

ROOM FOR BART

Phil Dorrell

It was late Saturday afternoon and Bart smelled good things coming from the kitchen. He wandered in and leaned up against the counter, watching his mother peel and cut potatoes. Her wrinkled hands worked methodically. Bart had watched her do this many times, but he was not interested in watching today. "Mom, do you love me?" he asked.

Without looking up she said, "Of course, dear. Will you please get the milk out of the refrigerator?"

"I mean, would you miss me if I were gone? Do you *really* love me?" persisted Bart. He got out the milk carton and handed it to her.

"Yes. I said so, didn't I? What more do you want?"

She started up the electric mixer and began to whip the potatoes. The grinding whir filled the room. "What a racket," thought Bart. He poured himself a glass of milk and grabbed a cookie from the cookie jar. He stared out the window over the sink. Its familiar green curtains framed a clear spring day outside. Bart could visualize himself and his father playing pitch and catch in the back yard. "Gee, what fun that used to be," he thought. But it had been several years since they had done things like that together. He was seventeen now, and a high school senior. His father ran his own business supply store six days a week. And, well, they both had plenty of things to keep them busy. The noise from the mixer stopped and there was silence for a moment. Bart was still looking outside when he said, "Mom, do you love the Overtons next door?"

"Oh, I suppose I like them pretty well . . . we get along. Now, dear, please don't spoil your supper with those cookies. I'm not cooking this for nothing, you know."

"But I mean *love*, Mom, not *like*. You know, 'Love thy neighbor.' That kinda thing. Don't you think there ought to be a lot more love in the world?"

Bart's mother looked straight at him. She placed her hands on his shoulders and said, "Look, son, if you've got some cock-eyed idea about running off and joining one of those hippy communes or something, you can just get it out of your head right now. Understand? And as

for this love business, why don't you ask Rev. Black about things like that? Why do you think we've been taking you to church for all these years, anyway? Now . . . scat!" She pointed toward the living room. "I've got work to do, and you know your father likes his supper on time."

Bart stuffed his hands in his pockets and shuffled toward the other room. Just then his father, a balding man of average height, came in the back door. He had already loosened his tie and was carrying his jacket over his shoulder. For some reason he was moving rather slowly this evening.

"Hi, gang," he said. He stopped long enough to peck his wife on the cheek.

"Hello, dear," she said. "Supper will be ready in a few minutes."

"Hi, sport," he said to Bart.

"Hi, Dad. How about a game of catch before supper?"

"Oh, Bart!" said his mother. "Can't you see your father's tired?"

"Not tonight, son. Maybe some other time, eh?"

Bart thought that he was also tired. He was tired of hearing the same excuse time after time.

"I wish," said Bart's mother to his father, "that you didn't have to work on Saturdays so much, dear."

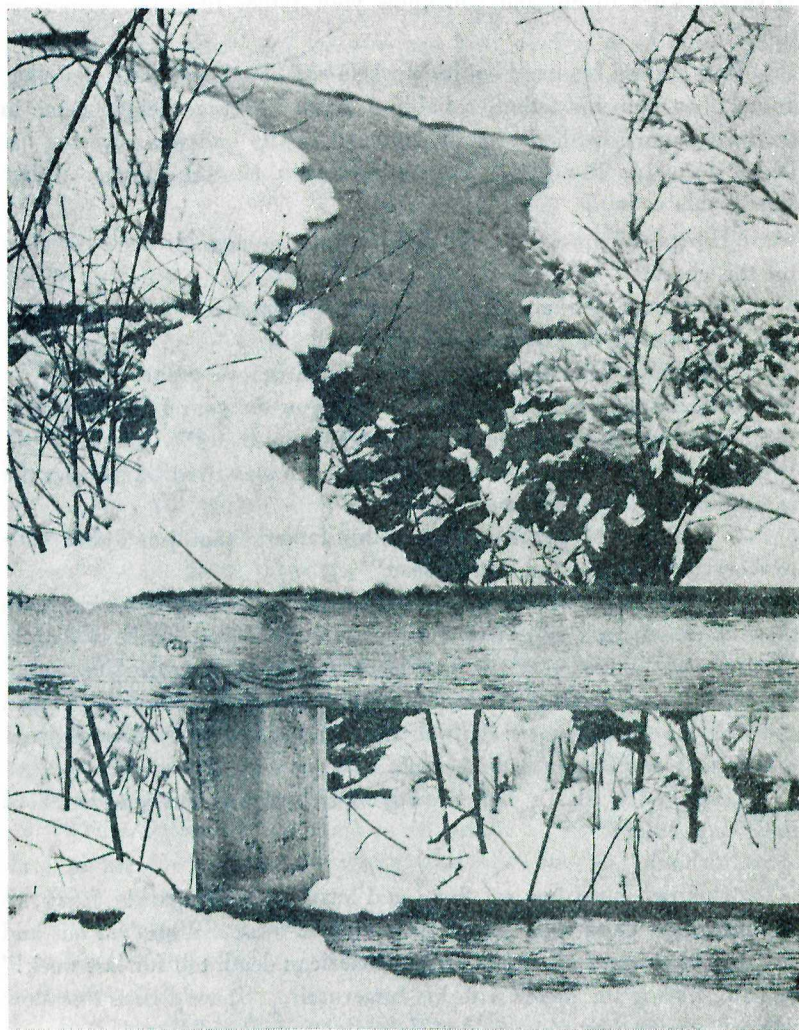
"Yeah. But you know how hard it is on the small businessman these days. I can't afford to hire anyone else. And I'd be a fool to close up on Saturdays. It's just something we'll have to live with." He walked to the hall closet and hung up his jacket. Then he plopped down in his favorite easy chair to read the paper. Bart sprawled out on the sofa and stared at the ceiling.

Disgustedly, Bart's father said, "Did you see this article about the Peace Talks?"

"Unhunh."

"Our delegates just sat there and let them stall again! I say we should forget the Talks and go in there full force. Wipe 'em out and get the mess over with. Look at this American death toll for last week!" he said, hitting the paper with his fingernails. "If we'd been this slow when I was in the army, we'd still be fighting World War II."

"Well, I hope I never get drafted," said Bart sitting up. "I don't think I could kill anybody. I . . . I just wouldn't be able to pull the trigger."



"Yeah, well you'd better not let me catch you burning your draft card or anything when you get one. No son of mine's going to be a dirty draft-dodger. I wasn't a traitor and neither are you."

Bart looked at the floor. He did not attempt to answer his father. He heard the noisy rustle of the paper as his father opened to the second page.

"Supper's ready," called Bart's mother.

They all went into the dining room. Bart's fourteen-year-old sister had finally gotten off the phone long enough to eat. Together, she and Bart repeated the grace. "GodisgreatGodisgoodNowwethankHimfor ourfoodAmen."

Later that evening, Bart and his steady girlfriend, Nancy, went to a party at a friend's house. Bart was driving Nancy home in the family car when she said, "Sure was a nice party, tonight, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I haven't enjoyed myself so much in a long time," said Bart.

"Remember when Judy and Bill fell down playing that one game?" she said giggling. "I thought I'd never stop laughing!" More giggles.

"Yeah. That was funny," said Bart. He gave a short chuckle.

"And then Fred and Cathy . . ." Giggles. "And then when we were playing charades . . ." More giggles. "I think it might have been nicer, though, if Cathy hadn't invited Jim and Sally," she said more seriously. Then in a rather hushed tone, she said, "I mean, they *were* the only niggers there."

"What?!" said Bart. "I never heard you use that word before!"

"I didn't *mean* anything by it. That's what they are, aren't they?"

"But Nancy! That word has some terrible ideas behind it." They arrived in front of Nancy's house and Bart stopped the car. "Besides, I happen to like Jim and Sally. At least they don't go around calling us 'whitey.'"

"So you don't like my choice of words, huh?" snapped Nancy.

"No. In fact, I don't!" said Bart. "And I wish you'd watch it from now on!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, mister! We'll just see who's gonna boss me around!" She jerked Bart's class ring off her finger and threw it at him. "There! You can have your crumby old ring!" She opened the car door,

slammed it behind her, and ran up to the house.

Bart was stunned. He looked at his ring for a moment, and then put it on his finger. He started the car and drove away slowly, as he always did when he wanted to think. After the initial shock was over, he decided that maybe breaking up with Nancy wasn't so bad after all. "We'd never be able to get along, now that I know she's so prejudiced," he thought. "And besides, I was getting pretty sick of the way she giggles all the time. Everybody at school thinks she's stuck up, anyway. I'm probably better off without her!"

When Bart got home, his parents were sitting in the living room watching television. "Well, look who's here!" quipped Bart's father. "What brings you home so early tonight?"

"Uh, well . . . Nancy and I kinda had a fight, and uh . . . well, she gave me my ring back."

"What on earth did you *do* to the poor girl?" asked his mother.

"Nothing. Honest. Uh, I'd rather not discuss it. Actually, I think I'm probably better off unattached. Things just didn't work out, that's all."

"Well," said his father, "In a couple of days you'll probably try to make up with her, I'll bet. Won't you? I was really happy when you two started going together. It seemed like such a good match. And besides, Nancy's father has a lot of influence in this town. He's one of my best customers."

"Is that all you ever think about?" snapped Bart. "I should date whoever's best for business. Is that it?"

"Bart!" said his mother. "Don't talk to your father like that. I know you're upset about losing Nancy. But have some respect."

"Listen, boy," said his father. "I've worked pretty hard for seventeen years to put clothes on your back and food in your stomach. But if you expect to be able to go to college, you'd better start thinking about the business once in awhile. It's more important than you think."

There was a moment of silence. "I'm going to bed," said Bart quietly. "Good night."

As he started downstairs to the room they had fixed up for him in the basement, his mother called after him. "Bart. I'm glad you came home early for a change. You really ought to more often, don't you think? I wish you'd get more sleep."

Bart didn't answer.

The next morning, the family got up to go to church. Bart's father got the Sunday paper from the porch while his mother started to fry some bacon. Bart's sister came into the kitchen. "Mmmm, smells good, Mom."

"Thank you, dear. Would you please wake your brother?"

"If I can. You know what a heavy sleeper he is." She walked down the steps to Bart's room. "Bart. Time to get up." There was no answer. She knocked on the door. "Bart, are you awake?" She knocked louder. "C'mon, Bart! It's time for breakfast!"

She opened the door. The bed was empty. She looked to one side, then gave a piercing scream, loud and shrill and agonizingly long. Hoarsely she cried, "Mother! Daddy!"

They were already running downstairs in their bathrobes. Bart's father was there first. "What's wrong, dear?" he asked.

She sobbed violently and pointed. Then she ran into her father's arms. There, hanging by a rope tied to a floor joist, was Bart's lifeless body.

His mother ran in and saw her son swinging gently back and forth. "Oh, dear God! No! she screamed. Her voice was harsh and tears flooded down her terror-stricken face. "What has that girl done to you?" She fell on Bart's bed in heaving sobs and buried her face in the covers. "She's not worth it, Bart! She's not worth it!" Her voice trailed off into bitter weeping.

