

4 This School Is Driving Me Crazy

by Nat Hentoff

Sam, who is about 14 years old, is tired of the school he goes to. He always seems to be in trouble. It doesn't make life any easier that his father is principal (headmaster) of the school.

platform *perron*
vigorously energetically
punk "snothvalp"
in'sert put
dick (slang) *penis*
frantically wildly
mugger *voldsmand*
swipe blow

The next morning, Sam and Benjy decided to take the subway to school. On the subway platform they were suddenly surrounded by six big kids.

"What school you go to?" one of them said, grinning coldly.

"PS 68," Sam said quickly. Benjy nodded vigorously.

"That's funny," the kid said. "You look like private-school punks with those blue jackets. Or maybe you're twins, huh?"

"Listen, man." Sam inserted the thumb of his left hand in his belt and made a fist in his right pocket.

"What you got in that pocket?" the older boy said as he and his companions moved closer to Sam and Benjy. "Is that a grapefruit or a stiff dick?"

All six of the bigger boys laughed.

"OK," their spokesman said, "hand it over. I want all the money both of you got."

Benjy was frantically digging into his shirt pocket when Sam started yelling, "HELP US KIDS! HELP US KIDS! MUGGERS! MUGGERS! PARENTS - HELP US KIDS!"

Three men, including a subway cop, rushed towards the clump of boys.

"You little bastard," the leader of the gang said as he took a swipe at Sam, who ducked. A woman behind them started bashing the older boy in the face with her handbag.



"POLICE! MURDER! HELP!" she screamed, battering the gang leader harder with each cry. He twisted away and jumped down on to the tracks as the other members of the gang sprinted up the subway stairs.

"You're a pretty generous kid," said Sam, grinning at Benjy. "Don't give the money until you have to."

"You are out of your mind," Benjy said, breathing heavily. "They could have killed us."

"No way," Sam said. "We're too young to die."

"You've got detention for the whole week?" asked Tim Rawlins, a skinny classmate. They had met at the entrance to the school that morning and were walking to their first class. He desperately wanted to tell Sam his own troubles, but thought that first he ought to show some interest in Sam's.

"Yeah," Sam said.

...
Coming along the corridor towards Sam and Rawlins were Fred Brompton, George Howes, and Bill Maguire, all seniors. Sam had never had any trouble with them, but he knew that Brompton, Howes, and Maguire were bullies and were scrimy besides. "Scrimy" was a special word between Sam, Benjy, and Blake. It meant, among other things, someone who smiles when he's about to bash you by surprise or who swears he wishes he could lend you a quarter and later, you see him take a fistful of change out of his pocket. Most of all, scrimy meant someone grown-ups say you ought to act like but who kids wish would fall down the nearest sewer and never come up. Scrimy Brompton, Howes, and Maguire were always like choirboys when a teacher was around, but Sam didn't trust them for a second.

"You just *know* what some people are like," Sam had once said to Benjy and Blake about Brompton, Howes and Maguire. "I bet you could have told right away what kind of kids those three were when they were two years old, in the sandbox. They probably grabbed everybody's pails and then kicked them in the face. That goes for Marty Brompton too, that scrimy Fred's big brother. So he's a big deal in the football team. But I've seen him bully little kids."

As Sam and Rawlins were about to pass the three older boys, the younger Brompton laid his hammy hand on Tim Rawlins' shoulder. "See you soon," he said. "Right?"

Biting his lip, Rawlins nodded.

"What's the matter?" Sam asked him as the three older boys

generous *gavmild*
de'tention *eftersidning*
bully someone who mobs others
bash (slang) hit
quarter 25 cents
sewer *kloak*
choirboy *kordreng*
pail (sand) *spand*
a big deal important
hammy big and fat



moved down the corridor.

"Nothing." Rawlins bit his lip again.

"Say," Sam stopped. "What the hell is going on?"

There were tears in Rawlins' eyes. "Will you promise not to tell anyone?" he asked. "Not your father, not anyone?"

Sam agreed, although he hated making that kind of promise because, once made, it had to be kept, no matter what. It could be like having a big stone inside your chest. Like when he once promised a kid he hardly knew that he wouldn't tell anyone about his mother. They'd gone to the kid's house after school and found the mother so drunk she fell into a closet on the way to get them some cookies. Since that day, the kid had barely spoken to him, and Sam was still carrying around this thing that had nothing to do with him.

Tim Rawlins blinked, gulped, and his voice came out breaking. "They make me give them money."

"Those three horses' asses?"

Rawlins nodded. "A dollar for each of them twice a week. It's been going on for three weeks now. I got my allowance raised to three dollars, and now I tell my mother I need extra money for notebooks and class trips and things. But she's getting suspicious. And this morning - you swear you won't tell anybody about any of this?"

"Yeah," Sam said, looking around to see if anyone was coming. Damn, it's like I have something to hide, he thought, feeling sour inside.

"This morning" - Rawlins brought his teeth together hard to keep the dry heaves down - "I took five dollars from my father's wallet."

"For Christ's sake." Sam exploded. "Turn the bastards in. One thing I know about my father is that he'll kick them out on their asses."

"No," Rawlins said. "They'll beat the hell out of me if I tell."

"Oh, come on," Sam said, "that's a lot of crap. Once they're gone from this school, they're gone."

"No, no." Rawlins looked imploringly at Sam. "They told me that if I tell, then they got nothing to lose and they'll keep watching until I'm alone somewhere and then they'll tear me apart. They mean it, they really do. What am I going to do, Sam?"

"You've got to turn them in," Sam said. "They won't do anything to you once you tell, because that'll get them into a whole lot worse trouble than being expelled. If they tried anything like that, everybody would know who it was."

no matter *uanset*

closet (US) cupboard
(GB)

gulp *synke*

al'lowance pocket money

heave *stønnen, hulken*

turn someone in

anmelde

crap (slang) nonsense

im'plore *bønfalde*

ex'pel throw out of
school

Sawu =



"No," Rawlins said, shaking his head. "I can't take the chance, you don't know how mean they are. Look." Tim lifted his shirt and then his undershirt and Sam saw an ugly red line going across Rawlins' stomach. *shapra*

"A nail file," Tim said, hurriedly tucking in his clothes. "It hurt like hell."

"You can't just let this go on."

"That's why I told *you*," Rawlins said. "You're the one kid here who's not afraid of anything. Think of something, Sam, because I can't."

"I tell you." Sam was getting very annoyed. *elluc* "All we have to do is go to my father."

"You promised!" Rawlins looked like he was going to cry.

"You promised you wouldn't tell anybody."

"Oh, Jesus," Sam said.

tuck in *proppe tilbake*
an'noyed angry
frankfurter sausage

1. What happens on the subway platform? How do you feel about the behaviour of the different boys? How would you have reacted?
2. When you have read the whole of part I, say why you think this story starts with what happens in the subway.
3. Explain what you understand by "scrimy". Why don't grown-ups see the truth – for example about the gang of seniors here?
4. What is Rawlins' story? How does Sam react?
5. Who is right about "turning them in" – Sam or Rawlins?
6. Characterise Sam. Build on to this characterisation as you read on.

II

"Have you any idea what's going on?" the headmaster asked Sam that night as he passed the frankfurters and beans.

"You mean the stealing in our room today?" Sam said.

"Yes, I mean the stealing, and not only in your room. A girl in one of the fifth-grade classes had a ten-dollar bill when she came to school this morning, and some thief has it now. You know I don't ask you questions about ordinary things that go wrong. I don't expect my son to be my eyes and ears in the school. It's *my* responsibility to know what's going on. But stealing is not an ordinary thing, and the suspicion it creates and feeds on is poisonous – in a school or anywhere else."

"Uh-huh," said Sam, who was losing his appetite.



^{skedgie}
"In your own ornery way, Sam," the headmaster said, "you have pride in Alcott, no matter how much you say you hate the school. So I am asking you as an Alcott boy – and that means an honest boy – to tell me anything you know."

Sam sighed. "If I knew anything, I'd tell you, dad, but I don't."

The headmaster kept looking at his son until Sam lowered his eyes. "You haven't the slightest clue?" he persisted.

"No, I really don't," Sam said. "Maybe though" – he reddened slightly – "somebody is making some kids steal things."

"What do you mean by that?" the headmaster asked sharply.

"Nothing. I hear about that sort of thing in other schools once in a while, and I just thought maybe something like that might be going on at Alcott."

"Just like that, the idea came to you, huh?" His father was still staring at him.

Sam thought hard about the terror in Rawlins' eyes when he made Sam promise not to say anything about what Brompton, Howes, and Maguire were doing. If Rawlins could have stolen from his own father, he could have swiped something from a kid's desk. Damn it, Sam sighed again, he knew he shouldn't have made that promise. Still, he had no proof Rawlins was the thief. It *could* have been somebody else. Any way you look at it, Sam thought as he pushed his plate away, that promise had to be kept.

"There's something you know about this that I ought to know." The headmaster spoke very distinctly and very softly.

Sam wished he'd yell. It's a lot easier not to tell somebody what he wants to know when he's yelling at you.

Sam's mother had been looking back and forth between her husband and her son. "I do wish you'd put Sam in another school," she said. "Other boys have a rest from the headmaster when they come home."

Yeah, Mom! Sam cheered silently.

"Sam can take it," the headmaster said. "He's a tough boy, right, Sam?"

"I wish you'd lay off," Sam said. "I don't know anything about it."

"I think you do." The headmaster tried to catch Sam's eye again. "I think you were telling me you know something when you said someone might be forcing kids to steal. I think there's a shakedown going on at Alcott."

"What do you mean, 'shakedown'?" Sam was using every bit of strength he had to keep from showing the panic growing in him.

ornery (slang) *stædig*

slightest smallest

clue idea

per'sist carry on asking

swipe steal

dis'tinctly clearly

cheer shout hurrah

shakedown mobbing (for money)





"You know what I mean," the headmaster said, beginning to raise his voice. "Bullies ganging up on a kid to make him give them money."

"No." Sam's mouth felt very dry. "No, I haven't seen anything like that."

"I'll give you something to think about." Sam's father leaned across the table and poked a finger into his son's chest. "If there is something like that going on at Alcott, the probability is that more than one victim is involved. Bullies swell up on other people's fear. So if you know something that you're not telling me, you are helping those bullies victimize God knows how many kids. By your silence, you are an accomplice. I want you to keep that in mind. I want the weight of your responsibility to grow heavier and heavier in your mind until you can't think of anything else."

"Carl," Sam's mother broke in. "That's your son you're doing this to."

"If I'm correct in my assumptions," the headmaster said, "Sam is doing this to himself. A decent boy does not remain

proba'bility

sandsynlighed

victim offer

swell up grow bigger

victimize terrorize

ac'complice medskyldig

as'sumption guess

decent anstændig



silent, for whatever reason, when the safety of others is involved."

Sam loved frankfurters and beans, but he hadn't had a bite. At that moment, even ice cream would have made him want to throw up.

"Can I be excused?" Sam asked.

"No," the headmaster answered. "You know how I feel about good food going to waste."

Sam looked desperately at his mother.

"Please, Carl," Liz Davidson said. "Nothing is going to be gained by making the boy get sick."

"Why should he get sick," the headmaster drummed his fingers on the table, "if he hasn't done anything he finds hard to hold down? And why are you perspiring, dear boy?"

"Damn it," Sam stood up, "I don't know *anything*. Can't you understand that?"

"One. There will be no swearing at this table," the headmaster began. "Two. You will eat everything on that plate."

"If I eat anything on that plate," Sam said, "I will throw up on your plate and all over the table."

The headmaster pulled in his cheeks to keep from smiling. "All right, you may be excused," he said. "But remember, if there is a shakedown gang, *you*, so long as you remain silent, are one of them."

1. Retell the conversation between Sam and his father. Do this in pairs, each taking a role.
2. Describe Sam's problem. What would you have done in that situation?
3. How do you feel about the father's behaviour?
4. What is the mother's role? Why is she like this?



Tim Rawlins was feeling miserable enough without its being dark and cold too. That evening, huddling in the doorway of Max's, the closed candy store around the corner from the school, he looked at the lighted windows in an apartment house across the street. Rawlins envied the kids who were warm and safe inside.

He looked at his watch. They were late. Rawlins shivered in



be ex'cused leave the table

gain get, win

per'spire sweat

huddled sammenkrøbet
envy misunde

the cold. I wonder if they'd take my watch in place of the money I owe them. Owe them? I don't owe them anything, he thought bitterly. If I wasn't such a damn coward, I wouldn't be here. I'd be home having dinner and looking out the window, glad to be inside. Jesus, I forgot. What am I going to tell my parents when I finally do get home?

"This poor little boy is cold." Fred Brompton, followed by Howes and Maguire, moved into the doorway, pushing Rawlins into a corner.

"What did you tell the headmaster this afternoon?" Brompton jammed an elbow into Rawlins' side. "And don't lie. We want to know every word."

"I didn't tell him anything," said Rawlins. His teeth were clattering more from fear now than from the cold. "Nothing, nothing at all."

"And he just patted you on the head and gave you a lollipop, is that what he did?" Brompton elbowed him again.

"No," Rawlins closed his eyes and mumbled, "he said I have to tell him -"

"Louder!" Howes ordered.

"HE SAID I HAVE TO TELL HIM BY HALF PAST EIGHT TOMORROW WHO MADE ME DO IT OR ELSE -"

A woman, passing by, looked sharply at the four boys.

"Lower, keep your voice *lower*," Maguire whispered in Rawlins' ear. Brompton smiled ingratiatingly at the woman who smiled back as she went on her way.

"What makes the headmaster think somebody *made* you steal?" Maguire pushed his face into Rawlins'.

"I - I - I wasn't thinking," Rawlins answered. "I just said that when Mr Kozodoy grabbed me, and he told the headmaster."

"You punk!" Brompton punched Rawlins hard in the stomach.

"What happens if you don't tell him?" Howes asked.

"I'll be expelled." Rawlins' voice was very low.

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" Brompton said. "We wouldn't want to lose you, Rawlins. We've become quite attached to you, haven't we? What are you going to tell the headmaster tomorrow?"

"I don't *know*," Rawlins wailed.

"*We* know," Brompton said. "You are going to tell the headmaster that this terrible bully, this disgrace to Alcott, this *monster* who made you steal is his crazy son, Sam."

"Sam!" Rawlins shouted in shock and protest.

Maguire clapped a hand over Rawlins' mouth, dug him in the ribs again, and whispered, "Keep your voice *down*, you little

owe *skylde*

jam *støde*

lollipop *slikpind*

in'gratiatingly

indsmigrende

at'tached *glad for*,

afhængig af

dis'grace *skændsel*



bastard. You're going to be talking real soft from now on, right?" Rawlins nodded in agreement, and Maguire removed his hand.

"I *can't* say it was Sam," Rawlins' voice was pleading. "I just can't. He's the only one -"

"You told about us," Brompton finished the sentence. "I *thought* it must have been you."

"He promised not to tell anybody, not even his father," Rawlins wailed.

"I bet he kept his promise," Maguire grinned. "He's a real straight arrow, that one. You picked a real winner when you went to Sam for help."

"OK, Rawlins," Brompton said. "It'll be your word against his, and the headmaster is going to have to bend over backwards to be fair when it comes to deciding whether his own son is a thief. All clear, punk?" He stared at Rawlins.

"I won't! I won't!" Rawlins struggled to get out of the corner of the doorway into which he had been pressed. But the massed bulk of the three older boys would not budge.

"You *will*," Brompton said decisively. "You will. Because otherwise, we will break every one of your fingers. And that's just for a start. Why, what do we have here?" Brompton took Rawlins by the chin and forced his head up. "This young fellow is crying again. I always thought you weren't Alcott material, Rawlins. Alcott boys never cry, right?"

Howes and Maguire nodded agreement in mock solemnity.

"And this young fellow is crying, even though no one's doing a thing to him. We're just having a talk, right?"

Howes and Maguire nodded again.

"Now if somebody ever really *did* anything to him ..."

Brompton said as he grabbed Rawlins by the hand and began to push the smaller boy's index finger back and back. Rawlins gasped, and Brompton stopped. "If somebody ever really *did* anything to him, I'll bet he'd pass out right on the spot. Anybody want to take that bet?"

Howes and Maguire, in unison, shook their heads from side to side.

"Now listen," Brompton commanded looking directly into Rawlins' eyes until Rawlins desperately turned his head away. "Listen good. If you say it was us, you will never be safe again for the rest of your life. You will never know when we're coming, but sooner or later, we'll get you. Right?"

Howes and Maguire nodded vigorously, menacingly.

"If you say it was us," Brompton dug his fingers into the back of Tim's neck, "you will have *had* it. Understand?"

straight arrow lige pil; en ærlig fyr

bend over backwards

do all you can

struggle fight

bulk omfang, masse

budge move

de'cisively afgørende,

med vægt

mock false

so'lemnity alvor

index pege-

on the spot lige på stedet

bet væddemål

in unison together

menacingly truende



"What makes you so sure that the headmaster will believe his own son is a crook?" Maguire said to Brompton.

"What evidence is there that Sam is *not* a crook?" Brompton smiled in anticipation of what was to come. "Here we have this poor young soul" – he patted Rawlins on the head – "finally breaking free of that evil Sam by having the courage to turn him in to his own father."

"I don't know," Maguire rubbed his upper lip.

"Tell me," Brompton demanded, "what's the first thing that comes into your head when you hear the name 'Sam'?"

"Trouble," Maguire answered. "That kid is always getting into trouble. You never know where he's going to screw up next. Even the seniors know his reputation. But trouble's one thing, stealing's another."

"You ever been in trouble?" Brompton asked Rawlins, who had his hands over his head and had sunk almost to his knees in the corner of the doorway.

"No," Rawlins said in a voice that could barely be heard. "Not until now."

"See," Brompton said. "Here's a boy with an unblemished record who has been forced into a life of crime by a known troublemaker. And when that troublemaker – *to save his own skin* – names *us* as the true culprits, who's going to believe him?"

"I won't do it! I won't!" Rawlins' voice was now so hoarse it hurt him to speak.

"Yes, you will," Fred Brompton said, punching him again in the stomach. "When the time comes, you'll think of Number One, just like everybody else does. Come on," Brompton said to Howes and Maguire, "this brave little fellow knows what he has to do."

The three older boys left the doorway. Rawlins was sitting on the ground in a corner of the doorway, his head between his knees. He heard them laughing as they went up the street. He wished that he was dead.

1. Where is Rawlins and what is he doing there?
2. What is Brompton's plan? Why might it work?
3. Why is Rawlins shocked by Brompton's suggestion?
4. Describe the different ways the boys terrorize Rawlins here.
5. Why do boys like Rawlins get mobbed – and why do boys like Brompton do it?

Is there any solution to this?

Is it just a problem in your school-days, do you think?

crook criminal

evidence proof

antici'pation forventning

screw up do something wrong

repu'tation ry

un'blemished pletfri

culprit den skyldige

hoarse hæ

Number One yourself

