The Spot of Ink

Lucy Kaufman

Looking away from his book, Peter stared at the hard hot brightness of the one lighted lamp. He liked the yellow compact circle of light thrown from the unshaded bulb, for although it was adequate for reading, it was too small to illuminate the room. For a long time, almost it seemed, from the time of his first coherent thought, he had wanted to burst the bonds which chained him to the room. And each night he read to forget the soiled cracked wallpaper and the thick film of dust which smudged the window panes and slid along the edges of the floor. Each night he read, for reading was the one escape he knew from the room he despised and the house he had never called home. But now these were only phantoms in a deep darkness of shadow, and that is why he liked the small unshaded lamp which obscured the corners of the room.

He looked away from his book, and his eyes fell upon the blue ink spot staining his cuff. Odd that the thing should annoy him still. It had happened that morning while he had been grading papers for Dr. Hayward. His pen freshly filled had leaked, and a huge blob of ink had dropped on his sleeve. He could not say why, at the time and later — during the day when he chanced to notice it, a searing resentment blazed through him. Perhaps it was a manifestation of the resentment which was forever a part of him. Or perhaps the ink spot infringing upon the crisp clean whiteness of his shirt stung his sensitivity. He dressed with such care each morning, and he diligently endeavored to maintain a fastidiousness alien to his fellow students. In that at least he could take pride.

He had been tempted to roll up his sleeves in order to hide the spot of ink, but for some reason which he could not explain, a strange perverseness prevented him from doing the thing he desired most to do. So he only stared at the spot despising it as he despised all of his limitations — with resentment and a bitter sense of inadequacy.

The door of his room opened, and Peter turned his head. In the dusky half-light he saw the heavy figure of his father outlined. Silently he waited for the words, knowing what they would be.

"So you're up here reading again? Apparently you find your books better company than your parents. It's remarkable that you condescend to flatter us with your presence even at meals."

"Yes, I'm reading," Peter answered quietly. The light from the hall had slipped through the open door and was crawling along the walls in yellow streaks. He could see the places near the ceiling where the plaster had broken.

"You act as if this house weren't good enough for you, — you with your superior attitude that everyone laughs at. And what have you ever done to prove you're better than we are?"

"Nothing," he replied. The room became smaller and smaller, until he was surrounded and squeezed by a band of tightening space. Once more he looked at the spot of ink, and it grew larger. It was liquid and blue, and he felt that he was drowning. Furiously, he struggled toward the top of the wild dark whirlpool, and at last he broke the surface.

"You're right. I've done nothing," his voice was high and filled with anger. "And I never shall, unless I have the time I need..."
in which to work. You criticize the time I spend reading, but you also want me to be successful, not for myself but for you, because I'm your son. Of course, I want to write, and that in your esteemed opinion is not a profitable career. You would have me tie myself to the miserable dusty office where you and your father, and your father's father ground out their lives fifty weeks of every year. And what has it brought you? Forty dollars a week, a stifled soul, and this beautiful home in which I am so proud to live." He suddenly stopped, and look down at his book almost timidly.

"As long as you live in this house, you will treat it and the people in it with respect. If, however, you care to quit school, leave home, and find a job, you are free to do so." The lines around his father's mouth were tightening, and his eyes had narrowed.

Peter knew that there was no argument. It was the old misunderstanding between them, the same noxious weed of contempt which was deeply rooted in his hatred of the mundane and which had formed a gap that could never be bridged. Lately it had been widening, and although he knew that the only solution was to leave, he could not bring himself to take this step, because he was afraid. Most of all he feared loneliness, the kind of loneliness which came with the realization that he did not belong and that no one cared what became of him. Yet it was in this room when he was reading late at night that he would suddenly throw down his book, rush to the window, and lean against the sill gazing out at the lights across the town. And always there was the sound of laughter or of footsteps in the darkened street, or of music drifting over the night from some happier place, and he felt that he was lost, forever to be the stranger and inquisitor. It was then that he was loneliest. But he could not express these things, consequently he was resentful toward the people he knew as well as toward the thoughts which he could not put into words.

His father's voice came to him like a dream. "If you can segregate yourself from your books long enough, I wish you'd run an errand for me. I need some tobacco. Here's the money, and you'd better leave now. The store closes in a little while." He came closer to hand Peter a paper bill. In the light his face looked flushed and swollen, and his grey mustache was stained from his pipe. He stood staring at his son for a moment, then exclaimed with obvious sarcasm, "I see you have a spot of ink on your cuff. How did that happen? Don't tell me you were careless for once."

Involuntarily, Peter moved his arm so the spot did not show. He wished that he had rolled up his sleeves, but even now an odd kind of self-inflicted punishment restrained him. As he took the money, he said merely, "I'll hurry back."

It is quiet and warm in the street. Low in the east a full red moon scorches the sky. The April smell of moist earth and new grass clings to the wind, and a million stars hang over a sleeping town. But as the boy walks through the darkness, he senses the beauty of the night only vaguely if at all. He is concerned with the memory of a house which he has left and to which he must presently return, a house with cracked wallpaper and dusty floors. He is thinking also of a man whom he despises, a man whose stereotyped two dimensional life has been thrust before him as a standard of achievement. In the darkness the boy's mouth twists, as the hot ball of hate burns the corners of his mind.

Suddenly the silence of the night is
broken. From the open window of an apartment building slips the chime of laughing voices. The boy stops a moment to listen. Then as the hot salt water scalds his cheeks, he rubs his eyes and runs swiftly down the sidewalk. The sounds grow fainter, until he is out of earshot. Finally he stops again, for in the street lies a dog. The animal is motionless and whimpers softly. He approaches the dog and notices that the hair around its neck is matted with blood. The sad brown eyes look up at him, inarticulately begging for help. For an instant, perhaps the boy knows pity, for he stares down at the crippled animal. Then with all his force he lifts his foot and kicks the dog on the side of the head. With a loud yelp it tries to rise, fails, then falls back and is very still.

Slowly and with deliberation the boy rolls up his sleeves and without looking back walks silently away through the night.

The Banker

DORIS DALEY

Sylvester scowled at the traffic light because it was detaining him for a valuable moment or two; even though he could have crossed safely, he waited because that is the law. When the light changed, he hurried across the street with others who had eight o'clock appointments with destiny, and, just as he did every morning, looked in all the smart shop windows. In all except the very worst weather, Sylvester walked the six blocks between his hotel and the office; exercise was good for him and it helped shake off the stagnant clinging atmosphere of the young man's hostelry. He really disliked the place, but it was convenient and not expensive, and was thoroughly respectable.

"Some day", thought Sylvester, "I will move into a big apartment, with a valet and cook of my own, and I'll have a limousine to drive to work in, and I'll be rich and famous, like the executive vice-president."

He smiled to himself as he hurried through the big bronze and glass doors; he continued to smile as he benevolently greeted the elevator-boy, and the look of pleasure had not left his face when, closing the office door behind him, he nodded to the stenographer and errand-boy. Sylvester always strove to maintain his dignity in their presence because a private secretary must be worthy of the respect due him from such underlings.

He carefully hung up his correct black coat and lovingly placed his new derby on a peg — all big executives wore derbys. Adjusting his conservative red print tie in the mirror, he hurried to his desk and seated himself deliberately.

There were reports to fill out — endless reports — and letters to write and documents to check; some would have found it very dull, but Sylvester loved his work — it required neatness and accuracy, and Sylvester was proud of his neatness and accuracy. At home they had said he had no imagination — that he was a grind and