

# A new beginning

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fully of his generosity to them, on the other hand it is not displeasing to receive the occasional favours of one so irresistible to the other sex.

The other day I earned some unexpected money doing a couple of translations. Part of that money I spent on an expensive ticket for a concert-performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo* — it could not have been spent better! The other half is still intact, so I shall write Tricks a letter inviting him for a weekend. That money will be well-spent too.

## A New Beginning

by Seaweed.

The six o'clock whistle had sounded more than an hour ago in the large construction camp, bringing the day's work to a close; at least for most of the workers on this Air Force Base. But not so for Ron who, as an engineer, often found it necessary to work overtime.

The bare office in which he sat was now silent, Ron the only occupant. For the last ten minutes or so he had been motionless and pensive, his slim figure sprawled in a swivel chair under the fluorescent light which, stark though it was, gave his light brown, crew-cut hair a healthy sheen. Ron was a likeable, even attractive thirty-five, but tonight he was tired, and with nightfall and fatigue came loneliness. His work was finished now, but he lingered, listlessly, surrendering to the meager comfort of his reveries. Months of the impersonal life at the big, bare, isolated camp was making him a kid again, feeding on fantasies.

«A penny for your thoughts.»

Ron looked up, startled. Standing above him was one of the Army Engineers who had recently arrived at the base. He managed a wry smile. «I wasn't thinking. Just day-dreaming. It's a bad habit we pick up around here.»

«I might bid as high as a dime for a real good dream. I'm Ken Grafton; Captain Grafton, if you please.»

Ron introduced himself and arose. They shook hands, looking each other over. Ken was also in his thirties; Ron guessed his age at thirty-two. He had already seen him around the camp before and liked his looks. Ken was tall, and while at first glance he appeared to be thin, the shape of solid muscles showed through his thin khaki shirt and pants.

«To get back to that generous offer of yours,» Ron said, «the dreams aren't for sale. I either hoard them or give them away.»

«Maybe I don't need your dream at that. Maybe I've got one just like it of my own.» Ken spoke in a bantering tone, but his voice was a shade lower, tighter.

«In that case . . .» Ron stopped short. For ten long seconds they looked at each other, both smiling, challenging, asking. At last Ron said, «Sometimes A's dream plus B's dream adds up to something real.»

An alertness flickered swiftly across Ken's face, a look of intelligence, appreciative of what Ron meant. Instead of replying he grasped Ron's arm just above the elbow, pressed it, let his hand linger for a fraction of a moment before withdrawing it. But Ron turned aside,

turned to the desk, picked up his cigarettes, extracted one from the pack, lighted it, playing for time. It had all developed too quickly. He needed to get his bearings. Then he faced Ken again, saying almost angrily, «There are fellows in this world who enjoy nosing out other people's secrets and doing dirt on them, making mock of them.»

Now Ken was wholly serious. His manly features revealed a new sensitivity to Ron. «Then I will tell you my dream. It is very simple. I need a friend.»

«Same here. That's all I ask of life.»

Both of them suddenly felt naked and shy. They bravely looked each other in the eye but their gaze was troubled. They gave each other embarrassed grins, like kids. As abruptly as he had arrived Ken said, «See you tomorrow, mate», squeezed Ron's shoulder with strong fingers, wheeled and left. His brisk heel-taps echoed in the empty room.

After that first evening Ron and Ken met daily. Fortunately, they were often brought together by the work. Making a tour of inspection of the job site together they learned something of each other's background and began to size each other up as engineers. Sometimes they met at meetings of the civil and military engineers and their respect for one another's abilities increased. Their friendship seemed to keep them professionally on their toes. Each wanted the other fellow to see him at his best. After work they often met for drinks at the Contractor's Club where Ken was now an honorary member, or at the Officer's Mess where Ron would be Ken's guest. Although they seldom met in private they came to feel very much at home together. They talked about their enthusiasms and tastes and aired their favorite gripes. They sounded each other out on religion and politics and were relieved to find that neither of them was fanatical. Ron discovered that Ken had played varsity basketball in college and he told Ken about the swimming and diving medals he had won. Both talked at length about their past, their families and friends, and showed each other their treasured photographs. Ken told Ron about the small ranch he owned in Oregon.

Before long either of them could mention any of his far-off friends and loved-ones with confidence that the other fellow would know just who that person was and what the relationship. Neither of the two had lived spectacularly full lives, yet soon each seemed to the other to be a large warm world of thoughts and feelings and experiences. Sometimes one of them would be worried or depressed and then the other offered encouragement, consoled him, wooed him away from the darkness of his mood. They found a few stubborn streaks in one another and some vulnerable spots as well and learned to avoid both. In spite of the swift boldness of their first meeting, in the second phase of their friendship both of them seemed to steer clear of talk of sex. Neither could have given a reason for this reserve. Perhaps they felt a need to dissociate their friendship from the crudities of the world in which they lived. An unspoken agreement seemed to exist between them that their physical union, if there was to be one, should come about by itself when the time was ripe. Once, walking down a dusty road under a blazing sun, with the rattle and rumble of construction work surrounding them, Ken had

said to Ron, without preface and without follow-up, «I think your beast and my beast have a secret understanding.» Caught off guard Ron felt a thrill of pleasure in the pit of his stomach. «You are so right,» he said. Still, waiting was no hardship — they had so much else to make them feel warm and wanted and admired — and something told them both that it was best to wait. What were they waiting for? Perhaps it was the consolidation of man with beast in both of them, for the fusion of friendship with physical desire.

Their meetings were not always tête à tête. Once in a while when the discussion seemed interesting they would join one of the bull sessions usually to be found in the clubs at night. Sometimes they went to the movies with a few of the others. Sometimes an acquaintance would drop into a chair at the table where Ron and Ken sat facing one another over sandwiches or drinks. They always welcomed such intruders with good humor but without encouraging them to make a regular thing of it. As their friendship matured both of them felt more indulgent towards the crude men's world in which they lived, yet in rubbing shoulders with that world they were also motivated by expediency, diplomacy. They knew that they had to be careful for that all-male world of some eight thousand military and civilian personnel was as gossipy as a country town populated entirely by old maids. Sometimes it seemed to Ron that the ceaseless, obsessive talk of women among the men served at least to some extent as a means of warding off temptations of another kind. The crude, verbal obscenities of normal sex seemed to be used as if they were magic incantations, the muttering of which drove out the lurking «perversion» in all of them. Ron himself thought that this idea of his was quite far-fetched, yet it remained with him. It was only too obvious that most of the men on the base were abnormally sensitive to the slightest suggestion of abnormality in the others, anxiously on the look-out for it, ready to interpret the most naturally graceful mannerism as «queer», ready to find a «peculiar» meaning in the most innocent, if naive, remark. And once a man's sexual regularity was questioned the rumors would buzz around the base from one end to the other, so that what began as the merest nervous speculation would, within a few days, be accepted as a certainty by nearly everyone.

But to even the most suspicious observer there was nothing amiss in the friendship of those two efficient, clean-cut young engineers, Ron and Ken. And often, as he went about the day's business through the camp, threading his way amid the turbulent activities of men and machines, surrounded on all sides by healthy, hearty, hot young life, Ron wondered how many other partnerships like his and Ken's were flourishing, well-concealed, throughout the base.

One fine Sunday morning, warm and fresh and sunny, Ken appeared just as Ron was finishing his breakfast. «It's a wonderful day and there may not be many more like this. Let's go fishing!»

The idea appealed to Ron. The river was only a mile and a half from the outskirts of the base, a forty minutes walk along a winding trail through an unspoiled forest. But by the time they had changed into old clothes and had gathered together their fishing gear and some lunch Ken



was impatient — so they took his jeep. Once clear of the Base, they traveled a short distance on a broad, raw, new dirt road, turning off to follow an old wagon track into the forest until it petered out in an impassible growth of bushes and saplings. They had no difficulty in picking up a foot path leading riverwards. Except for the rustle of leaves and the occasional chittering of birds the woods were silent, and after a week of the mechanical din of large-scale construction work the silence was like a balm. Ron could feel his accumulated tension melt away, and a sense of freedom rose up within him. The path was narrow and they moved along it in single file, Ron in the lead. He knew that they were the first to walk the trail that morning for now and then he had to brush aside the spider webs which spanned it. Ron loved the scent of the earth and all the growing things.

«Doesn't it smell wonderful?» he called back to Ken, who was close behind him.

For answer Ken reached forward and rubbed his palm over Ron's close-cropped hair — half-gently, half-roughly; appreciatively, possessively.

Ken had been delighting in the lithe movement of his friend's body as he moved along the trail, dodging projecting bushes and over-hanging branches, leaping fallen tree trunks. Ron was wearing a pull-over sweater and faded jeans which fitted him like a glove, both garments displaying the surprising boyishness and the almost classic proportions of his body. Ken himself was wearing old fatigues, which gave him a rakish, hoodlum attractiveness.

A small squirrel bounded across their path in graceful arcs, scurried up a near-by tree and chattered at them.

Ken started to sing a current popular song and halfway through the chorus Ron joined in, in harmony. It was their first attempt at harmonizing and they liked the result so well they kept it up until they reached the river.

The river was a good mile wide. The two friends sought out the place where a thickly over-grown point of land was formed by the juncture of a small tributary with the great river. The stream was a favorite fishing ground, but the point itself was seldom invaded. Seeking privacy, Ron and Ken pushed their exploration of the point to the big river's edge and there they were lucky enough to discover a tiny natural beach of gray sand, hidden from view on all sides by tall, thick vegetation. Here they securely anchored their beer bottles in the cold water and stripped to the waist before baiting up and making their first cast.

«The fishing may not be so good on this side,» sad Ken, «But I'd rather have the privacy than the fish.»

«We've got the sun and the air and the peacefulness. That's enough.»

«Chum, you forget the main thing. We've got us.»

They settled down to two hours of fishing in the broiling sun, two silent hours but for the sigh of the breeze in the bushes behind them and the gurgle of the river sliding by. Sun-dazed and spell-bound by the quietude and half-adream, it mattered little that they didn't catch a thing.

When they put down their rods and decided that it was time for lunch their coppery backs were burning. Ken fetched the beer while Ron emptied the haversack of the sandwiches they had brought. They cleared a spot in the shade of the tall bushes which edged the small sandy strip and sat down to eat in a sort of cave of greenery, close together. They felt like schoolboys on holiday and, having emptied a second bottle, passing it from one to the other, stretched themselves out full length, luxuriously, side by side.

«This is perfect», Ken said quietly. «This is one of those rare perfect times.»

«Maybe if they weren't so rare they wouldn't mean so much,» Ron answered. But then he burst out, still speaking softly, but with intensity, «No, Ken! It shouldn't be as rare as it's been in our lives, having happiness like this. At least, as rare as it's been for me. I'm not feeling sorry for myself. How could I, at a time like this? But . . .»

Ken reached across the six inches which separated them and laid his hand over his friend's. «I think you're right. Hell, I *know* you're right! Chum, I'm tired of being f....d by the fickle finger of fate. I'm tired of taking it for granted that guys like you and me are stuck with an unhappy destiny. Are we mice or are we men? It's time we did some engineering with our own two lives.»

Ron raised himself on one elbow and looked searchingly at Ken, who was still lying on his back.

«Then it's time for me to tell you something, Ken. Another year and you'll be gone. And that'll be the end for us, if that's the way you want it, if that's the way it's got to be. I thank my lucky stars to have met you, to have been your friend at all, Ken. It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened in my life. But.... well.... I want you to know I'm ready for anything with you. I'm no kid, Ken. I realize what I'm saying. You can count on me. If you want me, I'm yours for life.»

«Do I want you? Christ, I'm sick with wanting you!» Swiftly, suddenly Ken reached up and took Ron in his arms, pulling him down upon him. As they fell Ron's arm curved beneath Ken's neck. Rough cheek rubbed rough cheek. At last they broke away, lay panting side by side, Ken's head still resting on Ron's arm. Ron's leg lying with sweet heaviness across Ken's thigh.

His chest still heaving Ken spoke swiftly now, pausing to gulp the air, speaking in headlong chunks. «Listen . . . I've thought of it so much . . . I've planned it night after night . . . I'll be out of the Army in fourteen months . . . Until we met I thought this reenlistment was a big mistake . . . I see it's served a purpose after all . . . You'll have worked out your contract before the Army let's me go . . . You know I've got that little ranch in Oregon . . . I closed it down six years ago . . . It was too lonely, I was too restless, I couldn't settle down . . . Come to Oregon with me . . . Look, I got that place for you and me . . . Only you were a long time coming . . . But don't you see it's always been waiting for you there . . . I had to go out in the world and find you . . . I've done it, now I want to take you home . . . We needn't give up the engineering . . . It's not so far from the city that we can't keep in touch with things . . .

Besides, I've got a few connections there, you know . . . You don't have to answer now, Ron... But think it over, before you take a stand . . .»

«I don't have to think it over, Ken. I accept. We aren't kids. I guess the others were just our education for this. We know how to get along together, Ken. We've learned the things young lovers overlook . . .»

Just then there was a muffled but startling crackle in the bushes opposite them, the sound of a breaking stick. Two striding pairs of legs, clad in fatigue pants, could be seen among the bushes' lowest stems across the little beach. Ron hurriedly withdrew his arm from beneath Ken's head and rose. Ken sat up, clasping his forearms about his knees. They had time to exchange grins, as moral support, before the intruders emerged upon the beach. The strangers were two young airmen. Neither could have been much more than twenty. It was obvious that they too had counted on the little beach being deserted for they were hand in hand. They recoiled from each other when they saw Ron and Ken. All four were aware of being caught redhanded and felt ridiculous.

One of the airmen, a self-confident, husky blond, was the first to speak. «Sorry to have busted in on you, fellers,» he said with a rural drawl, grinning like a Cheshire cat, «We're just taking a little walk.»

«And we're just waiting for a street-car,» said Ken. «Nice to see you kids. As a matter of fact, we'll turn the place over to you. We're about ready to leave, anyhow.» He gave the pair a droll and shameless wink. But the youngsters still a bit embarrassed, did not wait. They headed towards the other end of the beach with elaborate nonchalance. However, the big blond turned around and said «So long!» with a semi-circular gesture of his forearm before they disappeared behind the bushes.

«What nice kids!» Ron said. «I think the quality of the brotherhood is improving with this younger generation. But that was a narrow squeak, you know.»

«Come on, let's go back. It isn't as private here as one might think, and I want a lot of privacy this afternoon. We've got a lot of private business to transact and it just won't wait.»

They returned to the jeep and drove back to the base almost in silence, but once Ken looked at Ron and said, «Chum, we've always been careful and we can keep on being careful. But there's a subtle difference between being careful and feeling intimidated. Let's not forget that even if we had the bad luck to get bounced out of here, we've still got the ranch. Right?»

«Even if we didn't have the ranch we've still got us.»

Ken parked his jeep outside the drab, gaunt barracks marked «U.S. ARMY, Corps of Engineers» which was where he lived. He and Ron carried their fishing tackle and the haversack up to Ken's room. When they got there Ken threw open the door and stepped inside. «Come in,» he said. There was a proud resonance in his voice. Ron felt that passing Ken's threshold was the beginning of a whole new life. A faint and subtle odor of Ken Grafton filled the room. Ron loved it. Ken locked the door. Their faces radiant with love and sunburn, they looked at each other, moved easily, inevitably into each other's arms, into a long, long kiss.



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