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Hate Town

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Abstract

"Marge! Hi, Marge!" The boy had brightened when she walked through the door of the interrogation room. Then, quieter, with less spirit,..."

the speed with which the plates were emptied were almost all Jessie needed.

Then her cup was overflowing when Frank held up the meat platter for her to fill again and said in a loud voice, "Eat up, fellas. There's more in the kitchen. Sure got me a cook, didn't I?"

Jessie took the meat platter and hurried out of the room, so he wouldn't see her cry.



Hate Town

by Joyce Branson

"**M**ARGE! Hi, Marge!" The boy had brightened when she walked through the door of the interrogation room. Then, quieter, with less spirit, "I'm glad you're here."

"Oh, Steve!" The girl rushed past the police officer who had led her into the little room to the boy. She knelt before him as he sat on the only piece of furniture in the room, a streaked wood bench. She rested her forearms on his knees and peered into his dark eyes. "What happened, Steve?"

The boy glanced about the barren room. The officer had gone. The two, looking so much alike that they were unmistakably brother and sister, were alone.

Softly, he said, "I clouted Dad. With a baseball bat."

"I know. I found that out at the hospital. But why?"

The boy avoided looking at his sister; he instead looked at the rings on her left hand as it rested on his knee.

"Where's Bill?" The boy's voice cracked as he spoke, a sign of his age, not his emotion.

The girl rose from before her brother and sat wearily on the bench beside him. "He's driving up this afternoon. I came by plane as soon as I got Mother's call."

She waited for him to say something, anything. Relax, she told herself. He'll tell you in time. He always has.

Softly, the boy began. "He accused me of. . . I had been with. . ." His voice took on the tone of frustration and confusion. "The police had. . . Roger and I . . . 40 and 8. . . Oh, Marge — I don't know exactly. I just exploded when he bawled me out for riding in Roger's new sports car."

Marge felt her body jerk alert, her back straighten. She gritted her teeth. Relax, she commanded herself. She noticed that the boy, too, was straight and tense, his arms gesturing palms up and his face grimacing with his efforts to express himself.

"Look, Marge, this is the fourth time I've been hauled into this place this year." His arm movement indicated that he meant the police station. "But this is the first time I've done anything to cause it."

"Four times? Mom wrote about your Omar Heights run-in. I haven't heard about the others."

"Three guys got kicked off the football team for the Omar Heights shaft," Steve said. "And 'Killer' Arnold got promoted to sergeant."

"Mom wrote that the whole thing had been a mistake."

"It was," he said, dully.

"Then why did the boys have to leave the team?"

"You know the story?"

Marge nodded her head. "Yes. About a dozen of you had gathered on Buzz's lawn for a gab fest."

"Eighteen of us."

"Eighteen, then. And the police arrested you for illegal assembly."

"Arnold was the cop that took us in."

"But Buzz's folks vouched for you, didn't they? That's what Mom wrote."

"Sure, they did. They beat us to the station. Told the cops we were their guests. The cops had even taken Buzz in, and it was his own home they accused him of assembling illegally in front of."

"Nothing came of the arrest, did it?"

"Naw. Paul's old man hired a lawyer to tell the police off. He lives on Omar Heights, too. Paul was one of the ones in the most trouble — he'd wise-cracked to Arnold. Asked him if it was illegal to double date, since the cops considered any group over three as an illegal assembly."

Marge smiled. She watched her brother's cheeks color as he talked on, urgently trying to explain himself to her. Wonder how long it's been since anybody has seriously listened to him, she mused.

"They let us go, after a couple of hours, but all the parents had to come to the station to get us and listen to a lecture by some anemic juvenile officer. Boy, was Dad ever mad!" The boy whistled. "He really gave me a talking to. Said I was a disgrace to the family. Sure did shock me. I hadn't done anything really. Just gone over to Buzz's to talk."

"Then the next day. . ." Steve was pacing the floor now, his sister still listening intently. . . "the *Gazette* came out with headlines screaming 'Juvenile Gang Rounded Up On Omar Heights Drive' and went on to tell about how we'd defied repeated warnings by police to disperse the night before. . ." He gasped for air. "But the whole affair was over by 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Don't know why the newspaper called it night. Said diligent police officers had corralled us. And that rich S.O.B. Bozen said right there in the newspaper that the police department was doing a fine job, and it was a good thing that they were finally taking care of the teen-age toughs."

The boy collapsed beside his sister. She recognized his expression as one of defeat. "When Coach Bixby read the story in the paper, he got mad and kicked the three football players who'd been with us off the team. And, Marge," he said imploringly, "we weren't teen-age toughs. We were just talking. We had a right to be there. Paul and Buzz both live

on Omar Heights — Buzz lives just a few houses away from old man Bozen himself. We were their friends. He shouldn't have called us that!"

"Of course he shouldn't have." Marge stroked her brother's knee.

The two sat quietly for awhile, side by side, gazing toward a high, arched window opposite them. A ray of sunshine sliced through the dust-laden air to a spot just left of Steve's foot. He reached forth with his hand and whirled his fingers through the dust. It took on the form of a miniature tornado.

"That dust is suspended by a phenomenon called Brownian movement," Marge said.

"I know," her brother replied. "I took chemistry in school this year."

"That's good. How did you do?"

"Fine." A pause, then, "He sure was mad."

"Dad?"

"Yeah. Wouldn't let me out of the house for a whole month. And then two days after he forgave me, I got picked up again."

"What for?"

"Out after curfew, I guess. I'd been helping stock groceries on a Friday night for a supermarket. Worked until 12:30. Takes a lot of groceries to take care of the Saturday rush."

He was talking fast again, the words pouring forth in torrents.

"I was driving home — straight home. The cops stopped me. They searched the car, and they searched me, and then they took me in. They wouldn't even let me call my boss to let them know I really had been working until 3:30 in the morning. Dad made me quit the job after that. Seemed to think it was all my fault. It wasn't."

His eyes were pleading now, searching his sister's face for a sign of confidence. "Believe me, it wasn't my fault. I hadn't done anything wrong. Just stocked shelves till after midnight."

"I believe you," she replied gently. She lit another cigarette, coughed, and then asked, "Didn't Mother ever side with you? Didn't she see what was happening?"

"Aw, Marge, come on." His voice was tinged with bitterness. "You know how it is when Dad gets on a kick. You haven't been married *that* long."

She smiled. "You're right. Remember, we used to chant that bit about heaven nor hell nor Mother's yell could change our father's mind?"

"Yeah."

The ray of light was gone now, and the room was dark and shadowy. Marge wondered if the wait her brother was suffering through was the result of absent mindedness on the part of the police officers in the adjoining room. Or was it part of a scheme to torture the soul of a boy? Her brother could tell her it was the latter and that it would be another hour before he would be informed of the charges against him, if there were any, or hear the lecture of the juvenile officer if there weren't.

"That makes two times other than this, Steve," Marge said. "What was the third?"

"Oh, that was really stupid!" The boy shook his head in disgust. "Roger Fredrickson — you know him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, his father bought him a used sports car for graduation. Roger got the car last Friday, and his folks went north on a fishing trip Saturday. Roger took me for a ride in the car, and the cops stopped us. Accused us of stealing the car. We couldn't prove we hadn't, because Roger didn't have the registration papers with him, and the police wouldn't let him get them or call his folks. They kept us at the station until they contacted his folks themselves."

His words were measured and precise as he continued. "We got out late Saturday evening, and we went over to Ed's house. I didn't want to go home, 'cause I knew I'd catch all fury when Dad found out about the latest run-in with the cops. Ed had overheard his father talking about a shindig the American Legion and the Jaycees were having in the country at the 40 and 8, and a bunch of us decided to spy on them.

"We hid in the bushes. Lots of men were there. I saw your girl friend's father — the one who owns that dress shop — and that wrestler they called Moose when you were

in school. Moose was there with his old man — togetherness, I guess.”

As he continued talking, Steve’s voice filled with the sound of the incredulity he had felt in witnessing debauchery on other than the movie screen.

“Most of the men were drinking, and there were slot machines all over the place, and one huge roulette table right smack in the middle of things. Marge, those things are illegal in this state, but the Jaycees and the Legionnaires had them!”

His sister nodded sympathetically.

“There was a big trailer from a semi backed into the woods,” he continued, “and not long after we got there, a fat man dropped the back of it down so that it formed a platform. Two women stood on the platform, and the fat man started a record player. The women took off their clothes. Just took them off!”

Steve stared at the ceiling. He swallowed hard, and Marge could see the tears he was trying to choke back as they welled into his eyes. His lip quivered a bit. He glanced at Marge sideways and said, “Dad was standing right in the front row. Right in the front row. And so was that stupid cop, Arnold. And six other men in city police uniforms were there, and so were two highway patrolmen. The sheriff’s car was in the parking lot. They all just stood there, grabbing and clapping and shouting ugly things at the women in the truck.”

Steve buried his face in his hands and breathed hard. His sister stroked his hair.

“The next day — that was yesterday, and Sunday,” he said through his fingers, “I was playing baseball with some of the boys on the lot behind our house. Dad must have found out about the trouble Roger and I had had over the sports car, ’cause he came storming over to where I was standing and began laying me low for getting into it with the cops again. I was up to bat, and he stood there, ankle deep in that asparagus that grows wild in the lot, and he kept shouting at me and shouting at me, about how I was a disgrace to the family, and why couldn’t I keep out of trouble.

“But all I could see was him and Arnold and all that law standing out there grabbing at the ankles of those naked women. And then I hit him. I just hit him with the baseball

bat as hard as I could. And then I ran." He was sobbing openly now. "Dad fell, and I ran. I hid under the bridge about six blocks from our house, but they found me. So here I am, and I suppose Dad is dying, and I'll never get to say I'm sorry."

Marge was glad he'd mentioned his father's condition. She forced a wad of Kleenex into his hands and said, "Oh, Pop's going to be okay. His jaw's broken, that's all. It'd take more than a baseball bat to keep him down."

"Yeah?" He smiled. "Yeah. That's true."

They sat silently for a moment, then Marge cleared her throat.

"Bill bought a boat for our anniversary," she said.

"He did?" The boy's eyes sprung wide. "What kind?"

She pulled a pamphlet from her purse and handed it to him.

"A Chris Craft!" He whistled. "It's a beauty, and a big one too."

"They've almost finished work on the dam now, and the river has backed up till it forms the most wonderfully huge lake you can imagine. Bill's going to stay on at the dam site another six or seven years as resident engineer, so he bought the boat to help us pass our spare time. "I bought some skis and a life jacket for him."

"Wowee!"

"Just before I left this morning, Bill said he could use you in his crew this summer, if you would like to come live with us."

"Would I like to?! Well, I . . . Would I ever! What would mother say?"

"I already asked her. She thinks it would be good for you."

"And Dad?" The boy looked crestfallen at the thought of his father.

"He's got a broken jaw," she smiled. "He won't be saying anything for awhile."

"How soon can we go?"

"Whenever Bill gets to town with the station wagon for your things or you get out of this place, whichever happens last."

Steve stood up, then paced the floor. His sister was faintly surprised at his height, as she always was when she hadn't seen him for awhile. He walked to the high, arched window and looked out. "Hey, Sis, Bill's out there now, putting money in the parking meter!"

She put on her shoes, walked to the window, and stood beside him. He was half a head taller than she now.

"Look! There's a pup in the car!" her brother shouted. "Is he yours?"

"No, I think he's yours. Bill thought if you wanted to train him this summer, you two could go hunting together this fall."

"Yeah?" The boy hammered on the window. Bill looked up, and the boy and his sister waved.

"Hey, Sis," the boy caught her by her wrists. "Go bail me out, will you? See if you can get the juvenile officer to skip the lecture this time, please."

"Okay." She turned and walked toward the door. After all, she thought, he's got three lectures on credit already.

Indoors in Silence

by Sam Sample

Indoors
In silence
What I seek — sulks-
For the light I deny it
A house-bound Muse
Refuses, broods
And stays
In quiet