

**The Changing Room**  
By Elizabeth Savage

The Changing Room was the only place you could get your ether and sundry barbiturates on a consistent basis. To call it smoke saturated would've been a gross understatement: you could barely see three feet deep. She was careful to slump her shoulders as she glided through, breathing shallow, anxious to keep the outside out and her insides in. The sound of a heartbeat, superimposed over rhythmic metallic clangs and screeches, muffled the sound of people, glasses breaking, everything.

She placed both hands upon the bar. She felt like she was wearing ice skates. She leaned over.

"I WANT TO SPEAK TO THE MANAGER."

"WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE COLOR?" The password.

"RED, SOFT RED."

The barkeep folded forearms like big raw slabs of horse-meat, hiked tiny black eyebrows a little higher on a glistening dome of forehead. He leaned over to her ear, pressed his lips against it, said,

"You're a smart girl...why..."

"PLEASE." He handed her a key the size of her hand.

She swam past the dead, let herself be swallowed into the small passageway, sucked deeper and deeper until finally there was no smoke, no noise, only a tiny white room and clean softness. Her brother sat in a hanging chair, cross-legged so he looked like he was suspended in a water droplet. In his lap he held a small plant. He was on the phone. He glanced up without recognition.

"Billy."

He covered the receiver. "Please don't call me that around here."

"I'm sorry. Clay. Um, how are you? You look..."

"What do you want." She studied the eerie regularity of his features, and wondered again if it were true. That would make him only her half-brother. That would make more sense. He wore small oval glasses, although he could afford to have his vision corrected. He could afford anything. It was just him. Her brother had always had glasses, along countenance of subzero. These things were holdovers, tributes to a time when he couldn't afford anything else.

"How's business? Business good?"

"It's fine. What do you want." She wondered if Billy had any friends around here, and if he talked to them this way. She wondered what his lovers were like. Quiet, probably. And clean. She didn't think he hit any. He wouldn't have to.

"I'm looking for someone." She waited. "You know him."

"This isn't about that.... Bridgeman character, is it?"

"Yes...that's right."

He allowed himself a disappointed glare, and spoke into the phone. "Search for Bridgeman, first name..." He looked at her distractedly. He didn't even remember.

"Sam."

"Samuel. Yes. Yes, that's what I thought. No, that's fine." He hung up. "What did you want to know, if you could clear his debts? More charity work?"

She nodded. Her mouth hung open.

"You're too late. He was sent away a few weeks ago."

"Where?"

"Northern Territory. He's been put on watch. It'll help clear his system." He cleared his throat. "Sorry."

Clay's small hands removed the glasses from his smooth round face and began to clean them with a small white cloth. The manicured thumbs made slow circular motions on the small glass ovals. He squinted down at the hands as if he had never seen them before. The room now consisted entirely of Clay Martin and his fingers, of Clay Martin and the act of cleaning glasses, which, for all intents and purposes, could take him all night. She backed out of the room, careful not to make any sudden movements.

She found herself in an alleyway, standing on a piece of sewer grating. Steam rose up around her. If Sam were dead already, she'd know. Her insides would know. Somewhere in the duodenum or the Golgi apparatus, there would be a flip of something very much resembling a light switch, complete with the words *on* and *off*. The switch, of course, would be from *on* to *off*, at which point everything would change. She began to walk, hands clenched in the pockets of her thin, useless jacket, the left arm of which bore the insignia of one of the old armies. It made her think of another time, of strength and purity, squinting men with big square chins, large hands, high ideals, maps and plans, the color green.

When she tripped she fell in the dirty gray slush, her chin scraped against the curb. Her left side was soaked through. For some reason that made her feel as if she should wait for someone to come along. After twenty seconds of paralytic stillness, during which time slowed and was punctuated by her deliberate, steaming breaths, she realized that no one would. She could wait there all night, the muck seeping deeper and deeper until it soaked through the skin and muscle and into the bone and cartilage and on to her internal organs. It could do that and still no one would come. Grudgingly, she lifted herself up; the rest of the walk home, she tried to hum all of the Christmas Carols she could remember. That was only seven.

Home looked the same as always, the yellow streamers still shouted CAUTION, DO NOT ENTER, the red ones, POLICE LINE, DO NOT CROSS. They shouted these things over and over, without beginning or end, so that the sentences bled together (*caution-do-not-enter-caution-do-not-enter*), (*police-line-do-not-cross-police-line-do-not-cross*). In parts, the red streamers said CROSS POLICE, and in parts, the yellow ones said ENTER CAUTION. They negated themselves through repetition, they were meaningless. She lit candles in the room she inhabited, out of which she had created a bedroom (a mattress) and kitchen (a coffee maker, some non-perishables.) The rest of the house remained as she found it. She had allowed herself one risk: an antique audio-tape-player/ radio. Of course the radio didn't work, but the tape player did. She had found it in a pile of rotting clothes and toys. She kept to one room of the slouching, burnt-out mock-Victorian; she could not bring herself through the doorways of the other rooms, or worse, up the steps to the second floor. The house was brimming with the ghosts of whoever had lived here before. They still had pictures on the wall, everything. She knew that there might have been valuables left behind somewhere, but she felt wrong about looking. It had been bad enough clearing this room (the living room) out, making the smell go away, covering the ugly wallpaper with old newspaper, anything so long as it wasn't theirs. Funny, then, that she was able to listen to the tapes: Mozart, Wagner, and Chopin. Their music belonged to a distant past—it was the scribbling of madmen with funny hair and fine clothes and no inkling that their music would be heard in this future, by this family. The Larsens: it said so on all their mail, scraps of which was spread all over the hallway. The pictures she tried not to look at were so beautifully normal, so remote. Soccer team, spelling bee, camping trip. It made her feel sick.

Moving slowly to a nocturne, she peeled off her clothes, feeling wretched and cold and unhappy. She slipped a nightshirt over her head. *I wish I had a picture of Sam. If I only had a picture, that would make him real. Now I have no proof that he ever existed.*

It was true. He had left no clothes (he only owned one pair) but he had taken his notebook, too, and that was what made her think he had known he was going away. But why wouldn't he have told her if he had known? It couldn't be possible that it was his way to leave the woman he supposedly loved...silently, and without warning. She sunk onto her mattress, breathed his smell as her face touched the pillow. *So that's still here.* But soon that, too, would be gone. She considered taking off the pillowcase and placing it in some kind of airtight container. Ten years from now, if she were still alive, she could sneak into the closet, crack open the container, inhale deeply, and Sam would be back.

Or maybe he would come back inside the month, and be changed, healthy, and clean. *But that's so ridiculous. Ever since you've known him, he's been a variation on waxy white: sometimes more yellow, sometimes more blue, sometimes green. He's always freezing, he's emaciated, there are big dark hollows where his eyes should be. He's the saddest thing you've ever seen. He needs you, terribly.*

She pulled the covers over her shoulder and rolled over, pulling her knees to her chest. She pictured her huddled form from outside the bed: an embryo. From across the room: a kitten. From down the hall: a potato bug. She pictured the outside of the house from across the street: a rotting carcass. From down the street: a doll's house. *Really, there is no one to talk to.* From a mile away: a speck of dirt. *No one at all.*

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"Every sentence I utter must be understood not as an affirmation, but as a question." Niels Bohr



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**DUEBER FAMILY STORES**  
*A Little Bit of the Best of Everything*

Wednesday on the bus.

By Klew

Wednesday was yet another uncharacteristically cool and gray summer day here in Portland...at least that's what I told myself as the number 14 bus pulled away from the curb. Actually, that's what I've told myself every cool, gray summer day for the last 25 years. I've lived in the Willamette Valley for a long time now, but some primitive part of me still remembers lurching around the Serengeti under the African sun, busily growing a larger brain case, twiddling newly opposable thumbs and learning how to walk on two legs without falling over. Humans evolved in warm places damn it, and, at 48, how did I end up living here in the damp of Oregon for longer than I haven't? The answer is, of course, that I like it here, for the most part, and I want to be near the people I love, many of who live hereabouts...and that's how that conversation always ends. In reality, sulking about the weather is just a game the curmudgeonly part of my personality likes to play, except for the days that the weather really annoys me. On those days, I can take "sulk" to new heights...or is that lows?

As the bus lumbered along, I stared out the window, another desk jockey disgorged from the glass and brick canyons of downtown heading over the river towards home and a cold beer. In the seats behind me, one of those parent-child conversations was unfolding. The topic's never really clear, but the structure of the dialogue was unmistakable. Man-child whines, "But Daaaaad..." You can hear the tension in Dad's jaw twisting the words: "That's not what your mom and I agreed to when I picked you up. Enough."

Yikes, maybe it's time to move. Traveling regularly on the bus, I've heard far too many conversations that start like this and go downhill really fast. Some days I hate mass transit.

At the next stop a crunch of commuters climbed on board, filling the bus. Damn!! I'd waited too long to make my escape. Behind me, the conversation had paused for a moment of stony, sullen silence; across the aisle, a newspaper rattled. "Hey, can I look at the sports page?" Dad's voice was full of relief...he'd probably heard somewhere that good parents should distract tired and whiney children rather than allowing the conversation to escalate into a quarrel. After all, it's past five — the kid's probably worn-out and hungry, just like everybody else on the bus. The newspaper owner rattled about a bit more before sharing, "Now, I'll want that back when I get off."

Well, I don't do the sports page except during baseball season. And baseball is why I remembered Wednesday's sports lead. At a news conference the day before, Cal Ripkin announced that he is leaving baseball after 18 years with the Baltimore Orioles. I remembered the article and the photo of Ripkin, blue-eyed and graying. But Dad didn't mention Cal. Instead, I heard the little crunchy noises of paper being folded against itself, and then Dad said, "Look, these are the box scores. Let's read 'em." And he slowly read through the scores with his son, picking various players to use in explaining the terms, the initials, the numbers. The kid must have been paying attention, because he asked good questions, the kind of questions people ask when they are interested but totally unfamiliar with what they are asking about.

They worked their way around the page, their voices fading into the background as I spaced out. I remembered my Mom listening to baseball games on the radio when I was a kid. Her eyes would move to follow the plays as she stirred something or other that was supposed to feed four but had to be stretched to feed seven. That woman still loves baseball with a fierce and determined passion.

With such a mother, you'd think I would have been a baseball fan from the get-go, but it wasn't until I moved to Eugene, and started watching the local farm team play in one of the loveliest civic stadiums in the country, that I grew to love the game. It was an old-fashioned baseball stadium, with a wooden shell arching over the bleachers along the first and third baselines. A ten-foot plywood wall covered with advertisements from local sponsors kept the long grounders that sneak through the holes in the outfielders' gloves from rolling on into Amazon Creek and floating off to new adventures. When you sat in the stands with a cold Rainer in your hand, looking out over home plate towards the Cascade foothills, the warm golden light of an Oregon afternoon spilling across the field, shimmering in the dust raised by a slide into second base...well, life was very, very good. And the fact that the Ems rarely won never mattered; I was raised to root for the home team, and root I did.

Dad finished up the baseball lecture, unfolding and refolding the paper, getting ready to hand it back. He said, "Now look at this...Cal Ripkin is retiring. This man is a great ballplayer, a great human being." The kid said, "Yeah, he was in the box scores, huh Dad."

God, I love mass transit.

**"Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts,  
perhaps the fear of a loss of power."**  
John Steinbeck

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