

## *The Last Block Party*

BUD JOHNSON

The sun is setting over the deserted soccer field near the burial mound. The park is quieting down. The old man sits on the mound as an occasional jogger or cyclist in vivid Lycra passes on the bike path. The old man is nursing a beer and watching his world go up in smoke from barbecue grills two blocks away.

He puts down his cup. He digs into his pants pocket and pulls out a gold ring. He slips it easily on his bony finger. He holds it up to the fading light for a minute or two. He scrapes the ground with a plastic spoon left on the grass as a picnic souvenir...

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The old man didn't want to go to the block party in the first place. No, he kept saying, I'm not going. He was too busy, with the help of Elizabeth, going through his things, deciding which few to keep, which ones to consign to the garbage cart or to a garage sale of old memories before moving from the house where he had lived for half a century.

But the blond young wives trailing blond young children kept coming one after another to offer a personal invitation, and would not take his no for an answer. His son and daughter, the one in California, the other in North Carolina, declared in their weekly duty calls that he really should go; it would be a nice way to say good-bye to the old neighborhood.

Even Elizabeth, who was more than a cleaning lady since she not only took care of the house but also more or less took care of him,

urged him to go. "I'll be there with my two grandbabies," she said. "I'll feel funny if you're not there. What will people think if you stay holed up like a mole?"

All right, he said, he would make an appearance, but he really didn't belong. All the neighbors he really cared about had either died or moved away years ago, and all these new people were no more than nodding acquaintances.

That Sunday afternoon the lawn chairs, picnic tables, and grills were set up, a volleyball net stretched across the street, the beer began to flow from a tap, and the children were groping in the icy waters of a cooler for soft drinks. Then Elizabeth arrived from the bus stop, sent her grandsons, Brad and Marvin, to ring the old man's doorbell, and he finally emerged wearing a straw hat and leaning on his cane. All the neighbors clapped their hands and cheered as big, fleshy Elizabeth escorted him, barely reaching her shoulder, to a webbed chair near the pony of beer. She seated him there and brought him a plastic cup frothy with foam,

Singly and in pairs the neighbors came over to say hello and how sorry they were that he was leaving and to wish him well at Camelot Court, where they were sure he would be very happy, not that he was really old at eighty-one, but a retirement complex would relieve him of the worries of home ownership. Besides there would be a lot of people his own age as well as health professionals if they were ever needed.

"Camelot Court," he laughed, "a geezer ghetto. If King Arthur's there, he probably has Alzheimer's." The neighbors smiled at this but also seemed to think it sad. Did they sense that perhaps he himself was becoming a bit fuzzy-minded?

Someone asked him when he had moved on the block and he said it was fifty-five years earlier, a few years after he got out of the army in World War II, and he remembered block parties going back to the beginning. “Then we had more games, more music, more dancing,” he said, then looked pensive, “or maybe it was just that I used to have younger feet.”

Elizabeth laughed, “You’re still young, Mr. Sanders,” and ran over to take care of Brad who was crying after falling from a skateboard and skinning his knee. The other children were gathering around, comforting him, and Elizabeth told him it would be all right and took him into the old man’s house for a band aid.

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With Elizabeth gone the old man felt alone, for now the conversations were drifting away, not that anyone was rude, but people had run out of things to say to him and he had run out of things to say to them. The neighbors were now talking to each other about things that were no longer a part of his world – charter schools, block watches, a weirdo in the park exposing himself to children, computer software, Web sites, and the comparative merits of their SUVs; about investments the old man didn’t understand, politicians he didn’t recognize, bands and singers he had never heard of, restaurants he didn’t know, even diseases that were new to him.

He felt he was in a strange land where the only familiar voice he recognized was Louis Armstrong’s coming from the stereo in the upstairs window of one of the houses, a recording no doubt selected as a concession to the old man’s likely old-time musical tastes.

They were nice young people, he guessed, even if they lived in an

alien world, and he nodded to them each time he shuffled down the street, leaning on his cane for his ritual daily walk – only three blocks nowadays; a few years back it had been three miles. In the summer, he exchanged greetings with the young mothers and fathers sitting on their porches or lawns, and sometimes stopped to marvel at the going newest arrival in one of the young households. But he could never remember their names.

He knew only the exteriors of their homes – ivy-covered Tudors, colonials with white columns, Georgian brick, Victorian frames with cupolas, all roomy and heavily mortgaged, all built in the beginning decades of the 20th century with attic quarters for a live-in young maid fresh from Ireland or Germany – but knew nothing of their interior decor or how their occupants lived. There had been a time when he knew the interiors as well as he knew his own home, when he and his wife regularly attended parties in the various homes and entertained their neighbors in turn, when his children ran with all the other children on the block who looked upon the street and all the lawns as one big playground, and when the families would gather in the park two blocks away for picnics in the summer or ice skating in the winter.

More and more these days the old man thought of the prehistoric burial mound in the park, older than the neighborhood, indeed, older than America itself, having been here long before Columbus. A copper plaque, now green with age, placed on the mound in 1909 by a local archeological society, said it was the site of a Stone Age village. After a visit to the library, his wife said no one knew much for certain about the Mound Builders, but it seemed they had arrived

after the retreat of the Great Glacier 10,000 years ago, and, according to the books, the glacier would return in another million years, more or less.

He had often thought of those ancient bones presiding over the ebb of glacial ice and the return of vegetation, tribal wars, European exploration and settlement, and the building of the city, and now at rest in a mature urban neighborhood where the buses rumbled just a few feet away, and the thunder of jets shook the earth on their descent to the airport on the outskirts of town. In the midst of constant change, only the Neolithic Mound Builders remained the same, and would no doubt still be there when the site was once again under a mile of ice.

He thought of a summer night when he and his wife sneaked out of the house after drinking a bottle of burgundy, walked to the park and made love on the mound, and then joked that they hoped the Mound Builders were not shocked. That was when it was safe to walk out at night without a police escort, in a world that had vanished like the Stone Age village. The bones of the dead of that world were scattered, not gathered in one place like those of the Mound Builders. Now more and more on his walks he found himself resting on the burial mound, and thinking those inside were the only people in the neighborhood who had been there as long as he and would still be there after he was gone.

“Miss me?” Elizabeth laughed as she came back, and then her face showed alarm when he looked startled by her voice. “Why, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing!” he said, “guess my mind was someplace else.”

Hearing their words, the neighbors became aware once more of his presence and tried to make conversation, asking about his children – the psychologist and the accountant – and he said they were fine although his daughter was going through a divorce, and they asked about grandchildren, and he said there were three so far, two girls and a boy, and what did he do before he retired and he told them he was a dentist, and then one of them asked about cosmetic dentistry, and he said he had been out of it so long, he really did not have an opinion on that. One of the men offered him another cup of beer and said the bratwurst would be ready soon, and he took the beer and said thanks but no brats, he was not hungry. Then Elizabeth was pulled away by Marvin to look at his chalk drawing on the sidewalk, and he was alone again.

Suddenly he felt tired, like he felt so often nowadays, and while the talk around him became a drone his head drooped, he dozed, and he dreamed. He saw a kaleidoscope of images, flitting fantasms of past and present. Now an attractive patient in his dentist chair whom he recognized but he could not remember her name. Now listening to his daughter at the piano at a school recital. Now playing volleyball with his son and others at a long ago block party where later in the evening they listened under the street lights to Mozart played by a visiting Polish string quartet. Then a quick cut to his wedding and he and his lovely bride were exchanging rings, one ring buried with her as death did them part, the other in his pocket where he kept it after his finger shrank so he could no longer wear it securely.

And as so often it happened when he nodded off, the images in his head gradually merged with the world outside so that it was difficult

to determine the boundary, for here were the Mound Builders – much as his children had described them from their picture books – hairy men dressed in animal skins, their women with bare breasts daubed with ochre, accompanied by naked children – standing on the sidewalk at the end of the block and waving to him. He was faintly aware of the background chatter around him – “So I said to Vivian, ‘I don’t tell you how to raise your children, don’t you tell me how to raise mine.’” – “Let me tell you about this great Web site I found.” – “We’ve run into a wonderful time share deal in Utah.” – and was surprised no one had noticed the visitors to the block party. Then he realized the Mound Builders were not waving, they were beckoning, and he was the only one who was aware of it.

Fingering the ring in his pocket, he got up and shuffled down the street, and everyone kept talking; no one missed him. Now that he was on the way, the Mound Builders turned and headed towards the park, looking back now and then to see if he was following. They took no heed of the traffic as they crossed a busy parkway, somehow the cars seemed to flow around them, but as the old man tried to cross, brakes screeched, horns blew, and he barely escaped being hit. He followed the Mound Builders until he saw them give a farewell wave as they faded into the burial mound where he could not go.

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The old man scrapes the earth until he has dug a hole. Again he lifts the hand wearing the wedding ring, watches it glitter in the waning sun. He slowly takes it off his finger. He buries it in the mound, and gently pats down the earth.

“This belongs here in our world,” he whispers to the old bones below.

He sits there with his beer and watches with moist eyes the fumes still rising from the grills like smoke signals. Elizabeth arrives. She is hurrying and huffing. Her two grandsons run over to a nearby set of swings and sliding board to play.

“I knew I’d find you here,” she says. “You had me scared.” She notices his tears. She sits beside him and cradles him in her soft arms. “Oh,” she says, “I know how you feel, Mr. Sanders, but you’re not going be alone. I’ll come see you all the time. Just you wait and see.”

The old man feels the chill of the returning glacier. He shivers in her arms. □