

1941

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George Snell

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### Recommended Citation

Snell, George. "A House Cannot Stand." *New Mexico Quarterly* 11, 3 (1941). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol11/iss3/32>

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## A HOUSE CANNOT STAND

*George Snell*

**T**HE SHADOWS began to spread along the street as Harry walked toward town. The neon lights were all on, and the after-dinner crowds were going to movies, or window shopping, or just coming downtown to pass the time before going to bed. It was about eight o'clock, and the traffic had not reached its height in the streets. Harry walked slowly because he didn't want to get there in the middle of the feature.

It was pretty interesting, all right, to watch the people. There certainly were all kinds of people in the world. For instance, look at that poor old woman coming along the sidewalk. She looked as if she could hardly stand up on account of her feet hurting her. She hobbled along, carrying a mesh market bag full of kindling wood, and she had cut her shoes all to pieces so that her bunions could bulge out freely.

Or for instance, look at this old man barely moving, he was so old or something. It took him a long time to take a step, probably because he was paralyzed; but he was dressed up fit to kill, with a high white collar that looked like it was going to choke him, a straw hat, and a big red carnation in his lapel. Yes, and when you looked into his face you could see he was old all right, but he certainly was keeping a stiff upper lip. Harry felt a warm feeling for the old man and exchanged a courteous smile with him.

But of course it was more interesting to look at the girls, although there weren't so many of them on the street right now, and what few there were hanging on the arm of some fellow, going to a show, or a dance maybe. If only he had a girl hanging on his arm right now he would be a lot happier. Especially if it was a good-looking girl, like this one walking ahead of him, and if he wasn't so embarrassed when a girl was around.

He looked enviously at this girl's pretty legs, and he could see her heels exposed in the kind of shoes she was wearing, and it was easy to imagine that her foot if it had no stocking on would be little and white and smooth. His eye travelled up from her heels to her hips and watched how they moved slightly from side to side as she walked, and he could even see the faint outline of something she wore under the sheer dress: two faint lines converging down the round buttocks; probably a pair of panties or something. It made him feel extremely exhilarated for some reason, and restless, when he saw something like that.

But then the girl and the fellow turned off and went into a brightly lit alcove of a store to look into windows. Harry walked on, heaving a slight sigh.

He thought enviously he would be quite embarrassed to be walking with a girl, though. These fellows didn't seem to be embarrassed; instead they acted as if they owned the whole world; and they laughed and kidded with the girls just as if it was nothing at all. He wished he could do that; but girls certainly made him feel funny. It was a mystery how these fellows could go right ahead and talk and act around girls just as if they were anybody else.

Now for example, some fellows even boasted that they went to whore houses. How anybody could do that was beyond him. In the first place it was a sin to do things like that, and in the second it was dangerous and you couldn't tell what might happen to you. Anybody who respected women wouldn't do such a thing, that was certain all right. He would never, until he someday got married and had a beautiful wife who would be on a pedestal, and he would be able to go to her as clean and innocent as she would be when she came to him.

He allowed himself to dream of what his wife would be like and how it would be to have a wife; but he couldn't at all crystallize the matter. There were more and more people on the street now, and he was getting close to the theatre section. There were beer parlors and cocktail lounges along the street, and already they were beginning to attract customers. Harry glanced in through the doors as he passed and he could see men and women sitting at the bars with glasses in their hands and hear the laughter of the women, high and brittle. It made him feel uneasy and strange, like the sight of a girl's slim heels.

It was a subject he had thought a great deal about; in fact, it was the most absorbing matter he had ever encountered, and it was in his

mind a lot. Girls were so different from anything else. There were so many different kinds of them too; and they were so dangerous, especially the kind that sat in places like this and drank. If they got hold of you you had better watch out. Such girls, or women, would like nothing better than to get hold of a clean young man and try to debauch him. That was plain enough from what he had read and what his mother had told him often enough. It made you a little scared of them when you realized what they could do to you if they got you in their clutches.

Harry thought of his mother sitting home and wished he had asked her to go to the show with him, but she wouldn't have anyway because she would never go anywhere, and his father would not be home yet from work. It was too bad his father had to put in such long hours and that his mother wouldn't ever go out. His mother certainly wasn't like any of the women in these places. He tried to imagine what she had been like when she was a young girl, but he couldn't even imagine it. Probably she was awfully serious and the kind who stayed in the house and was interested in cooking and sewing and stuff like that, being so stern and all.

His eyes fell on another girl walking ahead of him, and he tried to imagine what she was like. She was older than the other, the one with the slim heels and the sleek buttocks, but she was even more interesting to watch. Look at the way she switched her hips, and she had such high heels he couldn't see how she could stand up. As she walked her heels clicked on the cement. She had red hair. He noticed that she even brushed the man walking with her with her hip, and she was doing it on purpose, sometimes leaning toward him as they walked.

There seemed to be something familiar about the man. He wasn't a young fellow by any means, and he walked with a heavy tread. The man's back looked almost like father. Harry speeded up a little and his eyes were jumping out of his head. Now that he looked, it couldn't be anybody but father.

As soon as he decided that, he stopped trying to catch up. It was only eight-fifteen, and father worked until ten. He couldn't understand how his father could be here, walking along with a girl or woman at this time of night. Maybe she was somebody from the office, though, or something like that. He wondered where they could be going. He felt a little foolish and guilty to be walking along behind them, and them not knowing they were being watched.

He couldn't help looking closely at the girl, more than ever now because it was father she was walking with. He wished he could see her face, but she would have to have a pretty face to have such a good-looking back. It was the best-looking back he had ever seen, including her hips and her legs. Her dress was high and when she walked he could even see the smooth inside of her knee and the little swell under the silk stocking of muscle behind her knee. His father didn't seem to be talking, but the girl was, and she suddenly turned her face toward his father, and Harry could see her profile.

It was certainly pretty, all right, and she had red cheeks, he could see even from where he was; they were rouged about like some of the girls you see coming out of the stage door at the Rialto. And she was clinging to his father's arm, and suddenly reached over and sort of hugged him.

That was a shock to Harry. Now he didn't believe she was from the office, or if she was it was certainly a funny way to act. He began to feel nervous about following them. He couldn't believe his eyes when his father's hand strayed back and patted the girl's rump. He tried to think that it wasn't his father after all; and maybe it wasn't; maybe it was his double. After all there are such things as doubles. Harry began to walk faster quite boldly, and in a moment was almost treading on their heels. He heard the man laugh. It was his father's laugh beyond any doubt, and Harry immediately fell back.

In all his life he had never seen his father with any woman but his mother; he couldn't remember any time. This was an awful thing, he was beginning to think, as he kept following them at a respectful distance.

He began to think of all the terrible meanings, wondering if mother knew of this, and asking his father under his breath: what are you doing, I can't understand. His heart was beginning to beat heavily against his ribs.

Just then they turned into a place. When Harry came up to the doorway he saw it was a beer parlor. He hesitated outside; he had only once been in such a place. But he decided to go in; he was very curious yet awed. He wanted to know what his father was doing with a woman. He wanted to see the woman's face clearly, and to see his father's face. Then he would know what his father was doing perhaps.

He pushed open the screen door and walked in cautiously. His

eyes took in the length of the bar and saw that his parent was not sitting there. He sauntered to the bar and leaned his elbow on it self-consciously, feeling the half dollar in his pocket that he had been going to buy his show ticket with. Looking along the booths he saw the woman sitting in one, and his father's shoulder was visible, with his back turned toward him.

He was afraid to look squarely at the booth, and he turned his head away but kept his eye on the booth. She was a good-looking girl or woman, all right. She had plenty of makeup on, and her hair was red. She was smoking a cigarette now, holding it in one corner of her small scarlet mouth and talking out of the other corner. She was pulling off her black lace gloves, and his father was giving an order to a waitress.

The bartender asked him what he would have. Harry asked for a glass of beer, and the bartender said he looked pretty young, bud. Harry said he was nineteen and knew he would get away with it because he did look three or four years older than he was.

He tried to make the beer last a long time, and that was easy because he didn't like the stuff anyway. He watched how the girl or woman drank her cocktail, and set the glass down empty after just putting it once to her mouth.

As he was lifting his glass again his father suddenly thrust his head out of the booth and called the waitress. Harry ducked his face away. It was his father, all right. And he looked different, too. His eyes were bright and watery looking, and his face was redder than usual, as if he was hot. His voice even sounded different, more bossy and bragging or something. It was too loud.

After they had had two more cocktails the girl or woman began to talk loud and to laugh quite a bit. She giggled, and Harry could see her white teeth and her tongue in her mouth when she laughed. She would look at his father in a most peculiar way as if she wasn't at all afraid of him.

Harry felt very bad. He didn't feel like going to a movie now, and besides he didn't have enough to get into the Rialto even in nigger heaven. The beer made him feel sick also. He tried to think of what his mother would say if she knew this about his father. He still could hardly believe all this was happening. That didn't seem like his father sitting back there, where he could hear his low rumbling voice and the tittering of the red-headed girl or woman.

He saw the girl get up, lurching; and he quickly put the beer glass down and walked out. He went up the street a short distance and turned to look into a jeweler's window, waiting for them to come out. His tongue felt thick and his stomach was sick.

When they came out, his father had his arm around the girl's waist; and she was leaning on him. They were both talking and laughing. That made Harry feel worse than ever. His father's face was redder than he had ever seen it.

He thought the girl might stumble and fall as she continued to lean on his father and they went down the street to the corner and turned. As soon as they turned Harry hurried after them. You never could tell what mischief a woman such as that might get a man into. It was too bad his father didn't know better. He felt he ought to keep an eye on them now; and he was still feeling bad because he knew himself that his father did know better.

Around the corner about half a block he saw the two enter a doorway. Over it hung a sign that said Rooms 50c-\$1-\$2. They stood in the doorway for a few moments, and Harry scrouged himself against a wall so they wouldn't notice him. He saw his father pulling on the girl's arm. She didn't seem to want to go in. His father was coaxing her and pulling her. Pretty soon she shrugged and let him pull her in. Then he couldn't see them any more.

Harry walked on and stood before the entrance for a little while, looking at the warped steps of the staircase, leading up. Nobody was there but he could almost see the red-headed girl's or woman's red mouth and made up face, and he felt like slapping it with all his might.

Without any money he couldn't go to the show, so Harry just walked around for a while and then went home. His mother was sitting there sewing, and she asked what was the matter. He said they changed the bill and the picture wasn't there he wanted to see. He looked at her off and on the rest of the evening trying to read but mostly just thinking about everything. Then about eleven the back screen door opened, and Mother glanced up in that quick, sniffing way she had. Harry's eyes turned to the kitchen too. His father came in grinning. He didn't look red-faced now, but he smelled like beer or whiskey.

"I had a few drinks with the boys after we got through," he said before Mother said anything.

"I could smell it," his mother said, sniffing.

"Well, we were so tired out we wanted just one to pep us up before going home." He threw his hat on the couch. "Hello, Harry," he said.

Harry said hello, and couldn't look in his father's eyes. In a flash he remembered that lots of evenings were like this.

"Well, what you been doing?" his father said to him.

Harry kept his eyes averted.

"He was going to a show, but they changed the bill," his mother said. "We just spent a quiet evening."

"Ah," his father said, "don't I wish I could do that. But no, I have to work every night."

His mother sighed and said nothing.

His father came over and gave his mother a kiss. "I'm so worn out I guess I'll go right to bed," he said.

"Poor dear," his mother said. "I don't think a drink does you any good."

His father shrugged. "Well, goodnight, son," he said.

Harry turned away.

His father looked surprised. "What's the matter with him?" he asked Mother.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she said.

"Nothing's the matter," Harry muttered. He got up and walked out of the room, and he could hear his father saying something about even his son turning against him in this house.