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CHRISTIAN TEEN CENTER

The Best Pool Shooter in Town

— by Joanna Thurston Roper

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When the elders down at the church hired the new preacher, everyone was well pleased. Of course, they always were during the first few weeks they had a new man in the pulpit. Brother Jack Price preached his first sermon on the 18th of October, and he and his wife Lenora stood at the back greeting the members and showing how proud they were to be in Sweetwood. There was an unusually big crowd. But there always was the first Sunday there was a new preacher.

The ladies had planned a big covered-dish dinner, so as soon as they had shaken hands with the preacher and his wife, they rushed to the kitchen to lay out plates, plastic knives and forks, and the paper cups. Bertha Watson sent her oldest boy Ben down to the Y to get four sacks of ice at the E-Z Stop. Lots of people objected to the E-Z Stop being open on Sunday — or at least they had said so when a new young fellow had bought out Old Man Calhoun's grocery store. He had remodeled the place and put in new lights and fixtures, and almost everyone who used it admitted that it was a decent-looking place, being on the highway and all.

Anyway, Bertha hurried out in the church yard to find Ben before Ruth Miller had a chance to call her boys. Ben hadn't had his license long, and Bertha knew this would be his only chance behind the wheel today. Waldo never would let the kids drive when he was in the car.

"Here, take my keys," she said, digging down into the depths of her brown purse. "Don't ask your dad for his. Now you be careful."

Ben went roaring off, gravel spurting from under the rear tires. Just as Bertha started back inside, she saw Waldo turn and stare after the car. Sunlight glinted on his bald head. Bertha waited to catch his eye and waved so he would know she had dispatched their son on an errand.

In the kitchen, Ruth Miller and Virginia Finn were taking Saran Wrap off the salads, and Mabel Mabry and Kay Davidson were moving all the desserts to a side table. They had set their girls to pouring tea into the glasses. As soon as Ben returned with the ice, they took turns plunking chunks of ice into each glass until Alma Crawford unceremoniously took over the job.

"You girls are too slow. Go call the menfolks. Just tell Jess to start, and he'll round 'em up pretty quick."

In no time at all, the dining room was packed with the hungry congregation. The women who had been working stood toward the back. A few used the corner of their aprons to pat sweat off their upper lips. Rowdy children pushed toward the front of the line while mothers frowned and motioned futilely to them. When silence fell on the crowd, an elder called on Old Brother Van Elmore to lead a prayer.

"Our Father." Brother Elmore's voice cracked, wavered and went haltingly on. "Hallowed be thy name. Bless us to thy use on this glorious occasion —" Brother Elmore droned on and on until mercifully he found a stopping point.

Virginia Finn had stationed herself near the preacher's family, and she urged them to make the rounds first. The preacher, though, looked at the mass of young faces waiting to surge through the line and suggested that the young eat first. Several women were telling him that "We don't do it that way," but he simply put plates into young willing hands and pushed them on.

Eventually the whole crowd had wound its way through the aisles of meats, vegetables, casseroles, salads, and desserts. The women seated themselves at the two closer tables, and the men occupied the tables in the center of the building. They were as anxious to talk with Brother Price

as the women were to get to know Sister Price. They especially wanted to know what kind of furniture she was going to put into the parsonage. The two women's classes had divided into "teams," and each team had decorated a room. The elders had allowed a fund for new carpet, and each team chose a favorite color for walls and carpet.

"You getting settled in all right, Sister Price?"

"Oh, yes. This house is going to be nice when we get everything fixed."

"Fixed?"

"We thought all you'd have to do was just move right in," Mable Mabry spoke for the older group.

"Oh, it is clean," Lenora replied. "That's a blessing. I'd like to paint all the walls white. Your last preacher must have had all girls — one bedroom's pink and the other one's blue. I hate to put the boys in those."

The table was quiet while the women considered how to deal with this newcomer. Nell Patterson, who was responsible for that pink bedroom with the white carpet, stared at her plate. Others were exchanging startled glances.

"You mean you'd re-paint the walls?"

"Why, yes. We have quite a few paintings to hang, and they look better on white. Besides, one color can unify everything."

"You mean you'll put pictures on the walls?"

"Why, yes."

"With nails?"

"That's right."

Again the ladies retreated into silence.

"Well, I guess we'd have to ask Waldo about that,"

28 Bertha surmised. The other elders' wives nodded, frowning. Lenora, sensing that the ladies were tense, searched for something complimentary about her new quarters.

"It's a nice big house — that will certainly be helpful when we entertain."

"Entertain?" Ruth Miller looked puzzled. "All the church entertaining is done right here."

"Yes, that's why we built this nice kitchen," Alma Crawford added.

"Well, I think I'll get some dessert." Lenora was anxious to change the subject. Before she got her pie, she checked on her two boys and then stopped by her husband's chair to ask if he was ready for dessert. She took his plate and when she came back, she sat down beside him.

"How old are your boys, Sister Price?" Waldo Watson inquired.

"Phil is ten and David is eight."

"But David's the tall one," Jack put in. "Just remember the big one goes in the young class."

"No, they'll be in the same one," Clem Miller said. "There ain't but two classes for kids."

Jack surveyed the men across the table in amazement and then turned toward the back of the room where most of the teenagers were. The young ones had already gone outside or to their mothers.

"Surely there's enough for more than two classes." Jack kept his voice casual.

"Naw. Just two. Everybody from six to fourteen goes to Miz Appleton's, and them that's fourteen and up, why Brother Elmore teaches them," Jess Crawford explained. "I was in his class when I was a boy, and now I got two boys in there myself."

"Me too," Clem said. "My boys was telling they hid his glasses just like we used to."

"Brother Elmore? That's the elderly man who led prayer before we ate?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, he went home early. His health ain't real good, and he has to be careful what he eats."

Much later Jack and Lenora went to their new home in the new community feeling quietly thoughtful. This job in Sweetwood might be very different from what they had envisioned. And at the same time several other couples left the church feeling vaguely disturbed about this young couple the elders had chosen. There was another group scattering across town and the surrounding farms who had a very positive view of the new preacher. That group was the young people — all ages. The new preacher had already won them.

In fact, it didn't take them long to begin addressing the preacher as Brother Jack. A few met parental disapproval of such familiarity, but the objections were swept aside by the sheer weight of popularity.

Jack had achieved his place among the teenagers by first of all rescuing them from Old Brother Elmore's class. At his first meeting with the elders, Jack had outlined a plan for making a class for the upper teens which he would teach and another for the middle school age which Lenora would teach. Then he pushed for a class for pre-schoolers, but there he lost. Those, he was told, belonged with their mothers. Jack very wisely abandoned that idea — for the moment anyway.

The first official act of the senior class was a banquet in honor of the retiring teacher. The students put together a "This is Your Life" tribute to Van Elmore, bringing in friends and family with speeches and sentimental presentations.

During the winter Jack worked hard. He studied energetically to make his Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night sermons the best he was capable of producing. He gradually turned most of his senior class into young Christian scholars. He also provided other activities for them. They met every Thursday evening as a choral group, and once a month he and Lenora had them come to their house for a social meeting. Jack was well aware that his success with them had helped ease the sting some members had felt when he declined to teach the senior adult class in favor of the young people.

When spring came, Jack started inquiring around to find out what the young people did during the summer vacation. Of course, some of them held jobs during the summer, or they were farm kids and had plenty to do with the harvest. But too many of them were town kids with nothing but time on their hands.

Jack made several inquiries around town about some empty buildings on Main Street. He had in mind finding one that could be turned into a teen center of some kind. Since he knew that the idea was almost too novel for Sweetwood and Tate County, Jack approached the project cautiously. He found that the large building on the corner of Main and Maple belonged to a widow over in Allis. Her late husband had been Dr. Mel Stone. Jack and Lenora went to see her one afternoon; and to their delight, they found that she was glad to donate her building for the purpose they described. She even offered to pay the utilities and have another bathroom built.

"Dr. Stone would be delighted," the widow told them. "He always felt that there should be a place for young people to gather. We never dreamed it would be our own property." Mrs. Stone gave Jack the key and told him to order the necessary building to be done and to send her the bill.

But Jack and Lenora knew their problems were far from over. Should they present the idea to the teenagers first — or to the elders.

"The elders, definitely," Lenora said. "It wouldn't do at all to have the idea reach the Crawfords and the Davidsons through the kids."

"Clem Miller would be for it — Waldo Watson would be borderline, and I think Jess Crawford would become borderline after his three kids get hold of the idea."

Lenora was doubtful. "I think Waldo Watson will be against it," she said. "You'd better have a good campaign speech."

She proved to be right. Despite Jack's enthusiastic description of a proposed center, Crawford, Watson, and Clem Miller asked that the proposition be tabled. As Jack had hoped, the idea was discussed in those homes, and it quickly reached other homes through the teenagers. At the next meeting, the proposed teen center was passed — though somewhat grudgingly on the parts of Gordon Davidson and Waldo Watson.

The creation of the Center was turned over to delegations of the older teens. They organized work crews, and the remaking of the "Stone House" as they called it was underway. Jack was an expert at delegating authority, but even he was astonished at how well the project went. The crews cleaned the interior of the building, painted it, made signs, and then proceeded to find furniture. Old-fashioned wicker furniture that had been in attics for twenty years appeared as if by magic. Perhaps as insurance against its return, the ladies gave the young people permission to paint it any color they desired. The color scheme was surprising, but the final effect was also surprisingly pleasant.

One afternoon Jack's phone in his study at the church rang.

"Preacher?" a man inquired.

"Yes."

"This here's Wiley Abbott down at Mutt's Bar and Poolhall."

"Uh, yes. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Preacher, it's about that center you're building. You gonna need some equipment, aintcha?"

"Equipment. Uh, yes, we're working on that." In the background Jack could hear pool balls breaking sharply from cue sticks. "We won't be able to afford anything very fancy."

"Well, I might be able to help you out some, Preacher. I'd like to make a little donation."

"Sure, Wiley. I guess you know we have our hands out for any donation that comes along." As he spoke, Jack imagined himself reporting a large cash donation from Wiley Abbott. But Wiley's next words wiped the grin off his face.

"I got this here pool table I was aimin' to trade in on a bigger one, but I thought you might like to have it down at your center."

Pool table! Even Clem Miller would have a sinking spell. Jack recovered fast.

"Wiley, that's great! I don't know how we'd get it moved, though. We —"

"There's a couple kids here can deliver it — any time you say."

"Let's make it one afternoon next week. We'll have to clear a place for it." There's more than space we'll have to clear, he thought.

"And Preacher, one other thing. These kids I'm sending over with it — some of the right kind of influence wouldn't hurt 'em a'tall."

"Why, sure, just tell them to stick around, Wiley. They're welcome at the Center."

"Thanks, Preacher." Jack held the phone a moment after it clattered dead.

A pool table! All we need now, he thought, is a light hanging over it advertising Jax beer! Jack had played pool in college, and besides liking it, he was also very good. But delighted as he was, Jack was more than a little wary of the elders' acceptance of the gift. Pool and Mutt's Bar — even Wiley Abbott himself — were all anathema to many at the church in Sweetwood. After all, Wiley didn't go to church — any church. He never had. Jack was also fairly certain that he had never been invited.

Jack remembered the two boys Wiley mentioned — what had he said — the right kind of influence wouldn't hurt them? Hm'mn. Wiley Abbott is asking for some missionary work and paying for it, too.

Jack's fear proved to be most accurate. The meeting at which he reported the Center's progress, including the acquisition of the pool table, was very nearly explosive. Even Clem Miller looked pained.

"I knew it," Waldo Watson thundered, slapping his hand on the table. "This thing's getting out of control."

"Have you ever played pool, Brother Watson?" Jack asked.

"No, I have not! And I won't allow my boys to, either."

"Have you ever seen a pool table?"

Watson looked surprised. "Of course. It's a big green table —"

"It's an instrument of sin!" Jess Crawford put in.

"Maybe we could take off the sinful green top and replace it with a more Christian color. Like white."

Four pairs of beligerent eyes stared at Jack. Back off, he thought. That's too far.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen."

"It's the gambling that's corrupt, I believe." Clem was caught in the middle. "If it was just a game, now, I wouldn't mind — but that gambling, now, we really can't tolerate that, Brother Jack."

"Do any of your kids play basketball?" Jack asked suddenly.

"Why, sure. Sweetwood takes the County Tournament every year. And in 1950 and '51 they took State." The men were taken by surprise.

"Well, now, that's a game," Jack said. "And to win it you have to drop a ball through a net." The men nodded warily. "And in pool you have to drop a ball through a pocket."

"Basketball is played at the gym," Gordon Davidson put in.

"And would any of you deny that there is gambling going on in that gym when basketball is played?" No one answered. Jack went on. "Could any of you name men in this church who bet on every game? And who of you has said anything to them?"

"Would you let the girls play?" Clem asked.

"Do your girls play basketball?"

Lois Watson, Waldo's oldest daughter, was Sweetwood's best forward. But no one answered. Jack went on. "I've heard a lot of criticism about girls playing basketball — especially exposing themselves in those brief suits. Now, if a girl plays pool, she has on pants at least down to her knees, if not her ankles. The dress code at the Center doesn't allow shorts."

When the vote was finally taken, it was three to one in favor of the pool table. But Jack knew it was a dubious victory. Waldo Watson had cast the dissenting vote.

Jack did not mention Wiley's apparent reason for donating the table. He still had not met the two young men

in question, and he had no idea what to expect. He only knew that Buddy Guthrie was the bootlegger's son and that Sparky was one of the prolific Daniel family, several of whom had spent time in prison for various minor offenses. So Jack decided to wait until he met them and then determine his next course of action.

He called Wiley and made arrangements for the table to be delivered, and so on Thursday afternoon Buddy Guthrie and Sparky Daniel unloaded the table from an old pick-up at the back of the Center. A large group of boys was on hand to help with the job. As soon as it was in place, Jack challenged Buddy to a game. Buddy, who had been smoking, looked around for a place to dispose of the cigarette that drooped from the corner of his mouth. When Buddy eyed the floor, Brad Miller stopped him. "Hey, Man! We got no ash trays, but don't mess up my paint job on the floor!"

"Right, Man." Buddy flipped the cigarette out the back door, hitched up his baggy corduroys and began chalking a cue stick. Buddy had been trained in pool at Mutt's Bar, but he was no match for Jack, who won three straight games.

Buddy straightened up and looked at Jack in disbelief. "Man! I'd sure like to see you tangle with Dutch Clayton or Wiley Abbott!"

"Hey, ol' Buddy!" Sparky jeered. "How's it feel to get licked for a change?"

"And by a preacher, too," Buddy said.

Someone in the back yelled, "Brother Jack's the best pool shooter in town," and a cheer went up. Even Buddy seemed to like the novelty of the idea. He and Sparky stayed for a brief devotion before the Center closed. Jack had a chance to talk briefly to Buddy.

"You ever go to church much, Buddy?"

"Naw. Just to the funeral when my grandpa died."

"I tell you what. Why don't you and Sparky sort of help me teach these kids how to play pool and then study with us later?"

"Why, sure. Heck yeah. I'll do that the nights Wiley lets me off."

That night Jack told Lenora about Buddy and Sparky as well as the first phone call from Wiley.

"I think it might be a good idea to expand the work at the Center to anyone the kids want to invite."

"Don't try to push this too fast." Lenora told him.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know — really. Have you talked to the elders about it?"

"No. Why should they object?"

"I don't know — maybe they wouldn't. It's just a feeling I have. But, Jack, why haven't you said anything to them about the boys? What's making you hold back?"

Jack laughed. "Maybe it's a feeling I have, too."

Even though Jack's victory over the elders was dubious, the pool table was soon a popular activity among the young people, and many of them were becoming fairly good players under Buddy's and Jack's training. Actually Buddy was a better teacher — partly because he had more time to devote to it and partly because the kids enjoyed learning his craft and then teaching him during the study sessions. Both Buddy and Sparky became regular members of the study group. However, Jack made it a point to shoot a game of pool with someone every day. He usually played with someone Buddy selected as the day's most promising player, but sometimes he played with Buddy or Sparky. Jack's skill was becoming well known, and the

young people continued to call him the "best pool shooter in town." Not surprisingly that title given affectionately by the kids was gravely suspect among the adults.

By the time the Center opened, there was a large assortment of other games. Chess, backgammon, dominoes, checkers, monopoly, darts, books, shuffleboard and ping pong were all part of the new recreational life for the young people. There had been a few tense moments over the backgammon and monopoly because of the dice, but that dispute was settled without Jack having to take part. The coach of the high school managed to find some weights, and so a weight-lifting room was also in the Center.

There was some visible evidence of the work being done by the nightly devotional classes that the older teenage boys were conducting. Buddy Guthrie had quit working at Mutt's Bar and had gone to work at the Co-Op. Jack called Wiley when he learned that Buddy had quit.

"Wiley, I understand you're short a hand now. Does that put you out any?"

"Why, hell no — 'scuse me, Preacher. That's the best thing coulda happened. No way I coulda got him out myself — he'd took it wrong — thought I was firin' him. This way he's all apologetic about leavin' — thinks it's his own idea."

"I see. I didn't want you to think the Center was interfering."

"Nosiree. You're doing a swell job with them kids, Preacher. You just keep up the work with them, and I'll get some ol' fart — 'scuse me — some ol' guy to work for me."

Jack laughed when he hung up. How could I reach ol' Wiley Abbott, he thought.

The Center had its formal opening the first Saturday afternoon after school was out. Brad Miller and Eddie Wayne Crawford went to Allis to bring Mrs. Stone in for the dedication; the boys also managed to have a newspaper photographer there to take her picture standing in the doorway under the elaborate CHRISTIAN TEEN CENTER sign. The months of work had paid off, and the Center was officially underway. During the summer it was to be open weekdays from three to nine, all day Saturday, and from one to four on Sunday.

"Well, how do you think it went?" Jack asked his wife Saturday night after the opening festivities.

"So far, so good," Lenora said.

"You still have some reservations, don't you, Lee?"

"Maybe as many as three," she told him, "maybe just one."

"And that one is the pool table?"

"Yes, I'm afraid of it. I walked by Alma Crawford and Kay Davidson, and they were talking — evidently about you or it."

"Or both?"

"Yes. Alma was saying she never thought she'd live to see the day."

"Well, if they get too hostile, we can send the pool table back to Wiley. He'd understand. What are your other two reservations?"

"I hate to say this, Jack, but I was really glad Buddy and Sparky weren't there today."

"Oh, come on, now, Lee! If teaching isn't a part of Christianity, then I'm in the wrong business!"

"All right, all right. Maybe I'm wrong — I hope so. It's just a feeling I have."

"You know, Lenora, a man couldn't have a better helpmeet than you. I just wish your feelings weren't always so accurate." They laughed. "Tell me," he said, "what are your feelings about bringing the Word to Wiley Abbott?"

"Negative," Lenora replied, and they laughed.

"You're probably right. But I've just about come to the conclusion that Wiley is one of the sharpest men in Sweetwood. He knows what's going on and why." The phone rang. Jack and Lenora looked at one another and laughed. "Hark, hark! The pool table goeth," Jack said, imitating Waldo Watson's harsh voice.

"Hello? — This is he." While the operator made further connections, Jack told Lenora, "Long distance."

The call was from an elder of the church in Livingston. Jack had been approached twice before about moving to Livingston to preach, and this call was a repeat of that offer. Although Jack was interested in moving on to a larger city, he felt that he should give himself longer to finish the work he had begun in Sweetwood. Before the conversation ended, though, he promised to go to Livingston during the summer to conduct a seminar on Working with Teens for their teachers.

"Be sure you include one session on pool," Lenora said when he hung up.

"Funny, funny," he replied.

Actually the preacher's pool shooting reputation was the single factor that caused so many church members to make drop-in visits to the Center. In time, however, the pool table lost its original fascination and was more or less accepted by most of the visitors. But ironically, it was that curiosity in the pool table that brought another problem to the elders' attention.

Charles and Virginia Finn — who had no children — were touring the Center one Saturday when Buddy Guthrie and Sparky Daniel came in. Although they did nothing more than play ping pong, the Finns were concerned. But they decided not to warn the elders yet. However, the Finns made a return visit, and they found the boys there again, this time playing shuffleboard with the widow Lorraine Clark's daughter Rose Marie and the Mabry's daughter Geraldine. Charles and Virginia considered it their duty to report the presence of Buddy and Sparky.

The very things that Jack had seen as qualifications for their participation in the work at the Center, the Finns, the widow Clark, and the elders saw as a detriment to the Center. So at the next meeting, they asked about outsiders attending the Center. Jack was taken by surprise.

"You mean kids from other towns?" he asked, wondering who had been there.

"No — we heard that Buddy Guthrie and Sparky Daniel have been there."

"Oh, them? Why, yes, they have." Since the pool table had ceased to be an issue, Jack had dismissed any kind of trouble concerning the Center. In fact, he considered Buddy and Sparky as charter members. Lenora's warning flashed through his mind, though.

"Why?" asked Waldo Watson.

"Why?" Jack repeated. "Why not?"

"They're not members of this church."

Despite Lenora, Jack was stunned at this approach. "Is evangelism not a part of this church?" he asked.

"We don't feel that the work we've done to put this teen center together should be used to entertain the hoodlums of the town," Gordon Davidson said.

Jack momentarily felt like laughing that anyone except Clem Miller would claim to have done any work on the Center. Then he felt bitter. "Gentlemen," he said, "the young people have been putting together a program to reach those in town who need the word of God. Every time the Center opens, they have a devotional and study period. Buddy and Sparky have been regular members of that class." Jack stopped and looked around the table at each man. "Now, if I understand you correctly, you want me to tell Buddy and Sparky not to come to the Center. Pray tell me, gentlemen, how do we make people members of the church if we don't teach them?"

It took three of them — Watson, Davidson and Crawford — a long time to discuss the possible criticism that could be leveled against them for harboring such elements of society within the bosom of the church. Finally, though, they decided to allow the boys to continue using the Center — and studying there. But Jack was disgusted and bitter. It was while the three men argued that Jack decided to leave Sweetwood and to accept the off of the Livingston church.

That night Jack called the elder there and asked if the opening still existed. It did. Plans were immediately put into motion for the Prices' move. However, the news of his resignation got to the young people by the usual route—from elders' meeting to families of elders and from there to teenagers in general. In this case an emergency meeting of the Center's officers resulted in a plea to Jack to stay through the summer. Jack and Lenora considered their request a reasonable one, and they asked more time of the Livingston church who agreed to extend the moving date. Besides, they reasoned, the good brethren in Sweetwood needed time to secure another preacher.

Actually Jack was willing to wait because more than anything he wanted Buddy to attend church as well as the devotionals at the Center. But Buddy remained adamant in his refusal to enter the church at 4th and Pecan.

"What in the world could keep you from going to the house of the Lord?" he asked one day.

"That house might belong to the Lord, Brother Jack, but right now Waldo Watson's got the lease."

Jack knew he was defeated. So he and his family left Sweetwood for Livingston. There was another covered-dish dinner for the Prices — this after his last sermon. As Jack made his way down the table laden with hams and salads and casseroles, he reflected that his year in Sweetwood had netted almost nothing. He revised his estimate, though, when a delegation of teenagers escorted him almost bodily to their own table. In the center of the table was a special cake in his honor — a baker's replica of The Center. And three special guests were Mrs. Stone from Allis, Buddy Guthrie, and Sparky Daniel. When Jack had a chance, he asked Buddy had he changed his mind about who had the lease.

"Naw, Brother Jack. I'm just here on a one-day miracle. The Lord didn't think He could manage any more'n that."

Brad Miller overheard them. "We'll keep working on him, Brother Jack. You come back and see."

But three years went by before Jack Price was in Sweetwood again. It was to preach the funeral of Brad Miller's father Clem, the man who had supported Jack so many times. As the funeral procession left the church and turned down Main Street, Jack leaned forward to see how the Center looked. It was empty, deserted, its once proud CHRISTIAN TEEN CENTER sign hanging crooked from one bolt. Someone was standing in the empty doorway, his foot braced against the door jamb with a cigarette cupped in a protective fist.

"Why, that's —" Jack turned to look out the back window as the car swept past, "— that's Buddy Guthrie." He tried to wave, but the car was too crowded. He could almost feel the cold, cynical eyes that watched the procession go by.

Waldo Watson spoke from the front seat. "Yeah, that's him. He's been in a passel of trouble. In fact, he just got back from doing time down at the state reformatory."

"For what?" Jack asked.

"Running a load of bootleg whiskey. Tried to take over from his old man, but he got caught." No one answered, and Watson went on. "Yeah, I always said he was no good. We just can't afford to have hoodlums like that among our young people."

Jack experienced something in that moment that was as close to hatred as he had ever known. Yes, he thought, Waldo Watson still holds the lease.