

Changes

The complexion of the neighborhood was changing. Now all of a sudden you saw black people at the bus stop or walking down 63rd Street. Crime was up, they said, and white folks were more and more nervous about shopping on Halsted Street or taking the “El” downtown. “For Sale” signs popped up on front lawns like mushrooms overnight.

“I don’t blame the bubaks,” Joseph Kovacs, Sr. said over dinner. “They don’t want to live in the projects either.” He slurped the sauerkraut from a greasy ham hock and waved it for emphasis at his son. “It’s the goddamned real estate blockbusters, greedy bastards! They use every trick to scare people, to make them believe the neighborhood is going up in smoke! You think these old Lugans will sell their two-flats for peanuts, after all their saving and hard work?”

“We should get out while we can,” said Joe’s mom, “before Chicago Lawn turns into a ghetto like West Englewood.”

“They can’t *make* us sell, can they?” Joe, Jr. asked.

“Of course not,” Mom said. “But they can make us *want* to.”

“This neighborhood will never change,” his father declared.

Things hadn’t changed much for young Joe since he’d graduated from high school in June. He was still working part time at the High-Low Foods, and he had time to hang out in the park and enjoy a last lazy summer before classes started at the junior college.

That would be a change, he realized when he went to register. Looking around the school, he suddenly had a sense of bigger and better things to come. Among the better things to grab his interest were noticeable changes in his old high school classmate Nancy Weber. He spotted her as she was talking to some collegiate dudes handing out fliers at a kiosk in the lobby. Nancy looked way different. To start out, she was wearing a denim mini-skirt with legs

that went from here to there. Her blonde hair had gotten longer and hung straight, dancing along her shoulders. She wore great big round glasses over her big blue eyes, and big round hoops in her ears. She'd filled out a bit, too, looking soft and round like he'd never noticed before, and Joe was pretty sure she wasn't wearing a bra.

He had probably spoken like ten words to her in high school, but now he had a feeling that maybe they could be close. He sidled over and started up a conversation, making small talk. He found out she helped at her uncle's restaurant sometimes, but was registering for a full schedule at the college. Joe was wondering what else had changed.

"You still going out with Vince Polo?" he asked.

She laughed, shook her head with a shiver of her shoulders and her hair practically made sparks. "No, that's over and done with."

"Oh." Joe shuffled his feet a little. "So maybe we could go out some time."

She smiled the most radiant smile and flushed a little, he thought. "Yeah, sure, why not?"

They agreed to see a movie the next week-end.

Nancy's father was a stocky, balding guy in a Dago Tee shirt, reading the paper at the kitchen table. "Where you taking her?" he asked, when they were introduced.

"Uh, to see a movie," Joe took a step back.

"Yeah, where?"

"Over to the Ogden." Joe had borrowed the family Ford for the occasion.

Mr. Weber put the paper down and stared. "That's *burr-head* territory, ain't it?"

"No, no, it's —"

"Da-ad!" Nancy wailed. "Don't say that!"

“Ohmygosh!” Mrs. Weber chimed in. She was a pretty lady without makeup, doing housework in a plain dress with an apron. “Is it safe?” she wondered.

“Oh, yeah, sure” Joe assured them. “That’s a nice show, and the neighborhood’s okay.”

Mr. Weber narrowed his eyes. “You gonna see that new spaghetti western?”

“We’re seeing a movie called *A Patch of Blue*,” Nancy told him.

“A batch of what?”

Joe shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Nancy had picked the movie.

“*A Patch, Pa,*” Mrs. Weber gushed. “Nan says it’s a *romance!*”

“Ooh la lah,” her father wheezed sourly. He picked up the newspaper again, dismissing them.

“They’re such racists!” Nancy complained. “

Joe didn’t care much for the movie, but Nancy liked it, and he liked Nancy enough to let his arm fall asleep on the seat back behind her. A couple times he sort of brushed up against the side of her breast, and she didn’t seem to mind. She definitely wasn’t wearing a bra.

Encouraged, Joe drove to Marquette Park after the show and pulled the Fairlane in line with the other cars around the Horseshoe Drive with their parking lights on. Nancy smelled so nice, he leaned over to kiss her, and she kissed him back, but she seemed distracted. She wanted to talk about the movie. Wasn’t that Sidney Poitier some great actor?

Joe wasn’t that impressed. “He talks real good, like a white guy. But he plays a black guy, so that makes him special, I guess.”

“Well, it just goes to show you,” Nancy said. “The blind girl didn’t know he was black. So she treated him normal.”

“That wasn’t normal,” Joe said, leaning in for a kiss. “That was loooooove.”

She let him have his kiss and then pushed him back. What did he think about the protest march coming up next Saturday?

"I didn't know about it," he admitted. "Guess I'll miss it, since I work Saturdays. What are they protesting?"

"You know," she said. "Open housing."

"Yeah? Well, it seems open enough to me."

"It isn't, though. They discriminate against blacks when they try to rent apartments."

Joe shrugged. "They shouldn't go where they're not wanted. Nobody wants them around here."

"But that's not the point," Nancy argued. "They have the *right* to go wherever they want!"

"*Having* the right don't *make* it right," Joe said.

After work that next Saturday, Joe walked over to the Horseshoe. Vyto and George sat perched like big pigeons on the back of the park bench, tee-shirt sleeves rolled up to show their muscles and curly veins.

"Hey," Georgie said with a nudge, "How'd it go with Nancy Weber? She put out?"

Vyto purred, "Ohh, come on, what'd you get?"

Joe put on a mysterious smile. "She's nice, you shitheads. I think I'm getting' close to her, you know?"

"College girl, now," George said, flipping his hand in a gesture that meant "could be this – could be that."

"Yeah, I tell ya – " Joe had been thinking about it. "She's got some different ideas. She seems pretty smart."

“Oh, shit, that’ll never work out!”

“Bad idea,” Vyto agreed. “Don’t get mixed up with a smart chick!”

Joe thought about it. “It’s more like she’s got feelings.”

“Yeah?”

“Feelings for people. I mean, I talked to her on the phone yesterday, all she could talk about was the protest march. Hey, were you guys there?”

They were and they were excited to talk about it.

“You shoulda seen ‘em, waving signs and shit,” Vyto told him. “Marching right down the middle of 71st Street!”

“Bunch of nigger preachers in suits!” George added.

“And a bunch of commies and North Side jews!”

“Geez,” Joe laughed. “Don’t we got our own jews?”

“Cops marched right in line with ‘em,” George said.

“Somebody tossed a bottle at ‘em, but it hit a cop by accident .”

“What’d the cops do?” Joe asked.

“They went ape shit, is what!” Vyto laughed. “They came chargin’ into the park swingin’ their billy clubs.”

“And you guys...”

“We ran like hell! What do you think?” They laughed until they just about fell off the bench.

Joe bummed a cigarette and a light. “So they marched into the park?”

“Yeah,” George explained. “Turns out they had a bunch of cars and a couple school buses parked on the drive near Kedzie.”

“At least we *think* they were their cars,” George cackled.

Sputtering, Vyto told how the mob had torched a school bus and pushed several cars into the lagoon. He slapped Georgie a high-five while Joe looked in awe. He was sorry he'd missed all the excitement.

The newspapers called it a riot. The evening news had film of the melee, with cops and teenagers running through the park, while the protestors marched in orderly fashion down the street. Civil rights activists vowed to continue their protests until all people had won the right to fair housing without discrimination. The neighborhood boys promised they'd be ready next time.

Joe tried calling Nancy Weber on Tuesday, to ask her out again. According to her mom she was working, so he left his number for a call-back.

He had a dream in which he was watching Nancy at a bus stop from the other side of a wide boulevard. She wore a leather mini-skirt, her long blonde hair waving like a golden flag in the violent gusts from passing cars. Joe attempted to cross the street, but the traffic was too heavy and too fast. Every time he stepped from the curb, he was forced back – and every time it seemed that another lane of traffic had appeared and Nancy was ever farther away. She looked his way without a word, becoming smaller and smaller as the distance grew greater between them. He awoke hard and frustrated.

“Dad,” he asked that evening, “can I use the car on Saturday night?”

Joseph, Sr. was sipping one more cup of coffee before second shift at the Rheem plant.

“Maybe,” he said, picking at a callused hand. “You staying out of trouble?”

“O’ course. As usual,” Joe grinned.

“Hmph,” his mom grunted. “You got another date with that Weber girl?”

“Maybe,” he said. “If I can use the car.”

“You don’t need a car for a date,” his father teased. “Your mother and me, we didn’t have no car. We walked places or took the bus.”

Mom leaned against a counter with arms folded. “He wants the car so he can go necking in the park! That’s where they go, the teenagers, after dark, parked around the Horseshoe, necking!”

Joe raised his arms to his father, pleading, “Dad?”

“Ho, so that’s it, is it?” he said with a broad smile. He grew serious. “Well, maybe the park isn’t such a good place to be. After Friday, who knows?”

“What’s Friday?”

Joseph indicated the newspaper folded on the radiator. “A big protest march with the bubaks. All the news people will be there taking pictures. Lots of politicians and Civil Rights people. That King guy is coming.”

“Elvis?” Joe asked. “Jesus Christ?”

“Don’t use His name in vain, you!” his mother scolded.

“Elvis’s or Jesus’s?”

“I mean the Reverend Doctor, of course,” said his dad. “Martin Luther King.”

Joe shook his head. “You’re right, there *will* be trouble. They said last Saturday was a riot. But this time it’ll be an even bigger mess. People around here are looking for a fight!”

“You can’t fight the King,” his father said, waving away the idea. “He won the Nobel Peace Prize! How can you fight with him?”

Friday afternoon was hot and muggy. Joe had a few hours before he had to go in to work, so he wandered over to the park to see what was going on. People were streaming along the paths and across the soccer fields. Dozens of cops patrolled the edge of the park, plodding in the heat, sweating in their blue uniforms. At 71st Street, in front of the Drugas Tavern and the

Lithuanian bakery, stood a wall of backs. Hundreds of jeering white spectators lined the sidewalks.

Worming his way to the front, Joe came up against a blockade of policemen facing the crowd. One helmeted cop stood near the curb, smiling and talking good-naturedly to Georgie.

“Hey, Joe,” George said with a nod, as the cop backed away and returned to his place in line. “That guy knows my cousin Leo.”

“Will that keep us from getting’ our heads busted?”

Georgie laughed. “I hope so! Last week the cops got pissed off ‘cause they got caught in the crossfire. But they don’t like this marchin’ here any more than we do!”

“I don’t see any marching going on,” Joe said, peering through the police skirmish line.

“Oh, they’re marching. They’re just kinda stuck in the traffic right now. Check it out!”

Cars were still crawling along the eastbound lane of 71st Street, while the protestors, Joe saw now, marched toward the park in the westbound lane. A station wagon had pulled in front of them and stalled there. A couple of smirking teenagers in Dago tees had the hood up and pretended to fiddle with the engine.

“Isn’t that Parelli’s car?” Joe asked.

“Yeah it is! His dad’s car, they call the ‘Stoker.’” Georgie yelled, “Hey Parelli! Get a horse!”

Parelli popped his head up from under the hood and shot George the finger.

“You seen Vyto?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, he’s right over there.”

On the sidewalk a little behind the stalled car, Vyto stood with a tall, skinny, shirtless guy.

“Jesus, he’s over there with Tony Fiorello?” Ordinarily there was no love lost between the “Bench Boys” from the Horseshoe and the Little Loafers of 71st Street.

Georgie shrugged. “We’re all against the niggers today, man!”

The marchers were led by a contingent of cops in riot gear – plastic shields attached to their helmets – brandishing night sticks. Behind them stood the main players, apparently – the black preachers and civil rights agitators in a line six people wide. The August heat had a couple of them carrying their suit coats, sweat soaking through white shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Several of the men stood fast in black suits and ties, though, and some wore white or black fedoras under the withering sun. In the center, bareheaded and wearing a gray suit, a short, broad-shouldered man with a trim mustache conferred with his lieutenants. Joe recognized the famous Martin Luther King.

A sharp crack caused the Reverend to flinch – a firecracker, followed by several more -- and the cops in front of him strode forward, nervous and wary. Joe looked over toward Vyto and saw several of the Little Loafers lighting another string of fireworks. One of the greasers threw it and ran, pursued by a cop. The firecrackers sputtered sulfurous smoke on the pavement in front of King and the others. Vyto just dodged and came right back to his place by the curb between a couple of middle-aged women waving “White Power” signs.

The protestors had signs, too, calling for open housing and invoking support for the Chicago Freedom Movement, waving flags with some kind of a peace sign in a circle. They’d been chanting something, but that petered out now as they milled about, bumping into each other. The whole army of marchers, black and white, looked like they’d just gotten off a bus from Selma, Alabama with their dark glasses and straw hats. White teenagers, college students, hippie types wearing armbands tried to keep some kind of order. Long-hairs wearing headbands held hands and tried to look serene.

Fiorello, the lanky Loafer, uncoiled a sinewy arm to let fly a pop bottle. A shout and the crash of broken glass from within the ranks of protestors brought a cheer from the crowd. Clearly the marchers were sitting ducks here, marking time surrounded by the hostile populace of Marquette Manor. A police officer leaned over the fender of the Stoker to say something to Parelli. Whatever he said, it convinced Parelli that he could in fact figure out how to reconnect the spark plug wires or whatever else was keeping the old Ford from moving. In a few minutes, the car crept forward, waved on by the cops, but Parelli couldn't resist revving the engine once more for good measure, leaving the marchers enveloped in greasy blue exhaust as he pulled away.

Another bottle and another curved through the air as the procession moved ahead. With every projectile launched, another policeman broke ranks and dashed through the curbside line of people, which would part like a motley curtain and close up again. As the march proceeded, the violence and volume increased. Middle-aged women, their hair in curlers, stepped into the street to spit at the protestors. A cherry bomb exploded in mid-air. The whites cheered.

"Keep white neighborhoods white!" they yelled, and a chant began, "Niggers go home!" A cop shoved Joe back from the curb and he heard himself shout, "Go home!"

Unified, the marchers moved past them toward the park.

George pushed in next to him and joined in the chorus. He jabbed Joe with an elbow. Eyes darting back and forth, he held out his hand. Joe reached out and took what he offered – a few chunks of broken concrete and a piece of brick from the alley.

"Niggers go home!" George yelled, and let fly with a rock.

"Go home!" shouted Joe, and he hurled the fist-sized brickbat with all his might. "Go home!" he shouted, watching the missile soar, watching it arc through the air and then down to

smite Martin Luther King soundlessly on the back his neck. The preacher staggered and collapsed to one knee.

The white man to King's right bent over him with a hand protecting his head. Others stepped forward, eyes searching. Panic rippled through the company – some of the young men broke ranks, confronting the ugly mob, and fists flew. Others rushed to quell the scuffle amid shouts and screams.

A couple of cops were looking right at Joe and his accomplice. "Shit!" George exclaimed, turning to run. The cops advanced toward them. Joe backed away, still entranced by the scene unfolding.

One of the long-haired hippy chicks burst forward from the second rank, stumbling and sprawling over King to help shield him from the barrage of bottles and rocks that seemed to rain from the sky. Her long blonde hair was set off with a bright purple headband. Draped over the man's legs, hands on the cracked pavement, the girl looked up in terror with her big blue eyes wide behind the big round wire-rim glasses, Nancy Weber's incredulous stare meeting Joe's across an ever-widening distance.

END