

CHANGE

By Richard Compson Sater

Word gets out. Always does. Party. Tonight it's over on North Chauncey, left at the four-way and follow your noise.

The house looks tired and beat up from the outside. Inside is hard-packed with students blowing off steam after mid-terms. At the door a guy collects three dollars from each of us and gives us plastic cups for the keg in the kitchen that was full twenty minutes ago, the guy says. But no guarantees, he says.

A band threshes away in the dining room. The bass drum says "Bent Moped" in day-glo green and orange. The band's name, I guess, which makes about as much sense as most band names. It takes me a minute to recognize the bass player because she has shaved her head since I last saw her. Can't remember her name. Over and over, she's shrieking something at the microphone that sounds like "I crucify your milkshake."

My companions this night are named Mitch and Dan and Sherry and Barbara. Otherwise, there isn't a whole lot I know about them – or want to, with the possible exception of Dan. There isn't a whole lot they know about me, either, which might be why they let me hang around with them. Not quite belonging, but since it's difficult to have a social life without some other people being involved, I take what I can get and tell myself to shut up.

Sherry's chasing after Mitch, and he's mostly letting her catch him. Barbara's trying to rope Dan, only he's not about to be caught. She does what she can. Which is mostly bed down with him anytime he wants, anywhere, often, and she lets everyone know it too. Sex is a beautiful thing, she says, loud (the volume she uses most often), for the benefit of anyone listening. That being the primary basis for their relationship (or what have you), it's is not likely to last, but she hasn't figured that out yet.

Barbara is pretty determined. But Dan is careless with people, so he will win out in the end. I watch him. He seems to need some looking after, but I don't know anyone with the requisite patience and money and lack of need for self-respect to qualify for the job.

I wrestle my way into the kitchen for beer and then back again, without spilling. Dan sits on the couch, pushed back against the living room curtains, and I squeeze myself in beside him. He takes my beer and swallows half of it, eyeing me over the rim of the cup. The band plays loud enough that the windows hum, each song indistinguishable from the next except for the stops and starts, bouts of furious, pissed-off guitar and breakneck drums with screaming over the top of it.

Somebody hollers "couching!" and I just have time to set my cup down before everybody piles on, Mitch and Sherry and Dan and me and Barbara and five or six people I don't know. A pointless stunt, like cramming people in a phone booth or Volkswagen, and who knows where it came from? It's hard on furniture, but there's no springs left in the couch anyway. After a second Mitch crawls out and topples the rest of the pile. He takes Sherry to see if there's any beer left. Dan finishes the rest of mine and hands the empty cup to Barbara and she heads for the kitchen too. I guess love is reason enough to make you run errands for someone else.

Barbara talks to me only when she knows Dan is watching. "He's such a jerk," she'll say, loud. He's a funny guy sometimes. Once when Barbara made him angry, he gave me her phone number on a card with "for a good time, call" written next to it. I'd like to know what makes him tick. Maybe he'd tell me if I ever had the nerve to ask.

After Barbara disappears, we have the couch to ourselves, and we stretch out at opposite ends. I discover some loose coins behind the cushions and fish them out. "We're rich," I yell at Dan above the noise. He is usually interested in money because he rarely has any himself. "Ninety-six cents," I yell, and show it to him, three quarters, two dimes, a penny. "I knew change was going to come," I yell. He winces. "You want it?"

"What do I have to do for it?"

"Just give me one night," I say. It's either meant to be a joke or I'm very obviously not thinking clearly.

Maybe he doesn't hear me, with the noise and everything. Or maybe he does. Either way, I guess it's all the same. His eyes narrow and he stands up and comes over to me and cups a hand around my ear. "You disgust me," he says.

He walks away. If he asks me about this tomorrow, I can blame beer and claim no memory. It doesn't matter that I meant what I said. Just one night. Please? I would bring him back safely at the end of it, wiser and shining brightly.

I dump the coins back into the couch and see that Dan has found Barbara again and he's towing her toward the door. She's hanging onto his arm and crying. The singer in the band is shrieking "my first date in Sodom" or something like it into the microphone, and everything in the world turns to salt.

Cops arrive. Noise complaint. Party breaks up fast. I leave by myself, not drunk but wishing I were.

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A couple weeks or months after that Dan and are out by ourselves, just us two for some reason, at this topless bar. His idea. He knows I don't like that kind of entertainment. He's broke, as usual, so I buy the drinks and give him dollar bills to stuff into the dancers' thongs. We don't get out of there until my wallet is empty. Two in the morning. Tanked. As we stumble home, I say something he doesn't like, or else it cuts too close to some version of truth, and that's us scuffling in the front yard of some frat house. Serious wrestling, life or death, rolling in the dirt and dark.

"I wanted to hurt you," he will say to me later, not long before he quits speaking to me entirely. "I really wanted to hurt you," his voice full of wonder.

You learn. But you get tired of some things long before you can change them.

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