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The Two Old Friends

by Howard Griffin

It was that restful moment when the waiter brings the coffee, that moment of confidence when you're with an easy friend and there is both the time and opportunity for communication. We had not met in many years and had only run into each other in San Francisco by the craziest chance, still Steve Halloran had scarcely changed, — older of course, but young-looking, calm and earnest. He was established more solidly than I, — indeed I felt apologetic in his presence, a court reporter who scraped a meager living from odd jobs, never in one place long, whereas Steve had forged ahead, gotten his degree and made for himself a distinguished lucrative practise in this city as a gynecologist. Soon after graduating he'd married, (this did not particularly surprise me, as a number of my homosexual friends, for one reason or another, had) and around Steve, even when I knew him in school, there had been a great loneliness. I remember how whenever we used to go in a restaurant he'd always choose a table near the wall, a corner table, if possible. Fear of failure obsessed him so that he almost became a grind; it had always been difficult to drag him from his books. But it was a pleasure to see him so much at peace with the world now, to look across the little pink-shaded table and see his strong honest features with the first tinge of gray, like exciting snow, about the temples.

Our eyes when they met were not equivocal. What could we conceal, who had known each other as well as two people can? It was the height of the dinner hour and the place with its large glittering windows high above the city was crowded and a-stir with the subdued noise of conversation, the clatter of chafing-dishes being uncovered, tinkle of ice, and the passage of waiters. And yet our little table, seemed intimate and cut off from everything around it. How assured and insulated was this world, — the well-groomed men, the women in their furs and jewels, the deep flesh tones of their faces and grace of their movements, the bright blue alcohol flames under the copper dishes, the music that did not stir one but seemed to facilitate emptily the gestures, the words. Below us, silver and dark, lay the pattern of San Francisco, that city of wind and fog, of beautiful freedom, and perhaps the sense of height and aloofness released our talk and placed it on a plane of rare uninhibition.

'Vera is a wonderful person, you must meet her,' Steve lit a cigarette and leaned back, smiling expansively, freely released, very human (no trace of smugness, no self-congratulation about him.)

'I would love to. I'd love to see your little girls too. How old are they?'

'Jane is fave and Betsy's nine. Betsy's already a phenomenal companion. And she's always making fun of her father, when he gets a little pompous.'

'Children that age can be demons.'

'They see everything. They see through things. They sense the slightest falseness in a person.'

'I suppose they can be quite hard and cruel —'.

'Yes, cruel. But not hard.'

'Oh . . .' There was an awkward pause. It occurred to me that I was not being very honest. 'Steve —'.

Immediately his tone changed. 'Yes, Alex?'

'I want to ask you a deeply personal question.'

He sipped his Courvoisier and smiled. 'This is the time. Go on.'

'All right . . . Why did you marry Vera?'

His face darkened, he looked down and made circles with his glass on the tablecloth. 'I'm not surprised that you ask. I've always been homosexual. I might almost say I married because I was homosexual.' — (The past tense did not escape me.) — 'But I must go back twenty years. When I knew you, Alex, I was very happy. Those days together at Cape May were perfect. But, later, I met some older men in New York and Boston and I saw what could happen if you went on that way. Do you know Reg Wagstaff? He has an apartment full of gold furniture and plays the organ for an Oratorio Society? Anyway, I did not want that to happen to me. You as well as I know what happens: it becomes harder each year to get tricks — that's what Reg calls them and that's what they are. Tricks; numbers. Sometimes they're gained by trickery: they are not real conquests. They're scalps. It becomes like a pointless problem in arithmetic, a mechanical thing that exhausts both parties, pursuer and pursued. Even here an element of confusion enters, for in the homosexual world, the man who chases is being 'chased' by the object of his pursuit. But I could see myself, I could see too clear a picture of myself in time. It is so hard to explain —'.

'I understand. Go on —'.

'Well, in due course, I had my taste of the 'gay' world. They take you up — those New York people — they know all the devices, the strategies; they take you up; they make you; they drop you. Maybe I just had bad luck and got involved in a series of once-ers. When my brother told me he was getting married and I met Christine (his fiancée), a sweet girl, I became frightened, I have always been terrified by loneliness and so I consented when Christine engineered a meeting between me and Vera. Yes, I first met my future wife on a blind date; it sounds funny. Women are clever; Vera sensed right away the great need in me. She came from Pine Creek, Montana and had nice blonde hair. At that time, being mixed-up, I turned completely toward her and I think she understood. From then on, I resolved to change. Although unimaginative, Vera is very sweet and practical. After Betsy was born, her life began to turn more and more to the children. It was just after the christening of my first child, that I began going out with a man again. I don't know why I'm talking so much; it must be the brandy . . .'

For quite a while I did not speak. A dark stern intense look had appeared on Steve's face. 'Since you have been so frank, I want to be too. Of course, New York is a terrifying city. I'm not surprised that you chose not to live there —'.

'Before you go on,' interjected Steve, 'I'd like to ask you a question.'

'Fire away —'.

'Why are you still single?'

'I do not think I can answer that directly. Instead let me tell you a story:

It is an early winter evening in New York, and I have just stepped from the subway-train on my way to a party at Gloria Starnoff's. I feel the need to relieve myself and go into the john, a dark place that seems made of iron and stone. There's a man standing at the urinal and, after a moment, he turns and takes me in his arms. Even before I have a chance to look at him, he embraces me. From somewhere I hear the regular sound of a dynamo. Suddenly the door opens. A great red-faced man is confronting us. He flashes a badge in our eyes and says: 'O. K. I have you both on a loitering charge. What's your name? Where do you live?' I tell him and he clumsily writes it on a pink card. Stealthily I look over at the other man, seeing him for the first time, — listless and dull-eyed he is and I'm sorry that he touched me. When the cop asks him what he does, he answers sadly that he's a baker's helper. He looks older than I thought. The cop, then, turns to me: 'You'll be locked up. Come on.' We agree not to cause any disturbance, and the transit policeman leads us roughly to the street-level. We make several turnings until we come to a dark lonely stretch of street. When the cop takes each of us aside separately. I know that this is a shake-down. I search my pockets; I have only some change on me; it is not enough and the cop is disgruntled and bitter. He agrees to release me on the condition that I meet him at a certain spot tomorrow, with more money. In fifteen minutes, I am drinking Martinis at Gloria's, inventing an excuse for my delay. But over the rim of my glass I see the loose bulging face of the cop with great black eyebrows. The next day is full of phone calls; I contact not only the lawyer but the district attorney. The lawyer's voice, the attorney's voice, they float to me in a strange disembodied way over the air; their voices are calm, firm, helpful. Over this space of separation, from a considerable distance, everything is arranged. As you can imagine, the tables are turned: at the correct time, I meet the cop, out of uniform now, and give him a marked bill, which he eagerly accepts, only to be nabbed a few moments later by plainclothesmen and taken to the station, where he is quizzed, searched and put through the mill he was only too anxious to subject me to. His face becomes tense and congested with hatred and dark red blood. After I have given my testimony, I am released. Considerably relieved, I go home to my dark railroad flat and fix myself a bite to eat, thinking that my enemy, the cop, would be locked up in a dark narrow place, he would be confined for quite a while. I have escaped the arm of the law but by such a narrow margin and for how long? True, I have gotten the cop locked up in a box, but to what good? It will not, surely, cure his sickness. (I have been in prison; I know what he must be going through.) I think of him and we are combined like hateful Siamese twins by our thoughts. I am reminded of some deadly game: think of hatred, guess what I'm thinking of! I'm thinking of you! The next day I go to the Criminal Courts to sign a complaint, and I am caught in the cage of the legal situation. Although the law, paradoxically, is on my side, I do not feel at ease. The detectives

and police officials regard me with suspicion and dislike. Uncomfortably I hope the lawyers do not decide to go too deeply into my own past. When the cop, with his own lawyer, appears in Felony Court, he does not look at me; I do not look at him. He faces the judge, above him, and I am turned toward the courtroom, so that any confrontation is severely avoided. Does he hate me? Or is he drawn to me? Do I hate him? Am I attracted to him? Everything I say, everything I do has become impure.

What I remember most from this whole experience was the feeling of paralysis, of helplessness such as one has in certain dreams just before the life-and-death-moment of waking, panting and covered with sweat. It is only because you are strong, Steve, that I am telling you this. You can understand. You can sense what I am trying to say —'.

The great high dining-room had begun to empty out. A waiter hurried by, holding a long dark bottle of wine, swaddled in a napkin. The tall waiters hovered around a particularly brilliant table in the corner, like black insects. It was getting late.

'Why do you think I told you that story?'. I asked.

'Because you wanted to frighten me.'

'Let us settle our bill, and go.'

At that moment I welcomed the discreet attentions of the waiter, the polite Good-nights, the general noise and to-do, for, while I was telling the story, I'd started to relive the experience. It seemed, for a few cold minutes, that I was back in New York in that dark apartment, that I was caught in the same situation. We took the lift down to the main floor. In the crowded lobby, we finally found some chairs, in an alcove, behind some potted plants and, since we both had some time, we again fell into conversation.

After lighting a cigarette, Steve said: «You detained me with your story like the Ancient Mariner, and now, in turn, I am going to tell you one, a story that occurs to me although I am not exactly certain why. When war broke out, as you know, I went in the Army and was trained in a code school. As part of the 2203rd Signal Service Battalion, I was sent to the Philippines, where I spent a year on the island of Leyte, a remote stretch of jungle, a lonely and frustrating spot. I went over as Corporal but, after working in the radio hut, I soon became Sergeant. The fellows in our outfit were a regular bunch of guys, and if you kept busy all the time it was allright but I hated the nights, I hated the free time. There was nowhere to go for sex. Feeling as if I'd explode, I'd hitchhike aimlessly around the island, hoping to meet someone who'd break down and have some fun but it was difficult because, for one thing, everyone was afraid word might get back to his company and if the fellows in your outfit suspected you, they could make life hell. The constant shipping-in and shipping-out also made things difficult. I went for long lonely walks down the beach. Once, on a reconnaissance of this sort, I came across an old rusty LST; it was beached and sand-logged and the sun filtered down through holes in the bulkhead. When I looked more closely, I saw that one of the sailors who'd been on a disembarkation-detail nearby, had taken off his clothes and gone to sleep on the sand. He had placed beside him there his white cap, a pair of worn

denim shorts and a pair of old canvas shoes. He lay, asleep or dozing, with one leg crooked at the knee, an arm flung over his head. Only a little darker than the sand, his body had been tanned to a fine smooth color and his hair bleached and streaked, a tangle of dark and light. Further up on the beach, towered the great cocoanut palms and there seemed to be no other person around. I sprawled out beside him and pretended to read a copy of 'Yank.' In a while, he stretched and stirred himself, like a lazy animal, looking over at me with slightly narrowed eyes. When our eyes met, I don't think there could be any doubt what we were thinking. I slid in the sand, exciting and resistant to the skin, so that our bodies almost touched and I could smell the keen saltiness of his body streaked with sweat but when I reached toward him, he pushed me away. He was more upset than I and I could not understand the rejection. Turning, he began to pull his clothes on in an agonized way. 'Why?' I stammered, not moving. He frowned. All he would say was: 'An airplane might fly low and see us.' Hurriedly he put on his clothes and disappeared down the empty beach.'

'He was afraid,' I said, 'he was afraid of the air, of space.'

From the direction of the lounge floated the strong carrying voice of the bell-boy: 'Paging Mr Halloran . . . paging Mr Halloran . . . paging Mr Halloran . . .'

Steve looked surprised. 'I wonder who that could be? . . . Excuse me.' He disappeared in the direction of the phone booth. When he returned, five minutes later, his face looked dark and worried.

'Vera . . .' he explained briefly. 'I'm sorry but I shall have to go —'.

We shook hands and bade each other goodby under the gold clock in the center of the vestibule. As I watched his slim body disappear through the revolving door, I wondered if I'd ever see him again . . . Was he caught, too, as if in an invisible cage? Oh, where did the cage begin? Where did it end? As I walked into the crowded, indifferent traffic I thought of the little stories we had told each other. But about his life there was a kind of space that could not be about mine.

Book-Review

They stand apart

Edited by His Honour J. Tudor Rees and Harley V. Usill

William Heinemann, Ltd. London.

'They stand apart' — no more appropriate title could have been chosen for a book which deals in five sections with the phenomenon of homosexuality in regard to law, society, Christian morals, the medical aspect and the law in regard thereto in the other European countries. Here seems to be a book many of those 'standing apart' will be keen to read.