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## Down at the Dinghy

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IT WAS a little after four o'clock on an Indian Summer afternoon. Some fifteen or twenty times since noon, Sandra, the maid, had come away from the lake-front window in the kitchen with her mouth set tight. This time as she came away, she absently untied and re-tied her apron strings, taking up what little slack her enormous waistline allowed. Then she went back to the enamel table and lowered her freshly uniformed body into the seat opposite Mrs. Snell. Mrs. Snell having finished the cleaning and ironing was having her customary cup of tea before walking down the road to the bus stop. Mrs. Snell had her hat on. It was the same interesting, black felt headpiece she had worn, not just all summer, but for the past three

summers—through record heat waves, through change of life, over scores of ironing boards, over the helms of dozens of vacuum cleaners. The Hattie Carnegie label was still inside it, faded but (it might be said) unbowed.

"I'm not gonna worry about it," Sandra announced, for the fifth or sixth time, addressing herself as much as Mrs. Snell. "I made up my mind I'm not gonna worry about it. What *for*?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Snell. "I wouldn't. I really wouldn't. Reach me my bag, dear."

A leather handbag, extremely worn, but with a label inside it as impressive as the one inside Mrs. Snell's hat, lay on the pantry. Sandra was able to reach it without standing up. She handed it across the table to Mrs. Snell, who opened it and took out a pack of mentholated cigarettes and a folder of Stork Club matches.

Mrs. Snell lit a cigarette, then brought her teacup to her lips, but immediately set it down in its saucer. "If this don't hurry up and cool off, I'm gonna miss my bus." She looked over at Sandra, who was staring, oppressedly, in the general direction of the copper sauce-pans lined against the

wall. "Stop *worryin'* about it," Mrs. Snell ordered. "What good's it gonna do to worry about it. Either he tells her or he don't. That's all. What good's *worryin'* gonna do?"

"I'm not *worryin'* about it," Sandra responded. "The last thing I'm gonna do is *worry* about it. Only, it drives ya loony, the way that kid goes pussyfootin' all around the house. Ya can't *hear* him, ya know. I mean nobody can *hear* him, ya know. Just the other day I was shellin' beans—right at this here table—and I almost stepped on his *hand*. He was sittin' right under the table."

"Well. I wouldn't worry about it."

"I mean ya gotta weigh every word ya say around him," Sandra said. "It drives ya loony."

"I *still* can't drink this," Mrs. Snell said. "...That's terrible. When ya gotta weigh every word ya say and all."

"It drives ya loony! I mean it. Half the time I'm half loony." Sandra brushed some imaginary crumbs off her lap, and snorted. "A four-year-old kid!"

"He's kind of a good-lookin' kid," said Mrs. Snell. "Them big brown eyes and all."

Sandra snorted again. "He's gonna have a nose just like the father." She raised her cup and drank from it without any difficulty. "I don't know what they wanna stay up here all October for," she said malcontentedly, lowering her cup. "I mean none of 'em even go anywheres *near* the water now. *She* don't go in, *he* don't go in, the *kid* don't go in. *Nobody* goes in now. They don't even take that crazy boat out no more. I don't know what they threw good money away on it for."

"I don't know how you can drink yours. I can't even drink mine."

Sandra stared rancorously at the opposite wall. "I'll be so gladda get backa the city. I'm not foolin'. I hate this crazy place." She gave Mrs. Snell a hostile glance. "It's all right for *you*, you live here all year round. You got your social life here and all. You don't care."

"I'm gonna drink this if it kills me," Mrs. Snell said, looking at the clock over the electric stove.

"What would *you* do if you were in my shoes?" Sandra asked abruptly. "I mean what would you do? Tella truth."

This was the sort of question Mrs. Snell slipped

into as if it were an ermine coat. She at once let go her teacup. "Well, in the *first* place," she said, "I wouldn't *worry* about it. What *I'd* do, I'd look around for another —"

"I'm not *worried* about it," Sandra interrupted.

"I know that, but what *I'd* do, I'd just get me —"

The swinging door opened from the dining room and Boo Boo Tannenbaum, the lady of the house, came into the kitchen. She was a small, almost hipless girl of twenty-five, with styleless, colorless, brittle hair pushed back behind her ears, which were very large. She was dressed in knee-length jeans, a black turtleneck pullover, and socks and loafers. Her joke of a name aside, her general unprettiness aside, she was—in terms of permanently memorable, immoderately perceptive, small-area faces—a stunning and final girl. She went directly to the refrigerator and opened it. As she peered inside, with her legs apart and her hands on her knees, she whistled, unmelodically, through her teeth, keeping time with a little uninhibited, pendulum action of her rear end. Sandra and Mrs.

Snell were silent. Mrs. Snell put out her cigarette, unhurriedly.

"Sandra..."

"Yes, ma'am?" Sandra looked alertly past Mrs. Snell's hat.

"Aren't there any more pickles? I want to bring him a pickle."

"He et 'em," Sandra reported intelligently. "He et 'em before he went to bed last night. There was only two left."

"Oh. Well, I'll get some when I go to the station. I thought maybe I could lure him out of that boat." Boo Boo shut the refrigerator door and walked over to look out of the lake-front window. "Do we need anything else?" she asked, from the window.

"Just bread."

"I left your check on the hall table, Mrs. Snell. Thank you."

"O.K.," said Mrs. Snell. "I hear Lionel's supposeta be runnin' away." She gave a short laugh.

"Certainly looks that way," Boo Boo said, and slid her hands into her hip pockets.

"At least he don't run very *far* away," Mrs. Snell said, giving another short laugh.

At the window, Boo Boo changed her position slightly, so that her back wasn't directly to the two women at the table. "No," she said, and pushed back some hair behind her ear. She added, purely informatively: "He's been hitting the road regularly since he was two. But never very hard. I think the farthest he ever got—in the city, at least—was to the Mall in Central Park. Just a couple of blocks from home. The least far—or nearest—he ever got was to the front door of our building. He stuck around to say goodbye to his father."

Both women at the table laughed.

"The Mall's where they all go skatin' in New York," Sandra said very sociably to Mrs. Snell. "The kids and all."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Snell.

"He was only three. It was just last year," Boo Boo said, taking out a pack of cigarettes and a folder of matches from a side pocket in her jeans. She lit a cigarette, while the two women spiritedly

watched her. "Big excitement. We had the whole police force out looking for him."

"They find him?" said Mrs. Snell.

"Sure they found him!" said Sandra with contempt. "Wuddaya *think*?"

"They found him at a quarter past eleven at night, in the middle of—my God, February, I think. Not a child in the park. Just muggers, I guess, and an assortment of roaming degenerates. He was sitting on the floor of the bandstand, rolling a marble back and forth along a crack. Half-frozen to death and looking—"

"Holy Mackerel!" said Mrs. Snell. "How come he did it? I mean what was he runnin' away about?"

Boo Boo blew a single, faulty smoke-ring at a pane of glass. "Some child in the park that afternoon had come up to him with the dreamy misinformation, 'You stink, kid.' At least, that's why we think he did it. I don't know, Mrs. Snell. It's all slightly over my head."

"How long's he been doin' it?" asked Mrs. Snell. "I mean how long's he been doin' it?"

"Well, at the age of two-and-a-half," Boo Boo

said biographically, "he sought refuge under a sink in the basement of our apartment house. Down in the laundry. Naomi somebody—a close friend of his—told him she had a worm in her thermos bottle. At least, that's all we could get out of him." Boo Boo sighed, and came away from the window with a long ash on her cigarette. She started for the screen door. "I'll have another go at it," she said, by way of goodbye to both women.

They laughed.

"Mildred," Sandra, still laughing, addressed Mrs. Snell, "you're gonna miss your bus if ya don't get a move on."

Boo Boo closed the screen door behind her.

She stood on the slight downgrade of her front lawn, with the low, glaring, late afternoon sun at her back. About two hundred yards ahead of her, her son Lionel was sitting in the stern seat of his father's dinghy. Tied, and stripped of its main and jib sails, the dinghy floated at a perfect right angle away from the far end of the pier. Fifty feet or so beyond it, a lost or abandoned water ski floated bottom up, but there were no pleasure boats to be

seen on the lake; just a stern-end view of the county launch on its way over to Leech's Landing. Boo Boo found it queerly difficult to keep Lionel in steady focus. The sun, though not especially hot, was nonetheless so brilliant that it made any fairly distant image—a boy, a boat—seem almost as wavering and refractive as a stick in water. After a couple of minutes, Boo Boo let the image go. She peeled down her cigarette Army style, and then started toward the pier.

It was October, and the pier boards no longer could hit her in the face with reflected heat. She walked along whistling "Kentucky Babe" through her teeth. When she reached the end of the pier, she squatted, her knees audible, at the right edge, and looked down at Lionel. He was less than an oar's length away from her. He didn't look up.

"Ahoy," Boo Boo said. "Friend. Pirate. Dirty dog. I'm back."

Still not looking up, Lionel abruptly seemed called upon to demonstrate his sailing ability. He swung the dead tiller all the way to the right, then immediately yanked it back in to his side.

He kept his eyes exclusively on the deck of the boat.

"It is I," Boo Boo said. "Vice-Admiral Tannenbaum. Née Glass. Come to inspect the sternaphors."

There was a response.

"You aren't an admiral. You're a *lady*," Lionel said. His sentences usually had at least one break of faulty breath control, so that, often, his emphasized words, instead of rising, sank. Boo Boo not only listened to his voice, she seemed to watch it.

"Who told you that? Who told you I wasn't an admiral?"

Lionel answered, but inaudibly.

"Who?" said Boo Boo.

"Daddy."

Still in a squatting position, Boo Boo put her left hand through the V of her legs, touching the pier boards in order to keep her balance. "Your daddy's a nice fella," she said, "but he's probably the biggest landlubber I know. It's perfectly true that when I'm in port I'm a lady—*that's* true. But my true calling is first, last, and always the bounding—"

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"You aren't an admiral," Lionel said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You aren't an admiral. You're a lady all the time."

There was a short silence. Lionel filled it by changing the course of his craft again—his hold on the tiller was a two-armed one. He was wearing khaki-colored shorts and a clean, white T-shirt with a dye picture, across the chest, of Jerome the Ostrich playing the violin. He was quite tanned, and his hair, which was almost exactly like his mother's in color and quality, was a little sun-bleached on top.

"*Many* people think I'm not an admiral," Boo Boo said, watching him. "Just because I don't shoot my mouth off about it." Keeping her balance, she took a cigarette and matches out of the side pocket of her jeans. "I'm almost never tempted to discuss my rank with people. Especially with little boys who don't even look at me when I talk to them. I'd be drummed out of the bloomin' service." Without lighting her cigarette, she suddenly got to her feet, stood unreasonably erect, made an oval out of the thumb and index finger of her right

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hand, drew the oval to her mouth, and—kazoo style—sounded something like a bugle call. Lionel instantly looked up. In all probability, he was aware that the call was bogus, but nonetheless he seemed deeply aroused; his mouth fell open. Boo Boo sounded the call—a peculiar amalgamation of "Taps" and "Reveille"—three times, without any pauses. Then, ceremoniously, she saluted the opposite shoreline. When she finally reassumed her squat on the pier edge, she seemed to do so with maximum regret, as if she had just been profoundly moved by one of the virtues of naval tradition closed to the public and small boys. She gazed out at the petty horizon of the lake for a moment, then seemed to remember that she was not absolutely alone. She glanced—venerably—down at Lionel, whose mouth was still open. "That was a secret bugle call that only admirals are allowed to hear." She lit her cigarette, and blew out the match with a theatrically thin, long stream of smoke. "If anybody knew I let you hear that call—" She shook her head. She again fixed the sextant of her eye on the horizon.

"Do it again."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

Boo Boo shrugged. "Too many low-grade officers around, for one thing." She changed her position, taking up a cross-legged, Indian squat. She pulled up her socks. "I'll tell you what I'll do, though," she said, matter-of-factly. "If you'll tell me why you're running away, I'll blow every secret bugle call for you I know. All right?"

Lionel immediately looked down at the deck again. "No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I don't want to," said Lionel, and jerked the tiller for emphasis.

Boo Boo shielded the right side of her face from the glare of the sun. "You told me you were all through running away," she said. "We talked about it, and you told me you were all through. You promised me."

Lionel gave a reply, but it didn't carry.

"What?" said Boo Boo.

"I didn't promise."

"Ah, yes, you did. You most certainly did."

Lionel resumed steering his boat. "If you're an admiral," he said, "where's your *fleet*?"

"My fleet. I'm glad you asked me that," Boo Boo said, and started to lower herself into the dinghy.

"Get off!" Lionel ordered, but without giving over to shrillness, and keeping his eyes down.

"Nobody can come in."

"They can't?" Boo Boo's foot was already touching the bow of the boat. She obediently drew it back up to pier level. "Nobody at all?" She got back into her Indian squat. "Why not?"

Lionel's answer was complete, but, again, not loud enough.

"What?" said Boo Boo.

"Because they're not allowed."

Boo Boo, keeping her eyes steadily on the boy, said nothing for a full minute.

"I'm sorry to hear it," she said, finally. "I'd just love to come down in your boat. I'm so lonesome for you. I miss you so much. I've been all alone in the house all day without anybody to talk to."

Lionel didn't swing the tiller. He examined the

grain of wood in its handle. "You can talk to Sandra," he said.

"Sandra's busy," Boo Boo said. "Anyway, I don't want to talk to Sandra, I want to talk to you. I wanna come down in your boat and talk to you."

"You can talk from there."

"What?"

"You can talk from *there*."

"No, I can't. It's too big a distance. I have to get up close."

Lionel swung the tiller. "Nobody can come in," he said.

"What?"

"Nobody can come *in*."

"Well, will you tell me from there why you're running away?" Boo Boo asked. "After you promised me you were all through?"

A pair of underwater goggles lay on the deck of the dinghy, near the stern seat. For answer, Lionel secured the headstrap of the goggles between the big and second toes of his right foot, and, with a deft, brief, leg action, flipped the goggles overboard. They sank at once.

"That's nice. That's constructive," said Boo Boo.

"Those belong to your Uncle Webb. Oh, he'll be so delighted." She dragged on her cigarette. "They once belonged to your Uncle Seymour."

"I don't care."

"I see that. I see you don't," Boo Boo said. Her cigarette was angled peculiarly between her fingers; it burned dangerously close to one of her knuckle grooves. Suddenly feeling the heat, she let the cigarette drop to the surface of the lake. Then she took out something from one of her side pockets. It was a package, about the size of a deck of cards, wrapped in white paper and tied with green ribbon. "This is a key chain," she said, feeling the boy's eyes look up at her. "Just like Daddy's. But with a lot more keys on it than Daddy's has. This one has ten keys."

Lionel leaned forward in his seat, letting go the tiller. He held out his hands in catching position. "Throw it?" he said. "Please?"

"Let's keep our seats a minute, Sunshine. I have a little thinking to do. I *should* throw this key chain in the lake."

Lionel stared up at her with his mouth open.

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He closed his mouth. "It's mine," he said on a diminishing note of justice.

Boo Boo, looking down at him, shrugged. "I don't care."

Lionel slowly sat back in his seat, watching his mother, and reached behind him for the tiller. His eyes reflected pure perception, as his mother had known they would.

"Here." Boo Boo tossed the package down to him. It landed squarely on his lap.

He looked at it in his lap, picked it off, looked at it in his hand, and flicked it—sidearm—into the lake. He then immediately looked up at Boo Boo, his eyes filled not with defiance but tears. In another instant, his mouth was distorted into a horizontal figure-8, and he was crying mightily.

Boo Boo got to her feet, gingerly, like someone whose foot has gone to sleep in theatre, and lowered herself into the dinghy. In a moment, she was in the stern seat, with the pilot on her lap, and she was rocking him and kissing the back of his neck and giving out certain information: "Sailors don't *cry*, baby. Sailors *never* cry. Only when their

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ships go down. Or when they're shipwrecked, on rafts and all, with nothing to drink except—"

"Sandra—told Mrs. Smell—that Daddy's a big—sloppy—kike."

Just perceptibly, Boo Boo flinched, but she lifted the boy off her lap and stood him in front of her and pushed back his hair from his forehead. "She did, huh?" she said.

Lionel worked his head up and down, emphatically. He came in closer, still crying, to stand between his mother's legs.

"Well, that isn't *too* terrible," Boo Boo said, holding him between the two vises of her arms and legs. "That isn't the *worst* that could happen." She gently bit the rim of the boy's ear. "Do you know what a kike is, baby?"

Lionel was either unwilling or unable to speak up at once. At any rate, he waited till the hiccupping aftermath of his tears had subsided a little. Then his answer was delivered, muffled but intelligible, into the warmth of Boo Boo's neck. "It's one of those things that go up in the *air*," he said. "With *string* you hold."

The better to look at him, Boo Boo pushed her

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son slightly away from her. Then she put a wild hand inside the seat of his trousers, startling the boy considerably, but almost immediately withdrew it and decorously tucked in his shirt for him. "Tell you what we'll do," she said. "We'll drive to town and get some pickles, and some bread, and we'll eat the pickles in the car, and then we'll go to the station and get Daddy, and then we'll bring Daddy home and make him take us for a ride in the boat. You'll have to help him carry the sails down. Okay?"

"Okay," said Lionel.

They didn't walk back to the house; they raced. Lionel won.