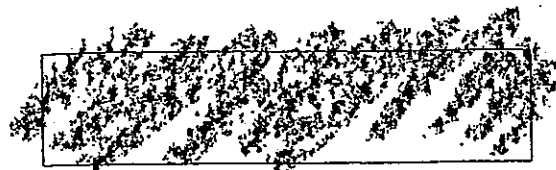


poem, or short script—create a
story between two siblings. If
you tell three different incidents
of a relationship between the two.



A Private Talk with Holly

Henry Gregor Felsen

Henry Gregor Felsen wrote over forty-six books and a number of short stories during his career, among them a series of young adult novels about teenagers and cars. Hot Rod (1950), his book dealing with the dire consequences of reckless teen driving, was immensely popular and went through thirty-two printings.

A writer about controversial subjects, Felsen wrote about teenage pregnancy in Two and the Town (1952) and about young American men who were burning their draft cards and dodging the draft during the war in Vietnam, supporting their democratic freedoms in Letters to a Son in Uniform—1967.

Felsen was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1916 to Russian-Jewish immigrants. He served his country as a combat correspondent during World War II, and attended the University of Iowa. He did most of his writing in Iowa, where he married and had two children, Daniel and Holly. Divorced in 1973, Felsen remarried in 1975 and lived in Vermont and in Michigan, where he died in 1995.

It was a summertime Saturday morning, and I was up before dawn to go fishing. I tiptoed out of the house so I wouldn't disturb anyone, but when I reached my car, someone was already up and waiting for me—my seventeen-year-old daughter, Holly. She was dressed in jeans, a blue denim shirt, and a khaki fishing vest, and she was checking out her tackle box. I knew that she had something important on her mind.

Holly first became my fishing buddy when she was about six years old. For years, I couldn't go fishing without taking her along, but when she reached her teens, she began to develop other interests. After a while, the only time she'd go with me was when she needed to have a private talk; the most private place we had was our little boat on a remote lake at dawn.

We reached the lake, near West Des Moines, Iowa, before the sun was up, unloaded our boat, and slid it into the water. Holly took her usual place in the bow while I pushed off. I switched on the electric

motor, and it propelled us quietly across the calm water. The night mist was just beginning to lift, slowly unveiling the pines and birches that lined the shore. A beaver, irritated by our intrusion, slapped the water with his strong, broad tail to show his displeasure.

"The usual starting place?" Holly asked.

"The usual."

I steered the boat to a quiet inlet dotted with tree stumps and came to a stop. Bass country.

"The usual bet?" Holly asked. She smiled, but her dark-brown eyes were serious, almost sad.

"The usual," I said. That was a dollar for the first fish and a dollar for the largest.

Silently, with studied care, she attached a plug to her line. Then, with a delicate but sure hand, she cast the plug alongside one of the stumps and began a slow retrieve, twitching the plug along to put it in lifelike motion. I picked out two stumps set fairly close together and cast an imitation minnow between them.

We fished around the stumps for several minutes without getting a bite. I couldn't help wondering what was on Holly's mind, but I knew she would talk to me when *she* was ready—it would only hurt to try to hurry her. At times, being a parent demands as much patience as fishing.

"Let's try drifting the bottom," my daughter said. "I have a feeling they're swimming very deep this morning."

I steered the boat out into open water, and we rigged our lures to run deep. I switched off the motor and let the boat drift very slowly, our lines trailing behind us. Now the sun was rising, and the lake and woods were bathed in the pure, clear light of dawn. Holly put on an old, battered fishing hat to shade her eyes. I looked around. There were no other boats on the lake. It was as though we were the only human beings on earth.

"Dad . . ."

I knew from her tone that the moment had come. "Yes?"

"You know my plans for college—to go to junior college in town this fall, then transfer after two years to the state university . . ."

"They're good plans," I said. "Among other benefits, we'll be able to do this for another two years."

She looked away, and I looked at the long, brown hair that curled out from under the old fishing hat. She looked so little—so fragile. Two short years, and she would be gone.

"Dad, would you be mad if I changed my plans?"

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My throat seemed to close. My words had to be forced out. "Don't
tell me you don't want to go to college . . ."

"I do, Dad. It's just . . . well, I don't want you to think I'm
unhappy at home or anything, but I want to go away to the university
this fall."

"Well," I said, grasping at straws, "I suppose we'd still have our
summers to do a little fishing."

She turned to look at me. "I wouldn't be home in the summer.
I'd like to stay in school all year long and finish in three years. That way,
I'll have my education and be ready for a job a year earlier."

And that was it. All of a sudden, good-bye forever to my big little
girl. My feelings must have shown in my face, because she gave me an
out. "It's up to you, Dad. I know it will cost more, and I'll be away
most of the time. If you don't want me to go, I'll stay here."

Before I could answer, the fishing rod jerked almost out of my hands
as the tip plunged into the water. I could tell by the strength of the pull
that I had a big one hooked. Holly forgot everything in the excitement
of pulling in the big fish. She grabbed the net and dipped it into the
water so she could get it under him when he neared the boat. Slowly,
with the line taut almost to the breaking point, I worked the fish in.
Holly netted him and used both hands to hoist him into the boat. What
we had was the most beautiful bass I'd ever tangled with.

"Oh, Dad," Holly said, "this is one you have to take home and
have mounted for your study wall. It's the biggest bass I've ever seen!"

Her words sank in, and I took a long, hard look at that bass, consid-
ering. Finally, I unhooked him carefully, lifted him, and, as Holly stared
in disbelief, put him gently back into the lake. In an instant, he was
gone.

"Honey," I said, "I've always dreamed of having a fish like that
mounted on my wall, where I could look at him whenever I wanted
to. But a fish on a wall is a lifeless thing, no matter how much you prize
it. That fish was so full of life and fought so hard for his freedom that
I had to let him go back where he belonged, to live his own life."

Our lines went back into the water again, and we resumed our
drifting and fishing. Holly's back was toward me. "Thanks, Dad," she
said, without turning around. "I knew you'd understand."

But she didn't know. And she couldn't know. And she won't know
until some day in the future, when her own child—with or without a
word of warning—turns a back on home and walks out into the grown-
up world forever.

Responding to the Story

Explain what each character felt during this talk out on the water. Then tell whose feelings you most related to and explain why.

Exploring the Author's Craft

Every story must have a *conflict*, a struggle between two opposing forces. The opposing forces may be within a character, someone who is trying to make a decision, for example. A character may be in conflict with some outside force—nature, society, or another character. Many stories have more than one conflict. What are the conflicts in this story?

Writing Workshop

A parent might understand this story more than a teenager does. Can teenagers empathize with the poignancy of a child's growing up and leaving? Here's a writing challenge: Write a poem or story that captures the point of view of a parent in relationship to his or her child. Explore the child's point of view, as the author of "A Private Talk with Holly" did, but be sure to get inside the feelings of the parent.

Alternate Media Response

1. Draw a picture of any scene of this story.
2. Create a fifteen-minute film or video that tells this story. Include both the peaceful fishing setting and the quiet conversation that occurs.