Paul said, his voice odd, “Maybe you can’t go either?”

Jimmy looked deep into Paul’s eyes. His heart beat fast with friendship and loyalty. “Don’t be a jerk. Come on,” he said cheerfully.

Paul’s face changed. The hate seeped away, leaving sweetness and humbleness. He flung an arm over Jimmy’s shoulder happily.

“Your—your mother doesn’t care if you go, huh?” he said.

Jimmy swallowed. Paul needed this so badly. So very badly. Paul had no mother at all. And his father just didn’t like looking at the world without Paul’s mother, and was always drunk.

“Nah,” said Jimmy. “She—she even said I should bring you to supper, afterwards. What shall I tell her, huh?”

Paul turned ashen, then flushed a deep scarlet. “Sure,” he muttered. “Be glad to.”

“I got to call her,” said Jimmy numbly. “Just a minute.”

Jimmy went into the drugstore and called his mother. He told her in a choking voice he was going on the hike, just he and Paul, and he didn’t care how mad she got. “Nobody else came,” he shouted into the telephone, “because all the mothers—” He was unable to go on for a moment. Then he finished. “I’m bringing him to supper afterwards, Mom. I said you asked him.”

He hung up before she could answer.

They had a wonderful day. Wonderful. It was May, and the leaves on the trees were chartreuse and new. They went six miles out of town. They watched chipmunks skitter. They lay on their backs and stared at fleecy white clouds changing shape. Paul’s face showed his contentment. His eyes were dreamy.

But Jimmy, in one cloud, saw the stern face of his mother.

But Mrs. Swanson’s face, when she greeted Paul, wasn’t stern at all. She looked uncertain as she studied his wistful, shy smile. Jimmy knew, of course, that his parents would wait until later to lecture him. They never made a scene before other people.

Throughout supper, Mr. Swanson was very friendly to their guest. But Jimmy could see that at the same time his father was carefully studying Paul. And Paul, never knowing, thinking they’d wanted him, had invited him, glowed and showed the side of his personality that Jimmy liked.

After they’d washed the dishes (at Paul’s suggestion), Mr. Swanson nodded to Paul. “Come on, Paul,” he said. “I’ll show you my tool shop.”

As Paul eagerly followed him down the basement steps, Mrs. Swanson touched Jimmy’s shoulder. Jimmy’s heart thudded as he reluctantly lingered behind. He turned and glared in defiance.

“I don’t care,” he whispered. “Nobody else came. I couldn’t—”

“Jimmy,” she said softly, and bent and kissed him. “I’m proud of you, Jimmy. You did the right thing at the right time.”

“But you said—” faltered Jimmy. “I mean—”

Her eyes were very bright. “I was wrong,” she said steadily. “This time I was wrong. You were right. He’s a nice boy, I think.”