

Hilda, Truman Capote

Hilda

I

"Hilda—Hilda Weber, will you please come here a moment?"

Quickly she went to the front of the room and stood next to Miss Armstrong's desk.

"Hilda," Miss Armstrong said quietly, "Mr. York would like to see you after dismissal."

Hilda stared questioningly for a moment, then she shook her head, her long black hair swinging from side to side and partly covering her pleasant face.

"Are you sure it's me, Miss Armstrong? I haven't done anything." Her voice was frightened but very mature for a sixteen-year-old girl.

Miss Armstrong seemed annoyed. "I can only tell you what this note says." She handed the tall girl a slip of white paper.

Hilda Weber—office—3:30.

Mr. York, Principal.

Hilda went slowly back to her desk. The sun shone brightly through the window and she blinked her eyes. Why was she being summoned to the office? It was the first time she had ever been called to see the principal, and she had been going to Mount Hope High for almost two years.

II

Somewhere in the back of her mind there was a vague fear. She had a feeling that she knew what it was the principal wanted to see her for—but no, that couldn't be it—no one knew, no one even suspected. She was Hilda Weber—hard working, studious, shy, and unassuming. No one knew. How could they?

She felt a little comforted. It must be something else that Mr. York wanted to see her about. Perhaps he wanted her to be on the committee for the Prom. She smiled feebly and picked up her big green Latin book.

When the dismissal bell rang, Hilda went directly to Mr. York's office. She presented the note to the complacent secretary in the outer office. When she was told to go in, she thought her legs were going to crumple beneath her. She shook with nervousness and excitement.

Hilda had seen Mr. York in the school corridors and had heard him speak at school assemblies but she could never remember having actually spoken with him personally. He was a tall man with a thin face topped with a great spray of red hair. His eyes were sea-pale and, at the moment, extremely pleasant.

Hilda came into the small, modestly furnished office with troubled eyes and a pale face.

III

"You are Hilda Weber?" The words were more a statement than a question. Mr. York's voice was grave and pleasant.

"Yes, Sir, I am." Hilda was surprised at her own calm voice. Inside she was cold and jittery and her hands clasped her books so tightly that she

could feel the warm sweat. There was something terrible and frightening about seeing a principal, but his friendly eyes disarmed her.

"I see by your record here," he picked up a big yellow card, "that you are an honor student, that you came here from a boarding school in Ohio, and that you are at present a Junior here at Mount Hope High School. Is that correct?" he asked.

She nodded her head and watched him intently.

"Tell me, Hilda, what are you most interested in?"

"In what way, Sir?" She must be on her guard.

"Why, pertaining to a future career in life." He had picked up a gold key chain from his desk and was twirling it around.

"Well I don't know, Sir. I thought I would like to be an actress. I've always had a great interest in dramatics." She smiled, and dropped her gaze from his thin face to the whirling blur of chain.

"I see," he said. "I ask this only because I would like to understand you. It's quite important that I understand you." He turned his chair around and sat up straight to the desk. "Yes, quite important." She noticed that his air of informality had dropped.

IV

She fidgeted with her books nervously. He hadn't said anything yet to accuse her, but she knew that her face was flushed; she felt very hot all over. Suddenly the closeness of the room was unbearable.

He laid down the chain. He was fixing to speak, she knew because she heard his sharp intake of breath, but she didn't dare look up at him because she knew what he was going to say.

"Hilda, I suppose you know there has been a great deal of thieving going on here in the girls' lockers." He paused a moment. "It's been going on for some time now—but we haven't been able to lay our hands on the girl who would steal from her class mates." He was stern and deliberate.

"There is no place in this high school for a thief!" he said earnestly.

Hilda stared down at her books. She could feel her chin trembling and she bit her lips. Mr. York half rose from his seat and then sat down again. They sat in a tense, strained silence. Finally he reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a small blue box and emptied the contents on the desk. Two gold rings, a charm bracelet, and some coins.

"Do you recognize these?" he asked.

She stared at them for a long time. Fully forty-five seconds. They blurred in front of her eyes.

"But I didn't steal those things, Mr. York, if that's what you mean!"

V

He sighed. "They were found in your locker, and besides—we've had our eye on you for some time!"

"But I didn't—" she stopped short, it was hopeless.

Finally Mr. York said, "But what I can't understand is why a child like you would want to do such a thing. You're bright, and as far as I can find out, you come from a fine family. Frankly, I am completely baffled."

She still sat silent, fumbling with her books, and feeling as if the walls were close and tight, as if something were trying to smother her.

"Well," he continued, "if you aren't going to offer any explanation, I'm afraid there is little I can do for you. Don't you realize the seriousness of this offense?"

"It's not that," she rasped. "It's not that I don't want to tell you why I stole those things—it's just that I don't know how to tell you, because I don't know myself." Her slim shoulders shook, she was trembling violently.

He looked at her face—how hard to punish frailty in a child. He was visibly moved, he knew. He walked to the window and adjusted the shade. The girl got up. She was overcome with a nauseous hate for this office and those bright shining trinkets on the desk. She could hear Mr. York's voice, it seemed far and distant.

VI

"This is a very serious matter, I'm afraid I will have to see your parents."

Her eyes leaped with fear. "You aren't going to have to tell my—?"
"Of course," Mr. York answered.

Suddenly she didn't care anymore about anything except getting out of this little white office with its ugly furnishings and its red-headed occupant and the rings and bracelet and money. She hated them!

"You may go now."

"Yes, Sir."

When she left the office, he was occupied with putting the trinkets back in the little blue box. She walked slowly through the outer office and down the long empty corridor and out into the bright sunlight of the April afternoon.

Then, suddenly, she began to run, and she ran faster and faster. Down the high school street, and into the town and down the long main street. She didn't care if people did stare at her; all she wanted was to get as far away as she could. She ran away to the other side of town and into the park. There were only a few women there with their baby carriages. She collapsed onto one of the empty benches and hugged her aching side. After a while, it stopped hurting. She opened her big green Latin book, and behind its protective covers, began to cry softly, unconsciously fingering the gold key chain in her lap.

The End