

## HOUSE

By Richard Compson Sater

He was a doctor, but his wife always said he was stupid – stupid about things like how to polish shoes or grill a sandwich for himself. I was in awe of him, partly because he seldom spoke to children, even his own three, except to scold.

Even his name intrigued me – Harris Braxton – because it sounded like two last names and seemed twice as final. But like the military extremity of his haircut, it suited him. The snapshots caught him this way: scowling, six-feet-and-something tall, edgy and precise as a pair of scissors and built the same way.

But I was seven, and then eight and nine, with no words to explain him, and so I kept him secret.

Wasn't it a time? I remember watching him at a neighborhood barbecue held at their house – just down the block from ours along a Pennsylvania smalltown street named Buena Vista. There were a million people there, it seemed to me, and everyone knew everyone else. All the parents were approximately the same age; we children shared grades and ganged up variously against one another, loyalties shifting almost daily.

He sat in a folding chair and balanced on his lap a flimsy paper plate full of hamburger, potato salad and beans. And a can of beer that he drained in one long gulp as I watched, his throat pumping furiously.

He noticed me. "Hey, sport," he said.

"Hey, Mister Braxton," I said back. "You want another beer? I'll get you one."

He nodded, and I was thrilled. A shiny aluminum garbage can – over by the sliding-glass back door -- pulled extra duty as a cooler, full of ice and assorted beverages, and I ran over and fished one out.

"Thanks, sport," he said when I delivered it.

He was welcome, and I told him so. Did he want anything else? He looked at me for a minute and kind of smiled and said, no, thanks, what he wanted wasn't on the menu here, or at any barbecue, for that matter. I didn't know what he meant, and I wanted to ask, wanted to ask him everything, wanted him to talk to me in words I would have no trouble understanding. But my little sister called me to come and play, and I went, because I could not think of a good reason to stay, beyond the useless fact that I wanted to.

The Braxton children were easily the most ill-behaved of the neighborhood lot, and they were our best friends, usually, not counting my older sister, who regarded us with the disdain characteristic of fifth-graders. Carlene Braxton was a year older than me but she repeated second, so we were in the same class. Deanna was my little sister's age. Jay, two years younger, kicked. Hard. We left him alone, mostly.

Their mom, Julianne, seemed strikingly beautiful to me, even then. She was at least a foot shorter than Harris. She was the first adult who asked me to call her by her first name, and I mostly recall her in vivid colors – dark features, her eyes limned in black and shadowed the color of sky, hair as dark and dishonest as night, drastically cut and styled differently every few months. She dressed in neon; everything about her served as counterpoint to her husband's diffidence.

One of the stories she used to tell was that she had to ask him to marry her. I wonder what she thought she was getting.

I wonder why he accepted.

Their living room had no furniture it. The story is that they were looking for the right kind. They never found it, as far as I know. But otherwise, they had everything first, all the newest gadgets and appliances. Their telephones folded up and had push-buttons in place of dials, a novelty in the late nineteen sixties. Their refrigerator was the first I'd ever seen with access for water and ice from the outside.

"That's neat!" I would exclaim, first time I noticed these innovations.

"Want to buy it?" she would answer back all the time and then laugh.

There was a huge map of the world thumb-tacked to the wall of the family room. There was a hunting dog in the garage, while the cars stayed in the driveway. The dogs changed – they seemed accident-prone -- but they were all named Tanya. Harris's red plaid jacket and hunting cap hung on a hook next to the door leading from the family room into the garage. There were no hunting trophies in the house, however, and the taste of their hamburgers never gave me reason to be suspicious.

I wondered about Harris and Julianne unattached, because it seemed as if he wanted a divorce or she did, all the time we lived in the neighborhood, and it was just one of those things. Their children spent a lot of evenings at our house while their parents settled things one way or another I couldn't even imagine.

The games we would devise were elaborate and serious, probably incomprehensible to anyone watching from the outside. When we played house, I was married to Deanna. The character I played was based on her father, and I even used his name. She played her mother. When I kissed her (that was one of the rules), I wasn't sure if I was doing something I wanted to do or something I did because he would have.

I finally figured out the answer.

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Although their parents and ours saw each other informally almost every day, they would still on occasion dress up and visit for the evening. Company. When they met at our house, there would be cocktails, onion dip, flavored crackers, fancy cheese. My sisters and I would be in pajamas, ready for bed, though we'd get to say hello before being sent upstairs. The four of them seemed to enjoy these nights, and we felt their enthusiasm as their low voices, peppered with laughter, put us to sleep upstairs.

In the morning we would find the remains on the living-room coffee table: tiny decorative napkins, crumbs and those tall striped cold-drink glasses (wearing sock coasters) – almost empty, with only a few thrillingly bitter drops of gin and tonic in the bottom. And usually a crumpled Salem pack next to an ashtray filled with butts; Harris was the only person my parents allowed to smoke in our house. The scent hung in the drapes long after other evidence of the visit had been cleared away.

When it was his turn, Harris took all of us trick-or-treating one Halloween. As we'd head for the front porch of the target house, he'd hang back at the road and turn the flashlight off. All I could see – because I turned around to look – was the lit end of his cigarette glowing in the dark. He took us farther afield than my dad ever did. It seemed like we walked miles, as our bags of loot got heavier and heavier with candy that would last beyond Christmas and usefulness. We felt wicked, like we'd earned the right to be pirates, cowboys (that was me, pardner), witches, gypsies.

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We moved from there, settling five states to the south, when I was nine, just after the calendar crossed into 1970. This relocation was my first taste of betrayal. Until then, I felt protected; my worries were no larger than phonics and the second-grade nun at Queen of Sorrows (who blamed my schoolwork on poor eyesight).

Somehow I knew such troubles were temporary and that I would survive them. Except the eyeglasses, which I still have. Although I admit Harris Braxton has left his own marks.

I think of him ridiculously often, yet I am continually surprised when he crosses my mind.

I am now approximately twice the age he was that evening as he sat with a half-eaten meal on his lap, lost in his own backyard. I have come such a long way to learn what it feels like to need something I won't find at a barbecue or anywhere else.

These days I find myself thinking restlessly of the four years we spent in that neighborhood. I reconstruct the picture with the precision of an archaeologist rebuilding the skeleton of an extinct creature, carefully digging out the details and patching them together in an attempt to understand the whole. It's a yardstick against which the rest of my life has been measured.

Did you live on a street like mine? Wasn't it a time? And have you found, as I have, that even after we grow up, we spend the rest of our lives playing an endlessly convoluted game of house in an attempt to recapture the innocence of a cowboy outfit on a cool October night, of second grade, of first love?

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