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Old Flaming Youth

JEAN STAFFORD

We knew it must have been the Ferguson twins who had stolen Janie's gold bracelet because no one else had been in the house that day except the iceman and he had only come onto the back porch. It was not an expensive bracelet or an heirloom or anything like that, but Janie set great store by it because it was the last birthday present Daddy had given her before he died. We hunted everywhere for it, in every cupboard and closet and in the button box and in the first-aid kit and under rugs and in the rag bag; we even looked in the flower boxes on the front porch that held nothing but frozen dirt and a few stems as hard as wire and one exploded lady cracker. We emptied out the carpet sweeper and Mr. Pendleton, our stepfather, even went through the garbage. We hardly spoke as we wandered upstairs and down, rummaging through the same places twenty times: I think I must have looked in the secret drawer of the sewing machine regularly every five minutes.

I don't imagine Daddy had paid more than two-fifty for it—it was just thin little links and probably it wasn't even real gold—but finding the bracelet came to be the most important thing in our lives. Janie wanted to find it for the reason I have said and Mother felt a little that way too, I think, for it had been only three days after that last birthday supper that Daddy had been electrocuted when he was repairing the lines at the depot. Mr. Pendleton wanted to find it because he was a methodical, fussy man and he hated to have things lost or moved or broken. Once he had had a conniption fit when Carrie, our dog, went off for a week, even though he didn't like her at all and called her names when she begged at the supper table. He wanted everything just so. And the reason I hunted so hard for the bracelet was that I didn't want the Fergusons to have stolen it and from the very first I was almost certain that they had.

I did not say so, but I distinctly remembered seeing it lying on the bureau in plain sight the afternoon before when Helen and Grace and Janie and I were all in Janie's room smoking and burning Maine Balsam incense to kill the smell and pushing the smoke out the window with our hands. It was cold and the

twins were annoyed that we had to have the window open but we couldn't help that. I remembered seeing it because I had gone to the bureau once, pretending that I wanted to comb my hair but really to see in the mirror how I looked with a cigarette in my mouth. It was just a few minutes after that that Janie and I went down to make peanut butter sandwiches and when we came back we found, a little to our surprise, that the twins had put their coats on; they said they had to leave right away because they had a coke date with some boys from out of town. They each took a sandwich to eat on the way. Janie and I were rather peeved, but just for a second, and I didn't think about it again until we found that the bracelet was gone.

All day I kept my fingers crossed and prayed that it wouldn't occur to Mr. Pendleton to suspect the Fergusons, for he was a great one for calling the police, a fact so well known in town that at school Janie and I sometimes got teased by kids who would say, "Had any Peeping Toms lately?" or "There's a Mexican I know that's got his eye on your henhouse." And besides his liking to ring in the law whenever he got a chance, he did not approve of the Fergusons who peroxided their hair and wore high-heeled shoes and earrings just to go to the store. To keep peace, Mother had tried to get us to break up with them. She thought they were unsuitable too—there was no use denying it, they *did* have bad reputations—but she could see our point: they were the only girls our age in our part of town except for Mary Jo Baxter who was retarded and Ethel Bull who had been to New York and lorded it over us in a way no self-respecting person could stand. She used to call Mr. Ek's big old general store "the corner delicatessen." If you can imagine!

Helen and Grace had quit high school in their sophomore year because they didn't like to get up early in the morning, and nobody lifted a finger to stop them. I can just feature what would have happened if Janie or I had tried that. Wow! During the Christmas rush they worked at the dime store, but the rest of the time they did nothing at all except have a good time and sort of keep house for their mother who was away at work all day and their grandfather who was as old as Methuselah and couldn't do much more than sit in a rocking chair and whimper to himself. He rather cramped their style when boys came to see them, so they would get a couple of the fellows to pick him

up, chair and all, and put him out on the back porch. I hated it when they did that because he would look so horribly scared and hang onto the chair arms for dear life and bleat the way Carrie does when I am taking a thorn out of her paw. But they said he didn't mind, that he was really not all there and anyhow he hadn't any right to mind since he was totally dependent on them and didn't have a red cent to call his own.

Mrs. Ferguson was a divorcée, a red-haired woman who had a millinery shop on Opal Street, and Mr. Pendleton, who had it in for milliners, don't ask me why, said she was no better than she should be. One night at supper he said that as he was going past the Fergusons' house on his way home from work he had seen her shimmying (that's what he said, *shimmying,* though when we pinned him down it turned out that she was doing the Hesitation Waltz) on the front porch with one of the twin's boy friends while another boy friend sat on the steps playing the saxophone. Mother, who had not danced a step since Daddy died, said she thought a plucky little woman like Mrs. Ferguson, with two daughters and an old sick father to support, deserved to have a little fun although she, personally, would not have gone about it so publicly. Mr. Pendleton was furious. He banged on the table and he said, "Next you'll be boosting free love."

Janie and I used to stop by their house on our way home from school a little after three, about the time the twins were having lunch. They had two menus, and only two. One was potato chips and Van Camp's pork and beans which they ate cold on paper plates and the other was wienies and canned sweet corn. For dessert they had either a Love Nest or graham crackers spread with Hippolyte. The grandfather cooked for himself; about all he cared for was fried mush. We could smoke freely there; Mrs. Ferguson knew and didn't mind—we were positive she smoked herself—and after the twins had finished eating and had thrown out the cans and paper plates, we would go into the front room and put a record on the Victrola (we were all four of us crazy about St. James Infirmary) and smoke. The square Mission chairs were so hard and slippery that we usually sat on the floor and sometimes, when my mind wandered, I tried to see a design in the blue and mustard linoleum, but there was nothing there except daubs and dots. The room was full

of souvenirs from the amusement park up in the mountains, kewpie dolls, leather sofa pillows with burned-in designs of pine trees or Old Faithful, swagger sticks, burros made of lead and cowboys made of straw, presents from their beaux who had won them in the shooting gallery.

We didn't do much of anything there. Whenever Mother told us that she would "just as soon" we didn't see so much of Helen and Grace, we said how on earth could their influence be bad when all we did was play the phonograph and sometimes have a game of cassino? Of course we did not mention the smoking nor the fact that once in a while we had cokes sent in from the drugstore—Mr. Pendleton had convinced her that Coca-Cola was habit forming. But we really didn't do anything more than that; we didn't even talk about things we shouldn't although my sister and I agreed that Helen and Grace could probably have told us plenty if they'd wanted to. They were extremely popular; they went to Cotillion Hall two or three times a week and in the summer they practically lived at the amusement park. They looked exactly alike; they were small and thin and they had big yellow-green eyes and they used orange lipstick on their Cupid's-bow mouths. They dressed alike, too; when they put on their black satin dresses and their opera pumps with rhinestone heels and put artificial roses in their Jean Harlow hair, they looked like a pair of French dolls and Janie and I said it was no wonder they had about a million dates. They had their differences though. Helen was sometimes quiet, but Grace never was; when Grace wasn't telling a joke or singing a song or doing a Spanish dance and snapping her fingers like castanets, she was chewing gum and popping it loud enough to wake the dead. And often she almost but not quite told things she shouldn't have, to Helen's uneasiness. Once I remember Helen's saying quite sharply, "Do you want people to say you kiss and tell?" Another time Grace let slip a remark about wishing she had a bottle of cold beer and although Helen covered up for her by saying she didn't even know what beer looked like, she didn't convince us. It was a well-known fact that two of their boy friends, Arthur Bonelli and Ray Stapleton, were bootleggers and successful too.

But as I say, those afternoons at the Fergusons were as harm-

less as Girls' Friendly and they were necessary to Janie and me, mainly, I suppose, because we had to have some kind of interval between school, which neither of us liked, and supper, when Mr. Pendleton every single night would fly off the handle about something none of us was to blame for, like a customer who had come into the hardware store that afternoon and had run down his line of monkey wrenches, or the sin and wickedness which he was dead sure was rampant in the peanut gallery at the Rialto. Good gosh! Nobody sat up there but little tiny kids who hissed the villain.

We would get through the evening, though, if we had had that time with Helen and Grace. They were so easy going and good-natured—except, that is, about the grandfather and even so we could see how he was a bother and an embarrassment, being so outstandingly old and just sitting there day after day like a bump on a log and smelling funny, probably of all that mush he ate though sometimes it smelled to me more like coal smoke. We could forget about their meanness to him and their high-handedness with their mother ("I didn't ask to be born," said Grace once, "but since she went and had me anyhow, she can damn well support me.") because they were so casual and nice with us. They liked us and they said so and if it hadn't been for Mr. Pendleton, they would have got us dates. "You poor kids," they would say, "why don't you tell the old prude to go jump in the lake?" They did share with us the boys who came to see them and even bragged about us sometimes. "Did you ever see such long eyelashes as that Janie has?" "Sue is going to knock your eye right out when she gets to be about sixteen." We didn't usually stay long though, after the boys came, because we really hated to see them take the old man out; I think that sometimes that pathetic squawk he made was "Help! Help!"

Well, we hunted for the bracelet all day Sunday and by the time we sat down to supper, we had to accept the fact that it wasn't in the house. And then Mr. Pendleton asked who had been there the day before. I suppose that Mother and Janie had been thinking the same thoughts I had because all three of us together said "The iceman."

"Dude Kennedy?" said Mr. Pendleton. "Rats. Dude wouldn't

know a gold bracelet from a potato worm." And he was probably right because Dude had been simple from birth. "Who else was here?"

"Was anyone else here, girls?" said Mother as if she honestly could not remember. Personally, I would have lied and said no, even if it had been my bracelet and was set with rubies and pearls. But Janie, either because she hadn't suspected the twins or because she wanted her bracelet back, no matter what, said, yes, the Fergusons had been here.

Mr. Pendleton stopped cutting his meat—he has the most maddening way of cutting it up fine before he eats a bite, exactly as if he were fixing it for a child—and slapping his hands palm down on the table he said, "Of all the rattlebrained ways to waste a man's time! Looking through the garbage on my day of rest for something those flappers stole. Well, it's clear the Misses Thomas want to make a chump out of me."

It rankles terribly with him that Janie and I have kept Daddy's name and that we've never been able to call him anything except Mr. Pendleton. Mother did what she could to calm him down and he agreed not to call the sheriff if Janie and I would promise to go over to the Fergusons right after school the next day and demand the bracelet. At first he wanted us to do it after supper—he said you never could tell with people like that, they might have skipped town. The way he talked, you'd have thought the thing came from Tiffany's instead of from the Nelson Dry. But Mother said we had our homework to do and finally he dropped the subject.

After we went upstairs I couldn't help telling Janie that I thought she was a selfish pill but she felt so awful about giving the twins away that I apologized and we started to lay our plans. At first we thought we would try to prove to Mr. Pendleton that they hadn't taken it, although we knew they had, but we were afraid he wouldn't believe us and might go down there himself and make a scene. We decided it would be better if we could go into the house when they weren't there and see if we could find it. One of them might be wearing it, of course, but we thought they probably wouldn't dare for a day or so. So it was agreed that Janie was to go to their house by herself and say that I was still at school getting help in geometry and she

was to persuade them somehow to go out for a coke. I would be hiding behind the ashpit and as soon as I saw them leave the house, I was to go in the back door which they never kept locked and get the bracelet. If the old grandfather saw me, I would first ask him where the twins were and then I would say that I had left my protractor here somewhere and would he mind if I looked for it. If I found the bracelet, we were going to tell Mr. Pendleton that it had been in Janie's gym locker all the time.

It was a pretty day that Monday, soft and springlike although this was only February, and Janie had no trouble at all getting Helen and Grace to go out with her because the weather had made them restless. That is what they *said,* but of course later on we knew they had another reason for wanting to be away from the house. I was in luck, too, for the grandfather was sitting on the front porch in the creaky old swing they never bothered to take down in the winter. He looked as if he were going somewhere; he had on a pale gray hat which he had dented in a way to make it look like a shovel and he was wearing an old polo coat of Grace's and a pair of galoshes with the buckles gone and one red and black striped mitten. On the swing beside him there was a Boston bag which I remembered to have seen before in the kitchen, full of potatoes. The Fergusons did things like that; for instance, they kept the playing cards in the icebox.

I saw the girls leave. I heard Helen say to the old man, "Now don't you move. You stay right where you are until they come. They're supposed to be here in precisely fifteen minutes."

His thin, wispy voice said, "You coming back?" I realized that it was the very first time I had ever heard him say actual words. Somehow I had thought he was a sort of deaf-mute: not really one, but just so old that he couldn't speak or hear. It gave me a queer feeling to know that all this time he had heard the dreadful things his granddaughters had been saying about him.

Helen said, "We're coming back when we get good and ready. As soon as they get here, you go along with them."

"So long," said Grace. "See you in church."

"Where is Ada?" he said in a little scream.

"At the store. Where did you think?"

The old man lifted the hand that was bare and seemed to wave it. The twins waved back and Grace said, "Go bye-bye?" and laughing they ran down the steps.

I waited for a few minutes and then went into the house. I was scared and I felt guilty, as if I had come here to steal something instead of simply to take back my sister's personal belonging. The water dripping in the kitchen made a loud and lonesome noise and every time I caught a glimpse of the grandfather sitting out there on the porch as I passed by one window or another, my heart did a loop the loop. He sat absolutely still, staring into space. Maybe he was going to visit friends or some other relatives; the Fergusons had some cousins in Nebraska and several times I'd heard them say they didn't see why they didn't take some responsibility for the old man, having a great big farm and plenty of space. It was none of my business, but I hoped that was where he was going and that the cousins would be nicer to him than the twins were.

They had hidden the bracelet well or else, I thought, they had it with them. I hunted everywhere, and though there were about twenty bracelets in all sorts of places—I found a bright green one in a box of nails—Janie's wasn't one of them. The drip in the kitchen and the noisy clock nearly sent me crazy the way they worked together offbeat: drip, tick, drop, tock. I was almost ready to give up and I was almost ready to cry when all of a sudden I saw the clasp hanging down below the orange wig of the kewpie doll on top of the Victrola. The wig came off and showed a round hole in the doll's head and there the bracelet lay like brains.

Everything happened at once then. I heard the girls come up the walk and heard Grace say, "For cat's sake, they haven't come *yet*," and at the same time I heard a car stop outside the house. All the same, I had time to get out the back way and then I walked very slowly around the block and up to the Fergusons' front lawn. The District Council car was there beside the parking and that thick-ankled Mrs. Downes, who is also the chief public nurse, was up on the porch with the grandfather, sitting beside him on the swing and rubbing his ungloved hand between hers as if it were frostbitten. She recognized me as I came up the steps; she ought to know me, I've been in quarantine enough times and she's the one who puts

me in and lets me out. "Hello, Sue," she said. "Do you know where the Ferguson girls are?"

There was not a sound from within the house and though I knew they were there, I dared not say so for I was not supposed to know.

"I thought I saw someone going in the house as I drove up, but nobody answered when I rang the bell and the door is locked."

"I think they're at the drugstore with my sister," I said and loudly I added, "I had to stay in this afternoon and work on my geometry."

Mrs. Downes clucked her tongue and said, "What do you think of girls who go to the drugstore when their own grandfather is going to the County Home? I'm surprised that you are friends with girls like that."

County Home! I nearly passed out. That awful poor farm out beyond the city limits where they still didn't have electricity and not a single tree or flower grew for miles around: I mean it, there wasn't a solitary thing to cast a shadow. Once a long time ago we had had more beans in the garden than we could eat or can and Daddy and I had taken a bushel basket of them out there. I had never forgotten the look and the sound and the smell of misery and how everything was gray and damp and weak. They had all looked like rags, those old outcasts, sitting on the piazza on benches with no backs to them, staring at their feet and not even looking up when Daddy cheerily said, "Hello! Anybody home?"

Mrs. Downes stood up and put her arm around the grandfather and eased him to his feet. She took the Boston bag and then she guided Mr. Ferguson down the steps saying, "Careful, dear, step! Now another." She did not turn around but she said, "Tell those girls for me that I hope some day *they* are down and out. Some day soon! And the same goes for their mother. As for you, Sue Thomas, Mr. Pendleton ought to take a hairbrush to you for keeping company like that."

After the car drove off, the front door opened and Grace cautiously peered out. "For Pete's sake, come in," she hissed at me. "What the heck did you say we were at the drugstore for? She might go down there and look for us and then it'll be all over town."

Janie was as white as a sheet but she was smoking and she had a smile on her face, but I knew my sister well enough to know it was a made up one, that she had just put it on the way you put on your hat. The first thing Grace did was to light a cigarette and give it to me and then she tried a riddle on me that they had heard from the soda jerk, a wisecracking boy named Milo Bean. "When a man marries how many wives does he have?" The answer was "Sixteen—four richer, four poorer, four better, four worse." I made the most ridiculous sound when I tried to laugh and Grace said, "What's the matter, kiddo? You're not worried about the old man, are you?"

"Doesn't he have a coat of his own?" I asked.

"Don't be ridick!" Grace blew a perfect smoke ring. "Where would he get the shekels to buy a coat? Listen, hon, don't blame us, it was Ada's idea. We told her it was us or him and naturally she picked us."

"Mrs. Downes is nice," said Helen.

"Nice? Did you hear what she said about us? She's a polecat." Grace's gum exploded like a popgun. She was chewing Teaberry; I could smell it. "Let's play St. James Infirmary."

She started to the phonograph, stopped short and then went on. I had forgotten to put the wig back on the kewpie doll. We all looked where Grace was looking and Helen said, "St. James Infirmary is too boo-hoo. Why don't you play us something on the uke instead?"

So Grace played "Show Me the Way to Go Home" and "Sleepy Time Gal" on the ukulele and Janie and I stayed until we had each smoked two cigarettes. We left as soon as Arthur Bonelli and Ray Stapleton came. Ray looked at the empty rocking chair and said, "Where's old Flaming Youth? Don't he want his joy ride?"

The girls laughed and Grace said, "He's getting it, big boy!" Ray rumpled her hair.

Mr. Pendleton believed Janie when she said she had found the bracelet in her locker and after he had lectured her on forgetfulness, he stopped talking about it though he never quite forgave her for wasting that Sunday and making him go through the garbage. We never went back to the Fergusons again and Mother, who has a lot of sense, never asked us why. The only time the name was ever mentioned again was when

she heard at the store that the grandfather had died in the county home. Of the mumps, if you can believe it.

I'll never forget that afternoon as long as I live and I know that Janie won't either, for she has never worn the bracelet since and if she comes across it when we are cleaning out our bureau drawers, I see her quickly cover it up with a handkerchief or a pair of gloves. Of course we see the Fergusons; we couldn't help it, living only two blocks away. They are always friendly when we meet. "Hey there, Thomases, how's tricks?" they say but we notice that they don't want to stop and talk.

Now what we do to get ready for Mr. Pendleton at supper time is go to the Public Library and read Faith Baldwin's books.