

DITCH

By Richard Compson Sater

Cut to fit and paint to match, my dad always says.

When I was a kid, I used to think he meant fixing something that was broken so the cracks wouldn't show, but he never was much of a handyman. After I grew up, I figured out it's the just viewpoint of a guy who gave up trying to fight the system. All he wants is a little peace and quiet, and he'll do anything to get it.

Cut to fit and paint to match. It will probably go on his tombstone.

I used to think it was funny. But just now I hear myself repeating that same thing under my breath as my wife Barbara and I head east along Interstate 80, where there is nothing straight road and flat land for miles in every direction, more Nebraska than you'd ever want to see.

We're not speaking, Barbara and I.

The only noise in the car comes from some radio station we must have passed a long time back – North Platte, maybe – but it's full of static. Country music, what else? Twangy songs about raising hell and love and cheating. I used to like it all right, but these days it all sounds the same. I keep fiddling with the dial trying to find something else, but there's not much to choose from out this way.

We hit the road about six this morning from Denver. Indianapolis is where we're headed, to visit my folks. We go for a week every summer, even though it's not much of a vacation. My mom and dad are both in their eighties, and they don't get along very well. Never have, come to think of it. Barbara hates this trip, and we have more than a thousand miles in the car, each way, for her to tell me so.

It was one of these trips a few years back when she insisted I stop calling her Barbie. "I'm not some fashion doll," she said. She told me to start using her full name or else. I thought she was kidding. I called her Barbie ever since we started dating, back in high school.

Just now Barbara sits next to me perfectly silent – which isn't like her at all – and mad at me. Which, I guess, *is* like her. We'll be married twenty-nine years come September, so I ought to know her by now. At least this time I know why she's upset. It's on account of an argument we got into over breakfast, whether it was Hedy Lamarr or Joan Bennett that Edward G. Robinson stabs to death with an icepick in this old movie *Scarlet Street*. Does anyone even know who these people are anymore?

I can't even remember how the subject came up in the first place. Neither one of us liked *Scarlet Street* when we saw it on TV maybe a month ago, one of those black-and-white '40s movies about a woman with a loser for a husband and a small-time hoodlum for a boyfriend on the side. Something like that. Anyway, the husband gets his nerve up and kills the wife because of the boyfriend, and the boyfriend gets charged with the murder and hangs for it, which is what the husband had in mind all along.

Clever, huh?

So we're sitting in this diner, and I'm stirring cream into my coffee and not eating my eggs because I ordered scrambled and the waitress brought over-easy by mistake. I hate over-easy, all that runny yellow stuff. She said she was sorry; she would exchange it if I would just give her a couple minutes, but I told her not to worry about it, it was fine.

Barbara and I are just getting started. "Oh, come off it," I say. "It was Hedy Lamarr. Ask anyone."

"No. It was Joan Bennett. Honestly, Hank. You don't know. You don't know anything," she says. "Why don't you send those eggs back if you're not going to eat them? The waitress said she would bring you a new plate."

"I don't like to make waves," I say.

"They're going to charge you anyway, whether you eat them or not." Her voice goes up a little at a time, like a slow elevator. "Why do you want to pay for something you're not even going to eat? What a waste of money. Honestly," she says. "Joan Bennett. Not Hedy Lamarr. Joan Bennett."

What's so funny is that I know all along she's right about the movie. I just want to see how long it will take me to give in, to admit it. To see how worked up she'll get, and what will she will say or do that will finally make me crack. It's just a game I play.

"You're dead wrong," I tell her. "I'm positive it was Hedy Lamarr. I'd stake my life on it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Hank. You've confused her with Joan Bennett because they wore the same hairstyle," she says, way too loud for a diner. People turn and look. Over yellow slacks, she's wearing this long flowery pink beach-robe kind of thing, and she wraps it close around her like some kind of protection.

"Don't *you* be ridiculous," I say.

"But – I'm *not*," she says. "You are! I'm not!" I wish she would come back with something better than that, especially now that we're the center of attention. At home, she would've driven six miles to the library to find the undeniable proof and xerox it and bring it back, triumphant after the kill. Like a head on a stick or something.

But we're not at home, and there isn't any convenient way to settle the issue. At times like this, I'll bet, she wishes we had one of those smart phones. But they scare her, so we don't. She picks up her pancakes and her coffee and moves to another table, sitting down with her back to me. Everybody's watching us now, some T.V. reality show come to life. I'm just smiling, like we do this all the time, like it doesn't much matter. I finish my coffee, and the waitress pours me a second cup. She opens her mouth to say something about the eggs, since I obviously haven't touched them. But then she changes her mind and just takes away the plate.

I'm not even sure Barbara will leave the restaurant with me, especially after she pays for her own breakfast. After that, she stomps off into the restroom – stomps as loud as she can in sandals, anyway. I head to the parking lot and wait by the car for her, and it's nearly half an hour before she comes out.

"You okay, Barbara?" I say.

"Shut up," she says.

I open the car door for her and – I swear I didn't do this on purpose – accidentally slam it closed on the hem of the beach-robe thing before she can pull it inside after her. I honestly didn't mean to do it, but she doesn't believe me for a second when I tell her so. The door leaves a greasy black mark all along the bottom of the robe. It's probably ruined.

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My father would never have used an icepick on my mother. But I remember him holding a cast-iron skillet two inches from her head and saying he would kill her if he caught her with another man again. The look on her face had nothing to do with fear. More like victory. I couldn't have been more than six years old.

Growing up in my house was education all by itself, junk they would never teach you back in school. Like how to play dumb, how to duck and cover, hit so the bruises won't show. Like what my dad always says – it's important to keep up appearances.

If you saw my folks standing next to each other in church Sunday, you'd never guess that just an hour before, they were throwing the good china. That's how it was. And after fifty years and a million broken plates, they're still sleeping in the same bed. It's funny what holds some people together.

"It's too hot," Barbara says after we've been driving for half an hour, the first time she's opened her mouth since we left the diner parking lot. So I turn the air conditioner on, and then the radio, since she gets quiet again. The North Platte station turns to static after a little while. For all the luck I have after that, we could be days between stations.

Ten or fifteen miles later, she says, "It's too cold," so I turn the air conditioner off again. Then she says, "If you can't get anything decent on the radio, you might just as well quit fooling with the stupid thing."

I turn the radio off. "Anything else, your highness?" I say. It's probably not the best thing, under the circumstances. She gives me this frosted glare, and I have a pretty good idea what she would call me if she used that kind of language.

A couple of miles later, she says "Stop the car." I look over at her – don't say anything, just look. "Stop the car, I said."

“Why?”

“Just do it. Now,” she says, loud.

“Not unless you tell me why.”

“Listen,” she says. “You just stop this car right now, buster.”

Well, sir. She doesn’t talk to me that way. I slam the brake pedal down, hard. I mean I put my whole weight behind it, and the car just about flips over. I’ll bet you could hear the screech miles away. It’s a good thing there isn’t another car behind us. But Barbara doesn’t say a word. She just throws open the door like she’s – I don’t know – pushing her whole life away from her. And she gets out of the car and starts walking along the edge of the highway, back the way we came. I pull over into the ditch, a safe piece off the road, and get out and follow.

“What’s the big idea?” I say, as if I actually expect her to tell me. “You get back in that car right now.” As if she actually would. She doesn’t even stop, just keeps heading west, into the wind. Even her back looks stubborn. Two cars whiz past, and she steps off the roadside and into the weeds and keeps walking.

A sign says there’s a \$500 fine for littering, which obviously doesn’t scare anyone. Just past it, there’s another sign that says the local Lions Club is in charge of picking up the trash for the next two miles. Barbara and I make our way through the broken bottles and food wrappers and empty cans. The Lions Club hasn’t been out here in a while.

“Come to think of it,” I tell her, “you were right about the movie. It was Joan Bennett. I’m sure of it.” Barbara keeps walking. “What’s the matter?” I say, and then I yell: “Stop!”

She stops. I finally catch up.

“Come on,” I say. “What’s wrong? You can tell me.”

She turns around. She’s crying, but it only takes me a second to realize that she isn’t crying because she’s sad. “You know what I hate?” she says. Only it isn’t a question at all, not the way she says it — like she’s going to tell me something I should already know, or maybe I forgot because I’m slow and she has to remind me.

“I hate ironing your shirts all the time,” she says. This is not exactly what I expect. Or this: “I hate your idiotic record collection and the smell of your aftershave,” she says. “I hate the way you clear your throat all the time,” she says. “I hate listening to you eat cereal in the morning,” she says. Her fists clench and then she’s beating them against my chest, hard, over and over again. I’m surprised at how strong she is.

“I hate your two-bit mustache,” she says, still hitting at me. “I hate waking up next to you and seeing you naked, you skinny, hairy old thing, you. Why can’t you wear pajamas like civilized people? I hate your big, stupid hands touching me. I hate —” but that’s the last of it I can make out. A whole convoy of trucks, screaming past us on the highway, drowns out her voice.

I can tell by the set of her mouth, how it opens and closes, that she’s hammering at everything I ever did wrong or felt guilty about. She’s building a whole house out of it, pounding four-inch galvanized nails exactly twelve inches on-center, one for every bad habit, every weakness, every lie. Laziness, anger, cans and bottles I never recycled, even things she could never have known about, like the book I never returned to the library, income I didn’t report on my tax returns, the neighbor’s cat I killed with an air rifle, those drunken one-night stands with men whose names I never wanted to know.

When she finally exhausts herself, she turns away from me, and then she’s running, running like a crazy woman through the tangled grass along the highway. Even her shadow, underneath, seems like it can’t keep up.

“Barbara!” But she doesn’t turn around. Maybe she doesn’t even hear me. “You coming with me or not?” I holler. “Last chance.” I stand there for a minute, watching her getting smaller and smaller, the flowered robe whipping her along like a sail on a boat. I turn and head back to the car. It’s a long walk. I didn’t realize how much ground we covered.

The door on her side is still wide open. I slam it shut, climb in, and start up, letting the engine idle for a minute. I make an illegal U-turn and catch up with her, a good two miles up the road, probably. By now, she’s quit running, but she’s walking like she knows where she’s going and she has to get there fast. She’s not crying anymore, either. If I didn’t know better, I would say she was even smiling. I roll down the passenger window. “Can I drop you somewhere?” I say.

“I don’t think so,” she says. She keeps walking. I coast to a stop. Make another U-turn and park again. After ten minutes, I can’t even see her, and after half an hour, I hit the road, heading east, toward Indianapolis. She had her chance, I tell myself. I crank the air conditioner all the way up. Still can’t tune into anything decent on the radio, but I keep fiddling with the dial. Skipping breakfast wasn’t such a good idea – I figure that’s why I feel almost sick to my stomach. I’ll have to grab something to eat at the next exit.

My dad would be proud.

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Barbara made the hotel reservations weeks ago. She always takes care of those things. When we’re on the road, she knows exactly how far we want to go each day and what time to leave so we reach our lodgings by the late afternoon. It’s always at one of the budget hotels recommended by the Triple-A where you get your money’s worth – swimming pool, cable TV, free breakfast buffet – and a decent night’s sleep. This one’s in Missouri, just past the halfway point.

I sign both our names in the register at the front desk, and the clerk gives me the key. “My wife will be joining me later on,” I say. I don’t know whether to believe it or not.

“No problem,” the desk clerk says.

“Could you give me a call when she shows up?”

“No problem,” he says.

There’s a rack of DVD movies by the counter. You can rent a video player, take it to your room, connect it to the television. I flip through the rack. There’s not much to choose from, and I don’t recognize many of the titles. A little sign says adult movies are available if you ask.

“Lookin’ for something in particular?” the desk clerk says.

I ask him if he’s ever seen one called *Scarlet Street*.

He grins. “Aw, sure,” he says. “I’ve seen ‘em all. Swedish babes. Red leather, right?”

“Yeah,” I tell him after a second. “That’s the one.”

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