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MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*

GERALD ADAMS, *Art Director*

JOE SHORE, *Advertising Rep.*

JOHN UNDERWOOD, *Editor*

J. PROSKE, *Associate Editor*

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Sheldon felt nothing but hatred for the everlasting sameness of things but now, tonight, he was finally going to get...



A LITTLE VARIETY

BY
RICHARD
HARDWICK

IT WAS the everlasting sameness, that was what got under Everett Sheldon's skin. He looked across Purvis' shoulder and out through the windshield. The Sherwood Forest subdivision spread out for miles, like a great cancerous thing that had grown up out of the earth complete with its wide asphalt streets, its new black power holes, granite curbs, and its houses. It was the houses that really got Sheldon. They were—with the exception of a few details—exactly alike. Little boxes packed with tiny rooms, distinguished by the angle of a television aerial, or by a tree in the yard, though that was rare. The colors were really the best way of dis-

tinguishing one from another. They were pink, blue, off-white, tan, and green, and apparently the builders had gone to some pains to insure that no house was the same color as either of its neighbors.

"Just look at them!" Sheldon snorted. "A bunch of Easter eggs!"

"What's eating you?" Purvis said. They were in Purvis' car because it was Tuesday and with six in the car pool each man had the same day each week. Tuesday was Purvis' day.

"Nothing's eating me." He hadn't expected a jerk like Purvis to see it.

Eckert turned and grinned at the men in the back seat. "Maybe Sheldon's afraid he'll get in the wrong house some night!"

"By God, that wouldn't be a bad ideal!" Sheldon said, thinking of Pearl. He was damned tired of Pearl. As tired of her as he was of everything else. What he wanted was variety, a release from the same, every-day monotony.

He felt Eckert grinning at him and he turned and gazed out the window at the houses as the car went along the street. In succession, Purvis dropped Perkins, Peeler, Lacy, and then Eckert. Eckert's house was pink, the same as Sheldon's, but there was a tree in the front yard. Maybe that was why they called the place Sherwood Forest, Sheldon reasoned, because one lot in twenty had a scrawny tree on it.

The next stop was for Sheldon.

"Your day tomorrow, Sheldon," Purvis said.

"Christ! I know when it's my day!"

Purvis shrugged and drove away. Sheldon went across the weed-grown yard and in the front door of his house.

"That you, Ev?" Pearl said from the kitchen. In a couple of seconds, after getting no reply, she came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. Sheldon was standing just inside the front door, his lunch pail hanging from one hand. "Ev?" she said, "why didn't you answer?"

"Just who the hell comes in the front door at six o'clock every day? Santa Claus?" He dropped the pail on a chair and stalked into the bedroom. He opened the tiny closet and picked up his boots from beside the double-barrelled shotgun propped in the corner. For the first time that day, a faint smile stole over his face. He sat down on the edge of the bed and took off his work shoes, slipping his feet into the boots. The leather was soft and expensive. The boots did not lace, but fit snugly about his feet and had open tops. He stood and took a couple of steps in each direction across the room, then hitched his trousers up so that the cuffs fell into the open tops of the boots with just the right amount of casualness. He turned each foot, adjusting the trousers till they were perfect, then he went into the kitchen. He felt better with the boots on. There was something now

that separated him from the others. It was his mark of individuality.

"How about a beer?" he said.

"I—I don't think there is any." She stirred something in a bowl, not looking at him.

He stiffened. "*Ain't* any!" He jerked open the refrigerator and peered inside. He moved a few dishes roughly, then slammed the door. "Where the hell did it get to!"

She looked at him quickly. "A couple of the girls came over. Emma and Betty—and, well, we *drank* them."

"You and your goddam friends—" he took a step toward her and she drew back.

"Hear somebody mention my name?"

Sheldon halted and looked toward the back door. Emma Eckert stood there outside the screen. He laughed and went to the door.

"Well, well, if it ain't the little bride!" He opened the door and she stepped inside. As she passed him he let his eyes wander down her body. He wondered if Eckert appreciated what he had there.

"Could you lend me a little coffee, honey," he heard her saying to Pearl. "This is Chip's poker night and he says he can't stay awake without at least three cups with his supper."

"Ain't used to staying up late, is he," Sheldon grinned. The Eckerts had been married only two months.

Emma laughed. "Sorry we drank up your beer, Ev. If I'd thought

about it I could have brought a couple from the house with me. We've got a few in the box."

"Don't worry about it. I was going out to get some." He rubbed his hands together. "Anyhow, just look where that beer went!"

Emma ran her hands down the sides of her dress, laughing as she did so. Pearl looked away.

Sheldon waited till Emma had gotten the coffee and gone, watching her as she walked across the four backyards separating Eckert's house from his own, then he went out and got in the car and drove to the store. He brought back two cartons of cold beer. He finished one in the car before he got home and opened another before he put the rest of them in the refrigerator.

Pearl had supper ready, but when she saw him open the beer she put his plate in the oven without saying anything to him. She sat down at the kitchen table and began to eat her own supper.

Sheldon went out on the front stoop and took a deep swallow from the beer can. He sat down on the step and began to think. It was almost dusk, and he looked both ways down the street at the houses stretching away as far as he could see. If there was only something different about his, he would be satisfied. But there wasn't and there wasn't a thing he could do to make it different. At least, not different enough.

He looked down at his boots and

adjusted his trousers again, then he picked up the beer can and finished the beer. He went inside and got another can from the refrigerator.

"Do you have to sit out front and drink?" Pearl asked him. "It—the neighbors—"

"To hell with the neighbors!" he snapped and went back out on the front stoop. He thought about Emma Eckert, about the way her dress seemed molded to her body when she had come into the kitchen. He was certain she hadn't had anything on underneath it. Now there was a woman who was different! A lot of the stuck-up dames around the neighborhood would have blown their tops if he'd talked to them the way he talked to Emma, about Eckert going to bed early and things like that. But not Emma. She was different.

Sheldon looked down the street toward the Eckert's house. Chip Eckert was walking across the yard in the near darkness. He got in the car and backed out into the street and Sheldon remembered that Emma had said he was playing poker tonight. For no reason a little thrill of excitement ran through him. He went in the house for another beer.

Pearl had finished eating and was in the utility room ironing. He could smell the damp, hot cloth odor when he went into the kitchen. The clothes basket was almost full. She'd be at it for some time.

He drank his beer fast, and when

he had finished it, he went out the front door and down the street toward the Eckerts' house. There was nothing unusual about a man walking down the street, and even if someone saw him and wondered about it, they could go to hell.

He looked down, but it was too dark to see if his pants cuffs were right or not. He'd just have to take his chances on that. He walked across the yard and knocked at the Eckerts' front door.

Emma came to the screen and looked out. "Ev? Chip's not here. This is poker night, you know."

"I didn't come to see Chip," he said, leaning against the door jamb with his hand. "I came to see you. You owe me a beer."

She laughed. Sheldon liked the way she laughed. "Sure I do! Come on in and I'll get it for you."

He followed her into the kitchen. The house was just as he knew it would be; just like his own. The bedroom there, the bath, closet, and the kitchen. Identical. Some of the furniture was placed differently, but otherwise they were the same.

She took two cold beers from the refrigerator. "Here you are, Ev. One for you and one for Pearl." She held the unopened cans out to him.

"You have Pearl's," he said. "I'll stay and drink it with you."

The smile faded a little on her face. "Okay," she said. She turned and put the beer cans on the kitchen counter, and suddenly she felt

Sheldon's hand on her waist. She whirled, her eyes flashing.

"Alright, buster! That's enough of that!"

He drew his hand back. "Okay. Just a slip of the hand, like they say. Go ahead. Open them."

"Here, you take them with you. You've had about enough anyhow."

She handed him the cans and he pushed by her to the counter and picked up the opener. He opened the two cans and held one out.

"Here. I won't bite."

She hesitated, then smiled and took the beer. "No, I guess you won't." She tilted the can to her mouth and drank. "Hits the spot, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, "and so does this." Before she could pull back he put one arm around her and pulled her roughly to him, forcing his lips down on hers. The beer can fell from her hand. Beer spurted wildly out of the two openings, against the stove, refrigerator, everything. Sheldon released her after a few moments and stepped back, grinning. "Not bad—"

"You lousy creep!" She slapped him across the face as hard as she could swing.

Sheldon stared at her, feeling the burn of his skin. "Why you little bitch—"

But she had seen the danger in his eyes, and had turned. He shot his hand out and grabbed at her, catching the cloth at the back of her dress. The dress ripped down the

back and Sheldon saw briefly that he had been right, that there was nothing under the dress but Emma. His other hand clutched her shoulder, whirling her around. He tried to pull her to him again.

"I'll show you it don't pay to fool around with me!" he snapped.

She lashed out at him with her nails, drawing crimson lines down his cheek. He pushed her away, hard, and she slipped in the spilled beer and fell. Her head struck against the corner of the kitchen counter, and she slumped to the floor without another sound.

Sheldon stood over her, breathing heavily. When she failed to move, he knelt beside her. "Emma?" He shook her. "Emmal!" He shook her harder, trying not to look at the half-open eyes that stared blankly over his shoulder. "Get up!" he commanded. "Get up!"

The slamming of the front screen door was like a bomb exploding.

"Emmy? I'm home. The game was called off."

Sheldon recognized Eckert's voice instantly, and quickly he jerked open a drawer beside the sink. The kitchen utensils were in exactly the same place they were in his own house, and he snatched out a long carving knife. When Eckert came through the kitchen door, Sheldon lunged at him, catching him across the forearm with the knife, feeling the blade sink through the flesh. But Eckert was a larger and more powerful man, and when he went

down under the unexpected attack, Sheldon did not stay to press his advantage, but kept going, bursting out the screen door and running up the street as fast as his legs would carry him. He went straight to his closet and got the double-barrel. He knocked Pearl aside as he raced to the back door and latched the screen, then went to the front door and looked out.

"Ev! For God's sake."

"Shut up and get out of my way!"

Through the door he saw Eckert coming up the street, running crazily, the knife in his good hand. He reached Sheldon's yard, not stopping.

"You come a foot closer and I'll blast you!" Sheldon screamed.

Eckert came on as if he had not heard, a strange wild sound issuing from his mouth. Sheldon levelled the gun and when Eckert was less than ten yards from him, he fired. First one barrel, then the other. The big man went down, his face a red amorphous thing. He clutched at the grass, twitching, then lay still.

Pearl ran screaming out the back door, stumbling, until neighbors stopped her headlong flight.

Up and down the street there were shouts. Questions. Startled answers. Sheldon looked down at his boots and adjusted his cuffs, then went through the house methodically flicking off lights and locking windows. He got a beer from the refrigerator, shut and locked the back door, got the five

boxes of shotgun shells from his closet, and went back to the front room. The sound of sirens was lifted in the evening air, many sirens, all growing louder. The first of the police cars skidded to a halt a block away, the siren dying, lower and lower, until it was soundless. Under the glare of headlights Sheldon watched the uniformed men moving about. He saw neighbors, people he knew and despised, as they talked excitedly to the police.

"Sheldon! Everest Sheldon!" The sound of his name startled him. The loudspeaker went on. "*Come out with your hands up! Come out with your hands up!*" A bright spot played across his yard and the front of the house. He moved back away from the door and levelled the gun toward the torn screen and fired. Then he dropped flat against the floor as the answering fire came from the men behind the police cars. His hand felt unconsciously for his boot top as slugs slammed through windows and buried themselves in the pink walls.

He inched toward a broken window, reloading his shotgun as he went. He looked out and saw the lights, lights from hundreds of houses in Sherwood Forest, and as he pumped two more impotent shots at the police car, he felt a strange feeling of satisfaction, for of all the houses in Sherwood Forest, of all the thousands in the entire city, *his* house was at last going to be different!