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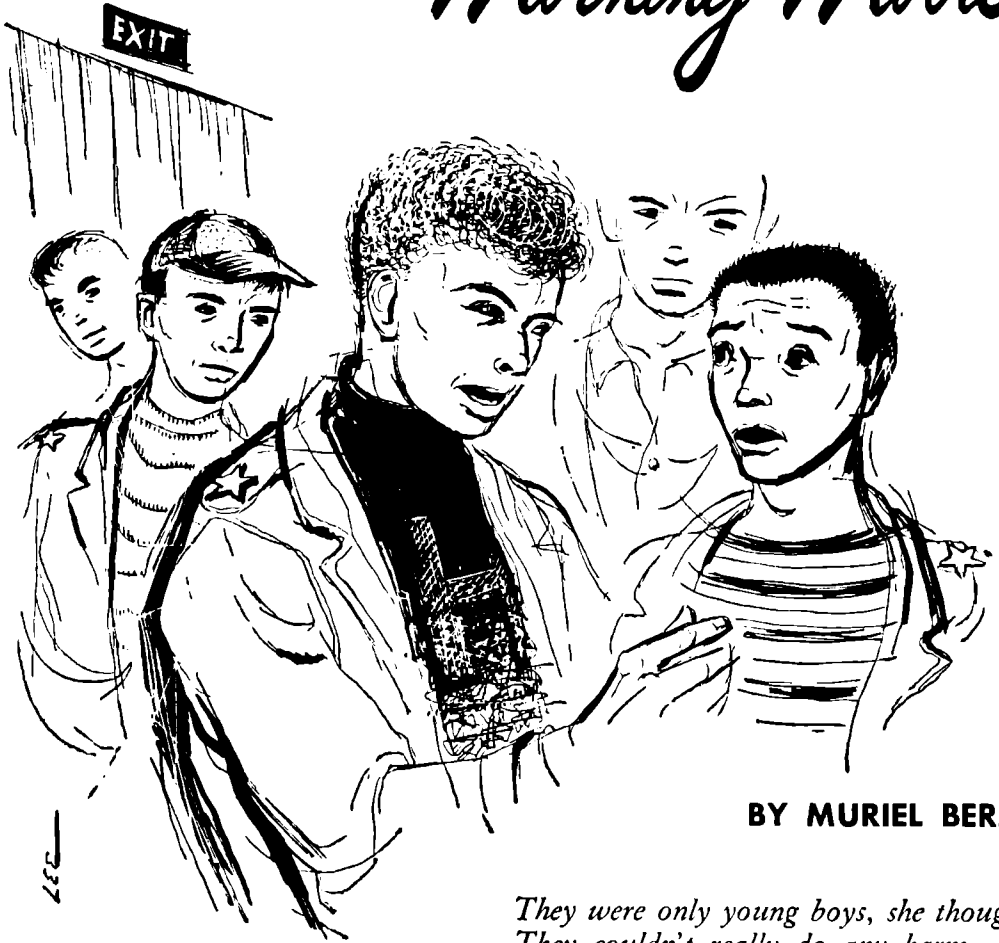
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Morning Movie



BY MURIEL BERNS

*They were only young boys, she thought.
They couldn't really do any harm . . .*

WHEN Carol found there would be a twenty-minute wait before the next feature, she went downstairs to the lounge for a cigarette. No hurry. It was only a quarter past ten, and she had the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon to herself before she had to be at work at the telephone company.

The lounge was empty. She sank down in a big leather chair behind a bank of decorative ferns to straighten the seams of her stockings, pleasantly aware of the cool, almost caressing firmness of the leather through her thin summer dress.

It was good to get away from

people and voices for a while, and when half a dozen teen-age boys came in, she knew a moment's irritation. She flipped her dress back down over her knees, but the boys had not seen her. They glanced around, as if to assure themselves they were alone, and then sat down in a group of chairs on the other side of the ferns. They all wore leather jackets with chrome stars on the shoulders, and all except one of the boys were, Carol guessed, about sixteen. The other boy was no more than fourteen. There was an adolescent fleshiness to his face, and his large dark eyes had a sheen close to tears.

Carol had taken cigarettes and lighter from her purse, but now she hesitated. There was a charged silence on the other side of the ferns, a kind of ominous pause. She studied the boys' faces. There were no smiles there, none of the expressions she might expect in a group that age. Almost unconsciously, she dropped the cigarettes and lighter back in her purse, and then sat quite still.

One of the boys, a little larger than the others and the only blond-haired one of the six, leaned forward and stared narrowly at the boy with the moist dark eyes.

"We're waiting, Teddy," he said softly. "You said you wanted a chance. All right. This is it."

"I didn't split to the law. Jesus, Rich, you know me better than that."

"Crap," one of the other boys said.

"Keep your lip out of this," the blond boy said. "I'll do the talking."

"Listen, Rich," Teddy said. "It was just like I told you. I didn't show because the old man found out I was up to something. He busted a strap on my can and locked me in my room. How you going to beat that? How could I meet you guys when the old —"

"You're off base again, Teddy," Rich said. "Way off. We don't give a good goddam why you didn't show. All we want to know is how come the *law* showed. That's all, Teddy. You try telling us that, for a change."

Teddy moistened his lips, his eyes a little wider now, a little more moist. "Jesus, guys, I —"

"Hurry it up," Rich said. "We ain't got all day. Somebody's liable to fall in here any minute."

"I don't *know* why they showed," Teddy said. "All I know is the old man found that curtain rod I used to make a zip-gun with, and he figured how I was —"

"Look," Rich said. "We spend two days working out a heist. We figure everything, every damn angle. We get so we know more about the way old lady Wimbert runs a candy store than she knows herself. Okay. Then, a couple of hours before we're supposed to pull it, we find out we got to move the time up a couple of hours. So what happens? You say

you got to go home a minute, but you'll be right back. You —"

"Listen, Rich! You know I —"

"Just shut up a minute, for Christ's sake. All right, so you go home. But you don't come back. We figure to hell with you, and we fall over to the candy store. And what happens?" He paused, smiling a little. "Tell us what happens, Teddy."

Behind the bank of ferns, Carol felt a sudden dull pain in her lungs, and realized she had been holding her breath. The big leather chair, so pleasant a moment ago, now seemed too chill. She glanced toward the door to the ladies' room, and then at the stairway leading up to the lobby. But even as fear became her only emotion, she knew she could not leave the chair. She sensed the danger of it. These boys were like no others she had ever known. They were completely outside her experience, and it was as if a door had been opened to a world she had never really believed existed.

The dark-eyed boy's face was sheened with sweat. "I tell you I didn't split!" he said.

"How come the law was waiting for us in back of the candy store, Teddy?"

"I don't know!"

"Sure you do. You know because you told them."

"Rich —"

"Shut up," Rich said. He glanced around the circle of faces and then

spoke in an even softer voice. "So our club's busted up, and we're all on probation. The juve squad's nosing around, and the first thing you know they're going to smell out some of the other heists. The first time any of us spits in the subway, he's asking for a fast trip to the coop." He paused. "You're a squealing, no-good son of a bitch, Teddy."

One of the other boys gestured impatiently. "To hell with him, Rich. We got to get out of here before somebody busts the setup."

"Rich, listen to me!" Teddy said. "You said you'd give me a chance. You said —"

"Maybe I was lying," Rich said. "You ever think of that?" He shook his head slowly. "No. Any bastard dumb enough to split to the law is too dumb to think of anything." He glanced about him at the others. "That's it, guys. Let's go."

The boys, with the exception of Teddy, rose quickly. Teddy stared up at them, dark eyes enormous against the sudden pallor of his face. His lips moved, but there was no sound.

As the group moved toward the stairway, the younger boy's chair was obscured for a moment. Several hands reached out as if emphasizing contempt, and then the group was on its way out.

Carol waited a long moment before she started for the stairway. As she passed Teddy's chair, she could not resist a final look at him.

He sat with his head pressed against the top of the chair, as if he had tried to make his small body conform to the convex surface of the back. There was something strange about his eyes, she noticed, and then she saw the small yellow handle of the icepick protruding from his chest.

And in the same instant she saw the subtle, almost imperceptible change that came into his eyes, and she knew that he was dead.

She stared at him, feeling her lips draw back from her teeth and the muscles cording in her throat, and then she was running up the stairs to the lobby.

She saw an usher, and started toward him, and then felt she would fall before she could reach him. She sat down suddenly on a marble bench and covered her face with her hands. She had to tell someone what she had seen, she knew — and yet she could not. For a few moments a door had been opened on

an incredible, terrifying world, but now that door had closed, and no fear she had ever known was like the fear she felt at the thought of opening it again.

Laughter reached her through the door to the nearest aisle, and she glanced toward it. There were people in there, hundreds of them. It would be so easy to slip in among them, into the darkness . . . Oh, Lord, why had it had to happen while *she* was there? She had never done anything wrong. Why should she have to be the one? She couldn't live through another moment of the world she had just seen, she knew. She couldn't live through being questioned by the police about it, describing the boys who had executed Teddy, coming face to face with them in court.

A minute dragged by, and then another, and then Carol got slowly to her feet and moved to the aisle and down its dark length looking for a seat.

