (with the aid of my girlfriends) that this college must be a place to have fun, and since you're only young once, why not live it up? Consequently, last semester's grades had been a shock to me and my parents, but I could say, "Boy, was first semester of my sophomore year ever a ball." One thing used to strike me though—while I was out on this ball I just couldn't seem to get away from a plaguing guilt complex, and

that I really ought to be studying or reviewing my notes. Sometimes I thought that maybe just having fun was not the big thing in life that it had seemed during last summer and the last part of my freshman year. But just the same, was I ever a dope last year. Just to think how cloddy I was makes me absolutely sick. I hadn't been so intent on having a good time last year, and I hadn't gone to many parties or even gotten drunk or anything. The few dates I did have were shy boys with dull unimaginative minds who took me to a show or to a dance either because their fraternities required it or they were fixed up with me through a friend.

This year, though, I had gone out of my way, almost, to get myself a date for just about every weekend, and I was rather proud of it. It had made me rather ostentatious, I guess, and sometimes I wondered about what kind of reputation I actually did have at Ivy College, but then that was in the category of what people would think, which was a strictly forbidden subject at Ivy because all the lectures in chapel had been on not caring what people thought of your actions, and in doing what you darn well pleased. "Conformity"—what a slogan for Ivy. For our school we would die a martyred life, impaled on our knitting needles, and buried in our crew-necked sweaters and sneakers. Our inscriptions would be a tweedy expression from our tweedy school.

It was almost time for supper, and the chapel bells were grinding out their cheery hymns to a bunch of students who not only did not believe in God, but denied His very existence. Confirmed atheists, that's what they all are, I thought, but then I remembered that in a discussion group I had come out with the statement that I did not believe in God myself, so I was a fine one to talk.

"How do you like Ivy?" "Oh, I just LOVE Ivy!" That's a fine response for freshmen, but when you become a sophomore, and wise to the ways of the world, that sort of thing is strictly for the birds. You hate the place and you are not afraid to show it and especially express it whenever another sophomore who UNDERSTANDS comes into sight.

I snapped myself out of my reflective mood and slipped into my skirt and left the room. My roommate and I usually locked the door because there was stealing going on in the dorm, but that was just another thing to confirm my opinion of all the people in the school anyway, and besides who would want my old junk. So partly to defy any thieves, and partly because I do feel a sort of kinship with them, I left the door open. I knew that the thief must really hate the place even more than I do myself, and anyone who hates Ivy is a friend of mine.

I wondered what kind of slop they would give us that night. It was a purely rhetorical question, because no matter what kind of slop it was, I ate it all and so did everybody else, because it really didn't taste too bad, especially after you once started in on it and stopped complaining. Besides, they kept you so damned busy with homework that you had to eat out of self-defense in order to avoid mono from late hours and too many parties on weekends. At least, I consoled myself, it was Friday, and TGIF. Everyone said TGIF, and I said it too, even though I wasn't especially glad it was Friday—but classes were over for the weekend, and absolutely no one but clods wasn't actually glad it was Friday, unless of course you didn't have a date, but even then you said TGIF because you didn't want everyone to know you didn't have a date, for heavens sake.

Actually, I didn't have a date this weekend, and it was the third weekend in a row that I didn't. A boy from the nearby boys' school had told me he planned to come down sometime, but they all planned to come sometime, so it didn't mean a thing. Anyway, on Friday nights I could go down to my best friend's room and we could discuss why we were going to transfer and what was wrong with the school.

There was a beautiful sunset, and one girl had stopped to admire it on the way into the dining hall. Things like that always give me a queer feeling, like a boy's admiring my knitting, or my father's saying I look nice. Sort of like someone coming in and putting in something that was more beautiful than I or the world deserved.

That weekend passed rather uneventfully. There were always things to do, but we all had become conditioned to depend on dates, and without a date things seemed routine and common. Even though I had three hourly tests the next week, I did not study much. As usual before a dateless weekend, I had vowed that it would be study all day Saturday and Sunday, but as usual, I did about two hours worth of studying by Sunday night. When Sunday night came, I began to get panicky and remembered my hourlies. It was two o'clock before I finally turned out my light.

In my classes, I always try to give a big show of being a bright student, and always manage to ask questions of the right sort to make my classmates and profs think that I am a brain. I often wonder what my professors think of these questions, but they never reveal themselves by their answers. Once a professor had gotten really angry at me and had started shouting. I told the other kids that he shouted because he wasn't sure of himself and wanted to impress the students that he really was, but sometimes I wonder about that too.

Like the rest of this conformist school, I always knit through every class, but unlike the others, who knit only because of social

pressure, I knit because I like to, and because it gives me something to do. So far I have accomplished one pair of argyles and a half a sweater and the first semester isn't even through.

The convocation that week was, as usual, about conformity, not directly, of course, but the lecturers feed it into the students every chance they have. Always giving you something about speaking your mind, getting your ideas into the open and not being afraid of what people would think if you did. The students always doze through these lectures and then go back to their dorms and tear them apart. Those old lecturers don't have to live in this hole and know the true state of things, and how you are thought to be a clod if you are different looking or different acting, but not different thinking. They always stress thinking, but it's looks and actions which determine your social career at Ivy. The intellectual stimulus that existed here during my freshman year has long since disappeared and in its place is the true idea that a hole is to dig, college is to have fun, TGIF, and to hell with tomorrow. A diploma is just a piece of paper anyway; marriage is the only real goal in life and the only way to get married is to have dates and to be popular and the only way to be popular is to conform, and, by God, if that's what they want, then I'm not going to be the first one to be different, to be the clod. So we talk about conformity, because that's what everyone is doing and it's conforming to talk about conformity. It is also conforming to be a sophomore and to hate your school, and any sophomore who goes around saying, "I just love Ivy" needs to get his head examined and to be called a clod. This country has gone to the dogs anyway and the Russians will soon take over, and maybe that's not such a bad idea—a social reform would be invigorating.

At dinner that Thursday, Betty, a good friend of mine, sidled up to me on the way out and asked me what I was doing that weekend. I said "Nothing much." She then asked, "Would you like a date with this guy that Johnny is bringing down with him from State?" I hemmed and hawed for a few minutes and said "Well, I don't know, what's he like?" Another purely rhetorical question because I knew as soon as she asked me that I would go with him. "Oh, he's a very nice boy, I've never met him, but Johnny says he's really neat." That was enough for me.

Saturday night I was ready well in advance of seven o'clock. I am always ready ahead of time because I like to spend the afternoon getting ready. I wasn't too excited this night though, because past experience with blind dates has taught me to be very wary of expecting more than I would find. When I went downstairs, the thought flashed through my mind that maybe he would be The One. The first

sight of him destroyed this thought. He definitely was not the type that I consider good looking. He was tall, thin, and had rather small eyes, close together. His chin jutted out sharply, giving him an aggressive appearance. His clothes were neat, but not the collegiate style that made the rest of the boys so tweedy at Ivy. "Hi," he said, "my name's Art Wheeler." He extended a hand and I grasped it rather limply, not looking at him. Oh boy, what a clod this guy is, I thought to myself, and silently damned Betty. He escorted me to the car where Betty and Johnny were sitting. We greeted one another and made the proper introductions. Art was driving, and the car was a fifty-five Buick convertible, which Betty announced that he owned. Maybe I could stand him for this evening, I decided, after I found out that he owned the car.

The conversation in the car lagged and then stopped altogether. I sort of coughed nervously once or twice to myself and started to ask him whether his father had given him the car or whether he had bought it, but decided against the idea. Every time I ask a question like that, it always turns out that his father has just died, or that the car was stolen, or something very embarrassing. So I said nothing, but really looked hard out the window, concentrating on the white line and the dingy houses which we passed on the road.

When we got to the show it was almost half over and I hate to go into a movie when it has already started, but I didn't say anything about it. The movie was one of those John Wayne B pictures and the plot was dumb and the film faded and flickering. My eyes hurt from looking at the screen and every once in a while I would look over at Art, but I got no satisfaction because he was always staring intently at the picture. Finally I thought I could stand it no longer, I shifted my position a little and recrossed my legs. Then I gave a small cough and glanced at Art. He didn't seem to notice me at all, and I was a little annoyed. I thought that he really should notice his date a little more than he did, especially since he wasn't such a neat guy anyway, even though he did own a fifty-five Buick convertible.

At last the picture was over, and he asked me if I wanted anything to eat. I glanced at Betty, but she was occupied with Johnny at the time and didn't seem too interested in whether or not I was hungry and couldn't stand the picture. She probably didn't even notice whether the picture was good or not. Out of some sort of ill-conceived compassion for Betty and the thought that our disturbing her and Johnny would be embarrassing, I answered no, thank you, and sighed a purposely audible sigh. As the next showing started in and good old John Wayne droned through the picture, I tried all sorts of little experiments to cut down the boredom. I tried to see how

long it would take the lady in front of me to feel me slowly pressing the bottom of her seat with my toe. When she shifted position and gave a half-glance around I stopped kicking and looked again at Art. He was still staring at the screen. How anyone could stare at John Wayne for more than five minutes without going absolutely batty was more than I could figure out. Art must have been a bigger jerk than



I had pictured him in the first place. After I had kicked the lady in front of me, I decided to work on Art for a while. Beginning with a very slight pressure against his elbow, I steadily increased it until one more centimeter and it would have slipped off the edge of the arm. You know, that is really a lot of fun to do, and it's even more fun if they have their chin resting on their cupped hand and you give a very sharp knock to their elbow. I didn't have the guts to really knock his elbow, so I just applied this steady pressure. Now this just shows how cloddy he really was; instead of applying opposite pressure

with his elbow, he just moved his whole arm and rested it in his lap, still staring at the screen.

When the last second, and I mean last second of that picture was over, the rest of them finally decided to leave. I was numbed to the fact that the show was going to last until next Thursday and it really was a great surprise to me that they actually decided to get up and go. When we got back in the car Art started in on the "wasn't that a good picture?" routine, which I absolutely despise, especially if the picture was as bum as that one was. I suppose I should have come out and said what I really thought of it but I didn't want to make myself obnoxious, and besides no one would have heard me but Art, and I didn't care if he knew whether I liked it or not.

On the road he said to no one in particular, "Well, where are we going now?" Betty and Johnny were busy in the back seat and they didn't hear and I should have said something but I didn't answer him. So he just drove us back to the dorm and parked out in the parking lot. Very surprisingly, he opened the door right away and he and I got out of the car and left Betty and Johnny still in the back seat. He walked me around to the front door and said thank you for a nice time and just stood there, so I said thank you also, and went inside. I don't know where he went after that because Betty didn't come in for another half an hour. Maybe he just stood outside the car or took a walk.

Up in my room, my roommate asked me if I had a good time. Of course I answered yes, and tried to build Art up. Believe me, there wasn't much to build up and I really had to work at it. I emphasized the car as much as possible and the fact that he was from State, but that was the best I could do. When everyone asked me if I would ever see him again, I told them yes, and that he was going to write to me, which was as big a lie as you can get.

You know, though, a guy like Art can grow on you, especially since he has a nice car and at least he was a date. That all happened a month ago, and I haven't had a date since then, but what can you expect at a hole like this. That's why I'm transferring to State, where there are lots of nice boys with cars, and at least you have a date once in a while.