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And How Do You Cope?
Charlotte McCown, 3rd Place
Short Story

I've got something I want to tell you before I go to bed. It's not a real big deal, but it's been bothering the hell out of me. See, I never really went to bars much until I got shipped off to this school for girls. We used to hang out at all the local bars, the really disgusting ones. We couldn't afford the others.

I don't go to that school anymore because it wasn't anything but an oversized Girl Scout camp. But I do miss the bars. I didn't know that until tonight. At least, I didn't know why. See, I never used to have a good time at all those places. I told myself I did, but I didn't. But tonight was different. That's what I want to tell you about.

Barbie called me around eight o'clock and asked me to go to this bar with her and some other girls. I really didn't have any money, but I went anyway. I always do. I figured it would be pretty much like those nights at Carson with Ashley and the girls.

This place we went to—The Windmill, they call it—was a perfect replica of all those familiar, old places. This place had it all. I mean, it really was like being at Carson again. Until I finally came to grips with the situation, that is.

There were only three of us that ended up going. It was me and Barbie and Katie. When we pulled into the parking lot, I was really starting to regret that I had come. There were about fifteen guys just hanging

around at the door and I was kind of scared to get out of the car. I mean, in Bilington, the guys could kind of tell that we were Carson girls and they pretty much left us alone. It was like having a lethal weapon or something, just being from Carson. But these guys tonight, man, I didn't trust them. They looked like a herd of dangerous buffalo.

"What the hell is wrong with you tonight, anyway?" Katie asked me when I voiced my opinion. "You act like you're paranoid or something."

"I am. This place is disgusting. Just look at it. The building looks like it ought to be condemned—if it isn't already."

Thank God for Barbie. Barbie to the rescue. "Ah, come on, Kinsley. Since when did a building stop you from having a good time? Honest, it isn't that bad once you get inside. The bathroom leaves a little to be desired, but the band is actually decent and the beer is cold enough to drink. Come on. You can't pass that up, can you? You never have before."

"I guess not, but I'm not sure I can handle walking in front of all those guys. I feel like some kind of specimen or something with all those eyes on me. Don't they bother you at all?" I looked from one to the other. They really didn't seem the least bit fazed. All I could think of was being appraised from head to toe, not to mention the verbal abuse. Maybe my ego could get off on it, but I couldn't.

"If you're not out of that back seat by the time I count to three, Katie and I are going in without you and you can just sit in the car and freeze." Barbie lifted the seat up and started counting.

"All right, all right. But only if you'll buy my first beer."

"Like hell I will! Who drove, anyway?" Barbie always drove, but only because she didn't trust anyone else's driving. And besides, we always paid for the gas.

The guy at the door was great. He carded me. You know how long it's been since I've been carded. Since I was seventeen. I wasn't really offended, but I faked it anyway. I gave him my driver's license with deliberate exasperation. He looked at it like it wasn't mine. I did get mad then.

"Look," I said, "people change. I mean, really, look at the freckles, for God's sake. Look at my big nose and fat cheeks. Just because I don't still have braces and my hair has decided to grow doesn't mean it isn't me. This picture is three years old!"

"Easy, kid. I believe you, but you don't really look twenty years old. Face it. You've got a baby face, but I reckon you're lookin' all right tonight. Give me your hand." He grabbed my right hand and slapped a red dot the size of a quarter across the back of it. I guess I must

How Do You Cope (continued)

have looked pretty confused, though, because he told me I had to have a stamp to go in and out without paying each time. I mean, really, it was degrading as hell. He may have believed I was twenty, but he sure wasn't convinced that I was not a rookie at bar-hopping.

Kate and Barb were already inside screening the crowd by the time I finished this little ordeal.

"Talk about big time harassment," I said.

"Kent's a pretty nice guy, really. He's just afraid of getting busted and a new face makes him nervous. But he did let you in free, didn't he?" Barbie asked.

"Yeah, but look what I had to go through. I'd almost rather have forked out the three bucks. My God, I can't take that kind of humiliation very often. It sends me into deep depression."

Katie led the way to a table in the middle of the room. Ashley used to always do that. I always felt like I was making a spectacle of myself parading around in front of all those people to get to my chair.

The tables were really classic. Just like the typical Bilington bar. They were your basic folding type tables with the common red tablecloths blotched with cigarette burns and stains from God only knows what. But the chairs were even better. They were metal and about as warm as a block of ice. But I guess you can't expect too much from a place like that. I suppose I ought to be thankful they even had tables. I've been to bars where they only had stools lined up against the counter and never more than two seats available right next to each other.

The owner of this place must not believe in waitresses. Katie went for the first round. Meanwhile, I took the liberty of checking the place out. It was definitely a third-rate bar. It was Bilington all over again. The place kind of reminded me of a theater. There were these tacky curtains hanging from the ceiling to the floor just like in a theater. They were red and black, like the tablecloths. God, what color coordination. And what originality. I mean, really, how common can you get?

"What do you think of the band?" Katie asked as she handed me a beer. She had this girlish expression on her face like she'd be really offended if I was anything less than ecstatic.

"It's all right, I guess, but I don't recognize this song. What is it, anyway?" It sounded like something you might hear if you ventured into the depths of Africa and discovered a lost tribe in the midst of a ritual.

"Oh, I don't know, really, but it's something the lead singer wrote. They do a lot of their own stuff in the first set, especially if the crowd's good."

"Yeah, Kinsley, the lead singer's really terrific, man. You missed it last night," Barbie said. "Katie and I were just sitting here talking to this guy and all of a

sudden he moons the audience. Not the guy we were talking to. The guy in the band. I'm not kidding. It was a riot. The whole place went up in smoke."

"I'm glad I missed it, thank you. I really don't get into that kind of stuff. Maybe I have an inferiority complex or something, but I think it's disgusting."

"Ah, Kinsley, you're no fun anymore," Katie said. "Barbie's right. It was funny as hell. You would have thought so, too, if you'd been here."

"I rather doubt it, my dear, but who knows? Maybe I'll get lucky. Maybe he'll do it again." If he had, I think I probably would've curled up and died.

I guess we'd been sitting there all of about fifteen minutes when we got approached. Katie was really going for it. She reminded me of Ashley. Ashley always went for it, too. The way Katie was talking to this guy, you'd have thought he was her best friend. I just couldn't get into that. If a strange guy ever came up to me in Bilington, I got all defensive and tried to act like I didn't know he was talking to me. I thought I would die when she got up and danced with him.

Barbie moved her chair a little closer to mine and attempted to have a conversation. I could barely hear her over all the racket.

"Are you having a good time?" she asked. Barbie always wants to know if I'm having a good time. It's like she feels responsible or something.

"It's been all right so far, I guess." I lied. I was anything but enthusiastic. I had that same old feeling I got when I went out with the girls at Carson. I was having a very run-of-the-mill time and nothing especially exciting was happening to me.

"Good grief, Kinsley, can't you just relax? This place is really great if you would just loosen up and play the game. The people are not the greatest, I'll admit, but they're the best people in the world to party with. Nobody says you have to find a husband here. Just find you some guy to dance with and let him buy you a couple of beers; then go for someone else." Barbie always had good advice. She's always looking for a freebie.

"Barbie, I can't just take some guy for a free ride and then ditch him. People have feelings, you know. I'd be afraid he'd get offended and decide to do something crazy and gun me down when I walk out the door. You never can tell about people like these."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're making yourself miserable. I'm telling you. If you'd just relax and get into the atmosphere a little, you'd have a better time."

We sat in silence for about five minutes when Barbie announced she was going to buy a beer. As usual, I got stuck with the purses and coats. And, as usual, Barbie got stuck talking to some guy that looked like he was probably a jerk. I always got left by myself

when I went with Ashley and the girls. They always found someone to talk to. I always found someone to watch, but that gets old after a while.

The band decided to go on a break after what seemed like an eternity. I had to go to the bathroom pretty seriously—beer does that to me—and I tried to catch Katie's attention.

"Hey, Katie," I yelled, as she and this goon were leaving the dance floor. "Would you mind playing babysitter for a while and let me go to the Ladies' Powder Room? I'm just about to float away." I really felt like I was, too.

"Kinsley, why don't you get up and dance? You don't have to sit here with this stuff. Nobody's going to bother anything." Katie has a lot of faith in people. She really is like a little kid.

"Katie, I can't just get up and dance with some guy I've never even seen before. I wouldn't have anything to say to him. That might be a little awkward, don't you think?"

"Look at me, you fool! Look at Barbie. We don't know these people any better than you do, but it doesn't matter. What are the odds you'll ever even see them again? I mean, really, Kinsley, get off your ass and do something. You're nuts to just sit there like a bump on a log and stare at the goddam band. The band's making music. They're making music for the crowd to enjoy, and you're just as much a part of the crowd as anyone else here. How can you enjoy the music if you don't dance to it?" Boy, Katie really tore into me. Calm Katie gave me the lecture of my life. She beat the hell out of any speech my parents can deliver.

I'm not sure exactly how it happened because Katie put me into a sort of state of shock. All I know is that I was dancing with a blond guy with buck teeth when the band came back from break. It was like being in another orb or something. I felt so different, looking at the crowd from the middle of the room. I felt different, being the one who was dancing and watching those who weren't. I felt like a part of what was going on and I think I liked it. I think I even liked the guy I danced with. I think I appreciated what Katie did—after the fact, of course. But what I really liked was tearing down that invisible wall between me and the real world. Between me and what I thought were common folks. You know, common folks are people, too, and people are individuals. I mean, tonight, I climbed down from the top of the totem pole that I always perched on and I think I learned how to relate to people. I learned how to try, at least. □