

Who Stopped that

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Illustrated by Lucia

FICTION

AT BREAKFAST my sister, Ginny, kept frowning at a spot about three inches from her coffee cup. Mother and Dad were making a deal about the car, and who'd have it when. It was settled, and Dad put his nose back in the paper. Ginny muttered, "It's all a matter of trust." She didn't say any more. Just kept frowning at that spot.

I could see it working on Dad. He sighed after a while and folded the paper and put it aside. "By now I should know better. What is a matter of trust?"

Ginny looked at him and her eyes went wide and blank. "What, Dad?"

"You said just now that something was a matter of trust. The statement seemed a bit incomplete."

"Oh, that! Well, I guess I was thinking about rules and things. I mean, if you trust someone, you don't have to thrust them into a prison or anything."

My mother's mouth tightened. There was a gleam in her eyes. "Better watch it, Hal," she said to Dad.

"Is anyone being imprisoned?" Dad asked, very softly.

Ginny gave her casual laugh, the one she uses on the phone. "It's purely relative, isn't it?"

"May I make a point?" Dad asked.

"Of course, Father," Ginny said, shy like. The word around our house is to duck when Ginny calls Dad Father.

"GETTING in tonight at one in the morning is a rule which will stand. If you wish to consider the rule unfair, you may go right ahead. But you're still in by one. Check?"

"Of course I'll be in by one," Ginny said sweetly. It was as though Dad had swung at a golf ball and missed. The lack of resistance put him off balance. He stared at her for a moment. She sipped her coffee, her eyes wide and violet and far away. Dad picked up his paper as though it would bite him.

As soon as he started to read, Ginny said, "It must be quite a mental picture."

Dad slapped the paper down. "What mental picture?" he asked, too loudly.

She shrugged. "Oh me. Rolling and hooting down the street at five in the morning with my clothes torn or something. Maybe I'm with some evil man with a mustache and we're carrying a baby in a basket."

"Ronny couldn't grow a mustache," I said. Hot sparks jumped out of her eyes. "You



Hal and Marty and Joe all faced the crisis

stay out of this, little man," she said hotly.

"Is Joe upsetting some preconceived campaign?" Dad asked.

"Campaign, Father?" she asked sweetly, making a fast recovery.

"This attempt of yours to fracture a rule, Virginia."

Again came the telephone laugh. "I know just how much chance I have of that, Father. I'll pretend to be Cinderella. Just as the dance is beginning to thrive I'll go out and leap into my pumpkin."

"Virginia, you are sixteen," Dad said.

"Why, Father! Goodness, have I been concealing my age or something?"

Dad bit his lip. He said, "I shall thank you to remember that I am the lawyer in the family. It is my business to develop logical arguments. The mental picture I have, and the one I object to, is a bunch of kids roaring out to some drive-in at three in the morning."

"I suppose you are referring to Trench Mouth Tavern. We don't go there any more, Father."

He snatched his paper up again and hid behind it. "One more word, young lady, and the hour will become twelve instead of one tonight."

Virginia gave the paper a shocked look. She stood up slowly. Her underlip trembled. "That is the kind of fairness I can expect," she said. "There is hardly time enough to make it worth going as it is. You seem determined to make a creep out of me!"

He dropped the paper on the floor. His face was real red. Just as he opened his mouth, Mother said, "Hal! Ginny!"

Ginny's violet eyes filled with tears and she flounced down the hall to her room. Mother said, "You were about to put yourself too far out on the limb, dear. Twelve o'clock would be a little absurd."

"Do you think one o'clock is absurd?"

"Now don't snarl at me. I can see her point. This is a special dance. Ronny isn't even calling for her until nine-thirty."

"Marty, in the law a decision that is upheld establishes a precedent, and I have..."

"She is your daughter, Hal, not a case at law."

"I don't get it," I said. "What's another hour or two with Ronny Bowman? I'd think she'd want to go at nine-thirty and come home at ten."

"Run along, Joe," they both said at once, as though they'd rehearsed it. I finished off my milk. It was time to give Saturday a little consideration. I decided to phone Skipper. We could hitch out to the dam and swim for a while.

JUST as I was taking off, Ginny collared me. "Wait outside," she said.

"I got places to go."

"You wait or you'll be sorry."

She came out, and we talked in the garage.

She gave me a narrow-eyed look and said, "How much do you want five dollars?"

"Where did you get five bucks?"

"I only spent half Gran's birthday check, stupid. Do you want it or don't you?"

I wanted it. I could use it. "What do I have to do?"

"They're not going out tonight. Are you?"

"Just to a movie."

"You'll be back about ten. I've been thinking how to work it. That clock they go by in the bedroom is electric. When the current goes on again, it starts itself, doesn't it?"

"Sure. So does the one in the kitchen."

"You stay awake, Joe, and when their bedroom lights go off, you go down cellar and unscrew the top fuse on the righthand side. That's the one for the bedroom. Keep track of the time. One hour later, go back down and screw that fuse in again. I'm going to tell Ronny I can stay out until two."

I whistled. "Boy, will you ever be i jam if..."

"Dad won't find out. Because after I check in with them I'll go to the kitchen and get a snack. Then I'll go down cellar and take that fuse out and put a bad one in. Then they won't know when it blew and the clock

won't be working in the morning so they won't have any chance to check."

"Did you ever wonder if you got criminal tendencies, Ginny?"

"It's not criminal. *Everybody* can stay out later than I can. Will you do it?"

I weighed the risks against the five bucks. "Sold," I said.

The movie was a stinker, so Skipper and I left the minute it was over and walked home. Dad said, "Your mother's gone to bed. Want to split a cake?"

"Sure," I said. It was about twenty after ten when we polished off the crumbs and the last of a quart of milk. I felt like some kind of an international spy. Dad reads in bed.

The only way I could stay awake was by standing up. By my watch it was eleven-thirty when the thread of light under their door winked out. My shoes were already off. I took some kitchen matches and sneaked down into the cellar. I unscrewed the right fuse. I wanted to back out of the agreement. It seemed worth more than five bucks. But I'd promised Ginny.

I waited in the dark for a long time. It seemed like an hour. I lit a match and looked at my watch. Quarter to twelve. Just fifteen minutes had gone by. I wondered if people can fall asleep standing up.

I risked putting on a light, and there was a pile of old magazines. I sat by the furnace and read until twelve-thirty. Then I screwed the fuse back in to start their clock again. I knew it would say eleven-thirty and be running again. But Ginny was still taking a chance that neither of them would get up and go over to the bureau or the dressing table and check the clock against a wrist watch.

I got back into my room and that bed felt wonderful.

A MILLION years later somebody was shaking me. Dad was staring hard at me, and not in a very friendly way. "You march right into our room, young man."

I guess I staggered. It certainly was a poor night to get any sleeping done. He came right along behind me. There was Ginny in her party dress, her eyes all red. Mother was sitting on the side of her bed in her robe, looking sort of startled.

"Now, young man," Dad said, "tell us of your cellar escapade."

I glared at Ginny. She said, "They made me tell, Joe. I'm sorry."

I said, "The next time I do you a favor..."

BETTER, BUT THREE PEOPLE TRIED

Clock?



Ginny said, "But I couldn't tell you, Joe, because you were at the movies. Before I left Dad whispered to me that I could stay out until two."

"He didn't tell me that!" Mother said.

"Now, Marty, I —"

"You just didn't want me to know that the great legal brain had backed down," Mother said.

Dad got red. "You're a great one. You, as I understand it, had already told her she could stay out until two and you'd fix it. A pity you didn't try to fix it through discussion rather than subterfuge."

Mother said, "Discussion! Hah! I just guessed at a full hour and turned it back in the dark."

I looked at the clock. And then I got it. When Dad finished reading, he'd turned it from eleven-thirty back to ten-thirty. Then Mother, in the dark, had turned it back to nine-thirty. Then, in the cellar, I cut off the current for an hour.

So WHEN Ginny came in happily at two o'clock, the three of them looked at the clock, and there it was, running along, saying eleven o'clock.

"If there's anything I detest," Dad said, "it is dishonesty."

The three of us stared at him. He got a little bit redder. He looked startled and then he began to grin. In about ten seconds the four of us were laughing so hard we had to hold onto the furniture.

Mother got control of herself first. She said finally, "This episode is declared a draw. No decision. Now let's all get some sleep."

The last thing I heard was Dad and Ginny in the hall. I heard him say, "You understand, Virginia, that this sets no precedent."

As usual Ginny didn't hesitate.

"Of course not, Father," she said sweetly. "Only for important dances."

As I fell asleep I was wondering whether the noise he made was a yawn, or just a great big sigh. One thing for sure. She wasn't going to welch on that five bucks. *The End*

"Just for this special dance," Ginny said, "why can't I stay out with Ronny till two o'clock?"