A Song for Margie

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Abstract

The three young men sat at a table in the back room of Swede’s Bar, playing cards and drinking beer. It was Saturday night. It was dance night, and a monotonous rapping of drums and the flat screech of a saxophone from the Legion Hall across the street drifted in the screen door that opened into the alley...
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THE THREE young men sat at a table in the back room of Swede's Bar, playing cards and drinking beer. It was Saturday night. It was dance night, and a monotonous tapping of drums and the flat screech of a saxophone from the Legion Hall across the street drifted in the screen door that opened into the alley. The three—Joe Osborn, Burt Cleaver and Billy Davis—were waiting for the dance to start. They were playing to pass the time until the street filled with cars and the young men, the girls, the old and young married couples, and the couples who were not married would filter into the hall when the band started playing for good.

Joe dealt the cards, three at a time. He laid the remaining part of the deck at his elbow, picked up his cards and spread them with his thumb and finger.

"I'll open," Burt said.
Billy stared at his cards. "Pass," he said, disgustedly.
Joe sipped his beer, set the glass down and rubbed his forehead. "Three," he said.
Burt swore softly. "Spades, I'll bet."
Joe grinned and flipped a black ace to the center of the table.

Burt tossed a deuce on top of the ace. "Here's low."
Billy played a nine, and Joe swept the trick to a spot between his elbows. He hesitated, frowning, then took a king of hearts from his hand and laid it down.

"Hah!" Burt's face broke into a broad smile. "You ain't got nothin'. Get 'im, Billy."
Billy slapped a joker on the pile and led the jack. Gimme some game," he said to Burt. "Hey, didja hear about Margie Williams?"
Burt slipped a card from his hand and laid it face down in front of him. "What about her? I ain't seen her around lately."
“They took her t' Clarinda this mornin’.”

“Yeah, I heard she was off her rocker.” Burt emptied his beer from his bottle into his glass. A red and blue tattoo of a naked woman smiled through the coarse black hair on his arm.

“I’m gonna offer him a hundred twenty for the heifer,” Ralph Osborn said as the car tires crunched along the rock driveway that led to the Williams house. “I reckon he'll ask a hundred fifty, but I ain’t gonna go above a hundred thirty-five.”

He pulled the car in behind Williams' pickup, and he and Joe stepped out. They started toward the house, but Joe's father had taken only three or four steps when he turned around.

“Ain’t that Margie?” he said, nodding toward the porch on the front of the house.

She was sitting in the porch swing, staring straight ahead at something beyond the road where thick timber came down off the hill to the edge of a creek bank. She didn’t seem to notice them, and the chains of the swing hung straight and still. Her face and arms were white, as if she hadn’t been out in the sun for a long time, and Joe noticed that her brown hair which had always been neatly brushed was snarled and disheveled and cut close to her head.

They were staring at her when Williams came around the side of the house. He stopped when he saw them, and stood with his arms folded inside the bib of his overalls.

“Mornin’, Ed,” Joe’s father called.

Williams didn’t return the greeting. Instead he looked back over his shoulder toward the house. A door opened onto the porch, and a plump, gray-haired woman took the girl by the arm and led her inside.

“C’mon,” Williams said, when the screen door had slammed behind the woman. “I got the heifer tied in the barn.”

“I wonder if they’ll catch ’em,” Joe said.

“It was them three marines,” Burt said. “When I was in Pendleton after basic, we’d go to Dago and L.A. and screw everything in sight. And it didn’t matter much if they was willin’ or not.”

Billy giggled. “Even niggers?”
“Hell, yes—niggers, Mexicans—it’s all the same. For twelve weeks I never seen a woman. When I finally got off the base, I’d took on a sow, if there’d been one around.”

“Sam’s got a warrant out for ’em,” Billy said. “I heard the old man talkin’ about it this mornin’.”

“They’re long gone by now,” Burt said. “When you rape some sweet little thing, you don’t hang around to ask questions.”

Billy laughed and played the ace of clubs, and Joe trumped with a ten.

“High, game,” Billy said. “Yer set, Joe. You guys ready for a round?”

“Yeah.” Burt grasped his bottle, turned it upside down, and pretended to milk it into his glass. “Go get us a round, Billy.”

Billy slid out from the table and hurried into the bar. Burt gathered up the cards and began to shuffle the deck. An intermittent staccato of drums came in from the alley, along with the roar of car motors and the clicking of heels on concrete. Joe picked up a jagged half of a broken poker chip and began cleaning his fingernails.

Burt laid the deck down and drummed his fingers on the scarred tabletop. “I bet that Margie Williams was a hot piece.”

Joe looked up at Burt. “That’s a hell of a thing to say.”

“Aw, Christ, I was just jokin’. You know, Joe, your trouble is you ain’t got a sense of humor.”

Burt smiled and leaned back in his chair. “I learned in the Marines that you gotta have a sense of humor. What I mean is, you gotta take things as they come. You gotta laugh a lot, or you’re gonna get your mind all messed up.”

“Well, Margie wasn’t no whore. I took her out a couple times. She was okay.”

Burt laughed and reached over and patted Joe on the back. “Listen, Joe, do you wanna know why I was out in the cornfield Saturday night while you was in the back seat discussin’ the weather?”

Joe dug at the black dirt under his nails. It was a Friday night in November and a cold north wind was sweeping over the hills, and cattle huddled together beneath the eaves of barns and dry clumps of fireweed tumbled across the roads.
Joe stopped the car on top of Fletcher's hill. Margie was sitting close to him and he put his arm over the back of the seat and wound her long hair around his fingers. The squares of light from farmhouses in the valley below seemed far away, and the baying of a hound somewhere in the timber of the hillside did not disturb the warmth of the car and the fresh smell of the girl beside him.

He began to kiss her, carefully at first, and then with more force and passion. He kissed her for a long time, then he slid his hand down from her shoulder and placed it over her breast.

"It ain't no secret," Burt said. "Aint nothin' but common sense."

He leaned close to Joe. "Here it is. They're all whores. Every damn one of them. All you gotta know is the right combination, and any woman'll go down like a stuck hog."

Joe stared at Burt. He saw the small black eyes, set close to the bridge of his nose, and glassy from the beer. He saw that the eyes did not change when Burt smiled. He threw the broken chip on the floor, picked up the deck, and began shuffling.

"God damn it! Where's Billy?"

"Here he comes. Drink your beer, Joe. We gotta get drunk before we go over. They don't let you take a bottle in no more, on account of what happened to Margie Williams."

Billy placed the bottles on the table and sat down, scraping his chair on the board floor.

Joe pushed the cards toward Burt. "It's your deal."

"Keep your shirt on—the dance is about to start."

"We gotta get drunk first," Burt said.

"Ah, there's gonna be some pussy there tonight." Burt laughed and drained his glass in one swallow. He picked up the deck, shuffled it twice, and dealt, slowly and deliberately.

"Hey Joe, you know that broad you had Saturday night?"

Joe studied his cards. "I'll open."

"It ain't your bid. That broad—she reminded me of a gal I knew in L.A."

"I pass," Billy said, throwing his cards on the table.

Joe turned up the cards. "You got a joker, and a deuce, and a king—Jesus Christ!"

Sketch
“C’mon,” Billy said, “The dance is startin’.”
“Yeah,” Burt said, “I got a bottle in the car. We’ll have a couple snorts and go over.”
“There ain’t nothin’ there yet,” Joe said. “Play your hand, Billy.”

Burt poured the rest of the beer from his bottle into his glass. “Christ, you seen his cards. You can’t play now.”
“Well, deal ’em over.”
“Damn!” Burt said. “There’s women just a’waitin’. Just a’waitin for Burt Cleaver to show up and ask ’em to dance. And here I am stuck with a guy that wants to do nothin’ but play cards.”

Joe got up suddenly and went to the jukebox that stood in the corner by the screen door. It was old, like the room and the table and the chairs. He looked over the faded song titles in the little yellow squares. He could hear the band playing across the street, and a woman’s high-pitched laughter. He scanned the yellow square and found the song. He fumbled in his pocket, drew out a dime, and pushed it into the slot.
“You go on, if you want to go,” he said. “Go ahead; I can hear the band playin’.”

He pushed the two red tabs, and the jukebox clicked and buzzed as the circle of black discs turned inside.
“Don’t wait for me. Go on. The women are plenty hot by now.”

He stood with his back to the table. The jukebox clicked again, and an arm pulled a disc from the circle and placed it on the turntable. A second later, the tinny, echoing sound of a guitar filled the room and drowned the noise of the band across the street.
“What’s the matter with you, Joe?” Burt said, from the table. “C’mon, set down and drink your beer and we’ll go over to the dance.”
“I ain’t goin’.”

Burt pushed his chair back from the table, got up, and walked over to the jukebox.
“Look,” he said quietly. “We’ll get rid of Billy. I know that broad I had out in the cornfield is comin’ tonight—and she’s bringin’ a friend.”

He peered into Joe’s eyes. “Well, she ain’t like that dog you got. Hell, I know you didn’t have no fun, but this one—
she's even wilder than the one I had. I wasn't gonna tell you, just introduce you and let you get her for yourself."

Joe said nothing. He pushed his hands into his pockets and looked out into the alley.

Burt laughed. "You ain't gonna be sittin' in the back seat discussin' the weather. Not with this one."

"I ain't goin'," Joe said. "You go ahead. Let Billy have her."

"Well, I sure ain't gonna force ya." Burt turned and walked back to the table. "C'mon, Billy, let's go. Joe is scared that some gal might rape him."

Joe turned away from the jukebox and stared at Burt. His fists were clenched, and the veins stood out on his forehead. He crouched slightly, his arms hanging away from his body, like an animal ready to spring.

He saw Burt, with his fingers clenched around the neck of a beer bottle, and he saw Billy standing behind him, grinning. A gray haze of cigarette smoke lingered over the table, and Burt moved through it, toward Joe, swaying a little, with the bottle in his fist. He moved up close, and laid the arm with the bottle over the top of the jukebox.

She didn't hesitate. She took his hand, firmly, and moved it away from her breast. And when he kissed her again, his hand lay on her shoulder like something awkward and useless, and he started the car and drove fast down Fletcher's hill toward the yellow squares of light.

Joe looked at the bottle, then at the face staring at him through the yellow light of the single naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. It was September when he first drove up the rock driveway of the Williams place. It was another Saturday night, a warm September night, the kind of night to steal watermelons and drink a case of cold beer on Fletcher's hill.

But Joe sat with Margie Williams at a booth in Mabel's Cafe, drinking a root beer, and talking about the movie; how exciting it was when the villain broke a bottle over the bar and went for the hero's throat. They talked and then Margie smiled and asked Joe to play a song on the jukebox.

"D-five," she said, and Joe went to the counter and changed a dollar bill and put a dime in the slot.

"Play it again, Joe, please," she asked smiling, after he
had spent three more dimes. "Just once more. It's my favorite song."

The music from the jukebox stopped and Joe looked away from the face. He pulled another dime from his pocket and dropped it into the slot. He pushed the two red tabs and the jukebox clicked and buzzed.

“She sure liked it,” he said, as the sound of the echoing guitar began. “You go ahead. Go on to the dance. I’m gonna listen to this song.”

And a Few Nails

Marshel Rosow
Science Journalism, Sr.

A gust of wind slipped through the paneless frame and tossed dust into my face. I coughed, spat, then looked up at the sky-splattered roof. “Bad storm last week,” I thought aloud. “Really took the shingles.” But I knew that what I saw was a product of time and neglect as well as wind. A crescent of gray peeked through where the cupola had been cocked to an angle by some earlier storm.

“They don’t seem to mind.” I snatched a cob from the dust at my feet and hurled it upward. The cooing stopped as the pigeons rushed for the hole high on the rotting south wall, their wings stirring the cobwebs under the eaves. “You can leave too,” I thought, as a straggler flapped into the November sky. “There’s nothing left here for you.”