PAUL'S CASE

1.

It was Paul's afternoon to appear before his teachers at Pittsburgh High School. He had been suspended a week ago. Now he was expected to explain his bad behavior. Paul entered the teachers' room, smooth and smiling. He had outgrown his clothes a little, and the velvet collar of his overcoat looked a little worn. But there was something elegant about him. He wore a jeweled pin in his neat tie. He had a red carnation in his coat. His teachers felt his appearance did not show the right attitude toward suspension.

Paul was tall for his age, and very thin. His large eyes had a glassy shine. He continually flashed them at people in an artificial way. His teachers found that offensive in a boy.

The principal asked him why he was there. Paul answered, politely enough, that he wanted to come back to school. This was a lie, but Paul was used to lying. He needed to lie to solve his problems. Then his teachers were asked to explain his behavior in class. They spoke with such anger that it was clear that Paul's case was no ordinary case. He was offensive in class. He had a contemptuous attitude toward his teachers. They attacked him like a pack of angry dogs.
Through all of this, Paul stood smiling; his lips open to show his teeth. Older boys than Paul had cried at such meetings. But Paul kept on flashing his eyes around him, always smiling. When he was told that he could go, he bowed gracefully, and went out. His bow, like the offensive red carnation, only showed his contempt.

The art teacher said what they all felt. "I don't really believe that smile is natural. There's something artificial about it. The boy is not strong, for one thing. There is something wrong about him."

His teachers left the meeting angry and unhappy. But Paul ran gracefully down the hall. He was whistling a song from the opera he was going to watch that night. He hoped some of the teachers would see how little he cared about the meeting.

Paul worked as an usher at Carnegie Hall. Since he was late that evening he decided to go straight to the concert. He was always excited while he got dressed in the usher's uniform. The uniform fit him better than the other boys, and he thought he looked elegant.

Paul was a model usher. Graceful and smiling, he ran up and down the aisles, showing people to their seats. He carried messages as though it was his greatest pleasure in life. As the theater filled, he became more and more excited. His cheeks and lips were red and his eyes flashed. It was as if the theater was a great party and Paul was the host. When the music began, Paul sat down in back. With a sigh he lost himself in the music. The first answering sigh of the violins seemed to free some wild excitement inside him. The lights danced before his eyes, and the concert hall flashed with color. Then the singer came on, and Paul forgot all about his teachers.

He always felt depressed after a concert. He hated to give up the excitement and color. Tonight he waited outside the hall for the singer. When she came out, he followed her across the street to the Schenley Hotel. The hotel stood large and lit up, for singers and actors and big businessmen. Paul had often hung around the hotel, watching the people go in and out. He wanted to enter that bright elegance and leave schoolteachers and problems behind him. He watched the singer pass through the shining glass doors. In that moment, Paul felt himself pass through with her. He imagined the delicious platters of food that were brought to the dining room.
He could almost see the green wine bottles in shining ice-buckets, like photographs in the newspapers.

A cold wind rose, and it began to rain hard. Paul was surprised to find himself standing outside. His boots were letting in water and his overcoat was wet. Rain fell between him and the lighted windows in front of him. He wondered if he would always have to stand outside in the cold, looking in. He turned and walked slowly to the bus stop.

Half an hour later, Paul got off the bus and walked down Cordelia Street to his house. All the houses looked alike. Clerks and small businessmen lived there, and raised large families. The children went to Sunday school, and were interested in geometry. They were just as alike each other as the houses were. Paul always felt hopeless and depressed when he walked down Cordelia Street. He had the feeling of sinking into ugliness, like water closing over his head. After the excitement of this evening he couldn't bear to see his room, with its ugly yellow wallpaper. Or the cold bathroom with the dirty tub, the broken mirror. Or his father, with his hairy legs sticking out from under his nightshirt. Paul was so late tonight that his father would be angry. Paul would have to explain, and to lie. He couldn't face it. He decided that he wouldn't go in.

He went around to the back of the house and found a basement window open. He climbed through and dropped down to the floor. He stood there, holding his breath, afraid of the noise he had made. But he heard nothing from upstairs. He carried a box over to the furnace to keep warm. He didn't try to sleep. He was horribly afraid of rats. And suppose his father had heard him, and came down and shot him as a thief? Then again, suppose his father came down with a gun, but Paul cried out in time to save himself? His father would be horrified to think he had nearly killed him. But what if his father wished Paul hadn't cried out, and hadn't saved himself? Paul entertained himself with these thoughts until daybreak.

On sunny Sunday afternoons, the people of Cordelia Street sat out on their front steps, the women in their Sunday clothes. Children played in the streets while their parents talked.
The women talked about sewing and children, the men gave advice about business and the cost of things. Paul sat there listening. The men were telling stories about the rich and powerful men who were their bosses. They owned palaces in Venice. They sailed yachts on the Mediterranean. They gambled at Monte Carlo. Paul's imagination was excited at the idea of becoming boss, but he had no mind for the clerk stage.

14 After supper was over, he helped dry the dishes. Then he asked nervously if he could go to George's for help with his geometry. His father asked him why he couldn't study with someone who lived nearer. And he shouldn't leave his homework until Sunday. But finally he gave him money for the bus. Paul ran upstairs to wash the smell of dishwater from his hands. He shook a few drops of cologne over his fingers. Then he left the house with his geometry book, very obvious, under his arm. The moment he left Cordelia Street and got on the bus, he shook off two days of deadening boredom. He began to live again.

15 Paul had a friend, Charley Edwards, who was a young actor. Paul spent every extra moment in Charley's dressing room, helping him dress. It was at the theater and concert hall that Paul really lived. The rest was only a sleep and a forgetting. This was Paul's fairy tale, this was his secret love. The moment he breathed the smell behind the scenes, his imagination took fire. The moment the violins began to play, he shook off all stupid and ugly things.

16 In Paul's world, natural things were nearly always ugly. Perhaps that was why he thought artificiality was necessary to beauty. His life was full of Sunday-school picnics, saving money, good advice, and the smell of cooking. It was not that he wanted to become an actor or musician. What he wanted was to see theater, to breathe its air, to be carried away from it all!

17 After a night behind the scenes, Paul found school worse than ever. He hated the bare floors and empty walls. He hated the teachers: boring men who never wore carnations in their old suits. And he hated the women, with their dull dresses and high voices, who spoke so seriously about prepositions and adjectives. He couldn't bear to have the other students think he took these people seriously. He wanted them to see that school meant nothing to him. It was all a joke. He showed his classmates pictures of his friends at the theater.
He told them unbelievable stories of his midnight suppers with actors and musicians. He talked about the flowers he sent to his actor friends, and the trips they would take together.

18   Things went worse and worse at school. Paul was offensive to the teachers. He had no time for geometry; he was too busy helping his friends at the theater. Finally the principal went to Paul's father. Paul was taken out of school. He was put to work as a clerk for Denny & Carson. The manager of Carnegie Hall was told to get another usher. The doorman at the theater was told not to let him in. Charley Edwards promised not to see him again. The theater people were amused when they heard the stories Paul had told. They agreed that Paul was a bad case.

III

19   The train ran east through a January snowstorm. Paul woke up as the train whistled outside of New York City. He felt dirty and uncomfortable. He had taken the night train to avoid any Pittsburgh businessman who might have seen him at Denny & Carson.

20   When he arrived at the station he took a taxi to a large men's store. He spent two hours there, buying carefully: a suit, dress clothes, shirts and silk underwear. He drove on to a hat shop and a shoe shop. His last stop was at Tiffany's, where he chose silver brushes and a tie-pin. Then he had the taxi take him to the Waldorf Hotel.

21   When he was shown into his rooms on the eighth floor, he saw that everything was as it should be. Only one thing was missing. He ordered flowers brought up to his room. Outside the snow was falling wildly, but inside the air was soft and smelled of flowers. He was very tired. He had been in such a hurry, and had been under such pressure. He had come so far in the last twenty-four hours.

22   It had been wonderfully simple. When they shut him out of the theater and the concert hall, the whole thing was sure to happen. It was only a matter of when. The only thing that surprised Paul was his own courage. He had always been afraid. Even when he was a little boy he felt fear watching him from a dark corner. And Paul had done things that were not pretty to watch, he knew. But now he felt free of that he had driven fear away.
23 Only yesterday he had been sent to the bank with Denny & Carson's money. There was more than $2,000 in checks, and nearly $1,000 in cash. He had slipped the thousand into his pocket, and left only the checks at the bank. He knew no one would notice for two or three days, and his father was away on business for the week. From the time he slipped the money into his pocket, and caught the train to New York, he had never lost his nerve.

24 When he woke up it was four o'clock. He dressed carefully and took a taxi up Fifth Avenue to Central Park. Snow fell against shop windows full of spring flowers. The park looked like a winter scene in the theater. Later, at dinner, he sat alone at a table near the window. The flowers, the white tablecloths, the many-colored wine glasses, the bright dresses of the women, the low music of the violins all these things filled him with joy. Paul wondered why there were any honest men at all - this was what all the world was fighting for. He couldn't believe in Cordelia Street. He felt only contempt for those people. Had he ever lived there? Alone later, at the opera, he was not lonely. He had no wish to meet or know any of these elegant people. All he wanted was the right to be a part of the scene and watch.

25 The manager of the hotel was not suspicious. Paul drew no attention to himself. His pleasures were quiet ones. He loved to sit in the evenings in his living room. He enjoyed his flowers, his clothes, his cigarette, and his feeling of power. He could not remember a time when he had been so at peace with himself. He was glad not to have to lie, day after day. He had only lied to make people notice him. He wanted to prove his difference from the boys on Cordelia Street. Now he could be honest. He felt no guilt at what he had done. His golden days went by without a shadow. He made each one as perfect as he could.

26 On the eighth day after his arrival in New York, he saw the whole story in the Pittsburgh paper. The company of Denny & Carson reported that the boy's father had paid back what he stole. They would not send Paul to jail. His father thought he might be in New York. He was on his way East to find his son.

27 Paul felt terrible. The thought of returning to Cordelia Street, to Sunday school, to his ugly room, to old dishtowels, was worse than jail. He had the terrible feeling that the music had stopped, the play was over. But later, at dinner, the violin and the flash of light and color had their old magic.
He drank his wine wildly. He would show himself that he could finish the game with elegance. Was he not a very special person? Wasn't this the world where he belonged?

28 The next morning he woke up with a headache. He had never felt so depressed. Yet somehow he was not afraid. Perhaps he had looked into the dark corner where his terror had always waited. He saw everything clearly now. He had the feeling that he had made the best of it. He had lived the sort of life he was meant to live.

29 Paul took a taxi out into the country. Then he sent the taxi away and walked along the train tracks. The snow lay heavy on the ground. He climbed a little hill above the tracks, and sat down. He noticed that the carnations in his coat were dying in the cold. All the flowers he had seen that first night in New York must have gone the same way. They only had one bright breath of life. It was a losing game; it seemed, to fight against the world's advice. Paul took one of the carnations from his coat. He dug a hole in the snow, and carefully covered up the flower.

30 The sound of a train brought him back. He jumped to his feet, afraid that he might be too late. He was smiling nervously. His eyes moved left and right, as if someone was watching him. When the right moment came, he jumped. As he fell, he saw with regret all that he had left undone. The blue Mediterranean, the gold of Monte Carlo. He felt something hit his chest. His body was thrown through the air, on and on, further and faster. Then, his imagination flashed into black, and Paul dropped back into the immense design of things.