

THIS WEEK
THE SUNDAY MAGAZINE

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Cover by Don Davis

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TOO YOUNG TO MARRY

THAT'S WHY THESE PARENTS
BRIBED THEIR CHILDREN
TO WAIT. IT WAS A GAMBLE,
BUT IT SEEMED THE
ONLY WAY TO STOP THEM . . .

By John D. MacDonald

Illustrated by Michael Ludlow

It was July again, one whole year since the strange offer had been made and accepted.

Walter Harrison sat heavily and alone on the screened porch and wondered how this evening would end. He could hear his wife, Mary, restlessly cleaning the spotless living room for the tenth time.

She had been almost relentlessly gay this evening, and he knew how much courage that had taken. He could hear the younger kids playing out behind the house in the warm dusk. The younger kids had been ordered to stay out of the way.

James and Elizabeth Rawlings would arrive within a half hour. The two couples would be fidgety and awkward with each other, as before.

A little while later the two kids who were in love would come and tell the two sets of parents of their decision. And because of the odd agreement the parents had made with the two kids, it would be too late for the exercise of parental authority — too late to save quiet, steady, eighteen-year-old Jud Harrison from the mistake he would regret the rest of his life.

Last July, a year ago, Jud had come to him bringing Nancy Rawlings along, to tell him that they wanted to be married. They were both seventeen. Jud had just finished their junior year in high school. Jud had been flushed, level-eyed, frighteningly serious.

Nancy, though full of nervous smiles and unaccountable giggles, had that same ominous quality of resolve. Though greatly shocked, Walter Harrison was glad that he had sense enough to tell the kids he was glad they had come to him about it instead of running off.

Walter passed along his feeling of shock and alarm to Mary. The kids went and made the same call on Jim and



THE CHILDREN'S FUTURE WAS A SHADOW OVER THEM

Betty Rawlings. And Jim, in white anger, made some comments to Jud that Jud did not care to repeat to his father. Walter sensed the spirit of rebellion in the two youngsters, and he phoned Jim Rawlings and tried to set up a conference between the four parents.

WALTER KNEW JIM CASUALLY, knew that Jim owned and operated an appliance store on Main Street, knew that the two families were about in the same income bracket. Nancy was their eldest child, as Jud was the first born of the Harrisons.

He knew that Jim, a lean, nervous-acting man, had a reputation for a quick temper. At first Jim didn't want to even talk about it. He said it was too damn ridiculous to talk about, and anyway Betty was far too upset to be a party to any absurd conference about it.

Walter kept his temper and cajoled Jim into meeting him for lunch. Jim at lunch was white-tipped. "They're kids. They'll get over it. I'm ordering Nancy not to see that boy of yours, and I expect you to do the same."

"Dandy!" Walter said heavily. "Just fine. Shall we chain them to posts in our back yards? Both those kids have spirit, thank God. They're good kids, I think. And if we put the lid on, we'll get a wire or a phone call from Georgia after they run over there and get married."

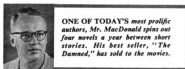
"Nonsense!"

"Can't you remember how it was at seventeen, Jim? First love? It really hits you. I'm confident we're on the wrong track. They'll run off."

"Can't you control that boy of yours?"

Walter stiffened and then with an effort curbed his

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ONE OF TODAY'S most prolific authors, Mr. MacDonald writes out four novels a year between short stories. His best seller, "The Damned," has sold to the movies.

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anger. "Are you sure Nancy will obey you?"

"She's reasonable," Jim admitted. "But she's got a stubborn streak."

Walter leaned forward and said, "Our only chance is to buy time. Enough time so there'll be a good chance of their breaking up before they do something silly."

Jim agreed at last and the plan was devised and, after much discussion, the two mothers agreed to it. The four parents met with Jud and Nancy, and Walter Harrison acted as spokesman while the kids sat, hand in hand, wary and subdued.

"We think you're both too young. We think you ought to wait. At least a year. But we know we can't pin you down that way without creating resentment. Jim and I have decided we can do this. We know you're both practical kids. You've both had spare-time jobs and summer jobs. Jim and I will each set aside one hundred dollars a month in a special account for you two. With taxes and expenses it won't be easy for us, but we talked over the figure and we can do it.

"Each month you wait you'll be saving two hundred dollars for your future. If you wait the full year, you'll have twenty-four hundred dollars to begin married life on. We would both have preferred to spend that money on your education, but that will be your choice. We've all agreed to it and we want you to think it's fair."

Jud frowned and said, hesitantly, "Like if we wait until . . . say Christmas, there would be about a thousand dollars? We could have that then?"

"Correct," Jim said curtly. Nancy and Jud glanced at each other and Nancy said in her thin young voice, "We think we ought to talk it over some."

"Of course, dear," her mother agreed.

The kids agreed to accept

and agreed to wait an indeterminate period, wait until they felt the time had come and then give fair warning.

That night in the bedroom darkness Mary whispered to Walter, "They're so . . . hopelessly young. Will it work, darling?"

"I think so. A year is a very long time to them. Those things end quickly. They'll break up. We're just buying time."

"She isn't right for Jud. She's shallow and she's selfish. If he was right for him, she'd be thinking of his future."

"Don't worry, honey," he said. "Just try not to worry."

But there had been on quarrel, Christmas had been a crucial time, but the kids did not make their decision then. They were close, inseparable, through their senior year. They both graduated with good grades, walked together at graduation, went to the senior dance together; both found summer jobs — and both were now eighteen.

At last, Walter thought, we bought that much for them, paid for that much time. Now they said they had made a decision and they wanted a conference as before. Jud and Nancy and the four parents.

Walter knew they would now wish to be married. He knew that as a matter of honor, of having given his word, he would have to accept it. And they were too young, too vulnerable, too unprepared for life. Life was full of rude shocks, and the kids did not yet have the proper weapons of defense.

The gamble had not worked, and Walter was afraid that Jim would now try to back out of the agreement. Walter was not particularly heartened by his belief that it was the only thing they could have done.

He stood up when the car stopped in front and Jim and Betty came up the walk in the last of the July dusk.

Mary came out onto the porch. They sat there tensely,

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"WILL IT WORK?" MARY WHISPERED

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waiting for the kids, the four of them. "It didn't work out," Jim said accusingly.

"Not the way we hoped," Walter said. "Before they sprang it on us," Jim said, "I want to say one thing. We made the gamble. I think we ought to stick with it. I'll help the kids as much as I can. You plan to stick to the agreement, Walt?"

Walter Harrison smiled and suddenly liked Jim Rawlings better. The man had a code of decency. And was shrewd enough to know that to back out would mean the end of all respect. Jim might make a very acceptable father-in-law for Jud.

"I'll stick to the agreement," Walter said.

"I thought it would be so long before my daughter would be a bride," Betty Rawlings said. "I hoped she'd marry..." She stopped abruptly, and they knew what she was about to say and shared her embarrassment. Hoped she'd marry a man who could support her nicely.

"Nancy is a sweet girl," Mary Harrison said firmly, and Walter was proud of her for saying it. The two couples felt closer, but there was no flavor of gaiety. The kids were too young to marry. It was something to face, to feel sorry about. It was a death of many hopes.

The kids arrived ten minutes later and came up the walk to the house. They all went into the living room and, as before, Jud and Nancy sat together on the couch. They looked so serious and so young. Their nervous smiles were a little too mechanical, but Walter saw that Nancy wasn't so jittery as before. There was a new quality of repose about her, a hint of maturity.

"So now we get the news," Jim said too heartily.

"Yes, sir," Jud said. "We think it's swell, the way you've been, the money and all. Maybe you thought we wouldn't

stay together for all this time. Maybe you thought it was just... kid stuff. But it's been a year and it's going to be a lot of years."

Nancy nodded firmly. "And so now you want to be married," Mary Harrison said gently.

"Well... we have a sort of a counter offer," Nancy said. "We... you better tell them, Jud. I mean ask them."

Jim looked down at his hands and then looked at them all, turned his eyes at last to his father, steady gray eyes. "We're as certain as we ever were, but maybe we aren't in so big a rush. I mean we were only seventeen last year. We've done a lot of talking. About the future and what we'll do and what kind of a life we want to have."

"We think we should wait a little while longer," Nancy said. "I'm sorry, Jud. I interrupted."

"You don't have to keep putting the money in. We're not asking for that," Jud said. "We can both get into State. I've been writing to Student Aid, and we've got two part-time jobs lined up and we both want to go up there in the fall."

"And we don't want to get married," Nancy said, "until we find out the score up there. You know, how the other married kids make out and what the living situation is and all."

"So," Jud continued, "we wonder if you'll go along with this. You keep the money and start giving it back to us in September after we get up there. We can figure out what we'll need and let you know. How much a month?"

"We'll make budgets and things," Nancy said, her eyes bright and eager and excited.

"And sort of plan on getting married either on Christmas vacation or Easter vacation, whichever seems to work out right," Jud said. "We can live in the

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dormitories until we decide."

Nancy said, "We just hoped ... that it would sound all right to all of you.

"We know a lot of kids who got married in high school."

Nancy said, "Our friends. They acted pretty smart about it at the time, and now they seem sort of trapped. I mean they can't ever become very much. Jud is real bright and he ought to have college, and I don't want him having a dumb wife either. There are lots of married students at State."

Long after the enthusiastic acceptance of the plan the kids had made, after Jim and Walter had insisted that they would keep adding to the "war fund," and after the kids had gone off in Jud's ancient car to celebrate as a drive-in, Walter kept remembering how they had looked as they had walked away from the house. Jud, tall with good shoulders, his slow laughter deep in the quiet of the night street. Nancy, small and trim, skipping along beside him, excited, pretty and in love.

Now Jim and Walter sat on the dark porch together. The two women were out in the kitchen, fixing a snack. They could hear the women talking, and Walter heard Mary laugh, a warm, precious sound to him.

They smoked and Walter said, quietly, "You know, Jim, that's a pair of good kids. We're luckier than we knew."

"You forget something else."

"What's that?"

"We weren't exactly stupid about the way we handled it."

Walter smiled with quiet amusement that give Jim another year and it would turn out to have been Jim's idea all along. The women called them and the men went in. Walter knew they were both aware now of the tragic narrowness of the boundary between disappointment and pride. And they felt the mutual warmth and closeness of two men who have escaped a great danger.

The End