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Buy me a Drink

by

S T O R N O W A Y

The slushouses of Panama City are much the same as the slushouses on any other waterfront. A seafarer since the age of sixteen, and I'm now twenty-six, I've been in most of the crummy parts of the world where ships go. I know most of the dives, clip joints, drums and brothels where sailors land up as soon as their ship hits port, demanding drinks, sex, any sort of companionship that will compensate for the monotony of their sea-going days, for the loneliness of those countless days in that so very isolated, so entirely male world, that is a seaman's. From the Reeperbahn of Hamburg and the Golden Mile of Genoa, to the back alleys of Yokohama, Sydney, and Buenos Aires, I know all the places. They're all much the same. So are the girls. The dames might look different, according to their color, race, nationality, but they all sell the same thing with the same indifference. Sailors in foreign ports are lonely men. What we want we buy, and often we pay dearly. But it never satisfies; synthetic commercial lovemaking never does satisfy.

It was not in the happiest frame of mind that I walked up the main drag of Panama City a few months ago. We had been at sea for sixteen days since Amsterdam, and this was our first landfall. I knew what I was going to do, though I did not want to do it, and I knew what I was going to pay, though I could not afford it. I had escaped from the other fellows on the ship because I had seen too much of them over the past weeks and I wanted new companions. I was lonely, browned-off, and ready for anything.

All the bars were crowded; most were overcrowded. Eventually I found one that looked less packed with people than the others, though it was no less noisy. There was a jukebox grinding out Latin-American rhumba music at a dime a disc, and there was a small negro band ready to take over when the jukebox ran down. It was hot, noisy, and very tawdry, but it was someplace where I could sit down. All the men in the bar seemed to be merchant navy types, or else service personnel in civilian clothes, and there were about a dozen women belonging to the house, varying from coffee coloured to jet black.

I ordered myself a large rye on the rocks. A girl came up. She was café au lait, and about sixteen years old. I guessed she had been at the game for five or six years, for they start young in Panama, and another two or three years would see her through. She was already well worn. She threw one arm across my shoulders and drew my head towards hers; her free hand she dropped between my legs where she pressed provocatively; and she smiled that empty artificial smile that you see on every prostitute's face when she means business.

«You buy me a drink?» That is always their first move, in Panama.

«You buy me one,» I invited her. She had bad teeth and I was not interested.

«You want to make love? Four dollars. Very good.»

That was not the last thing I wanted to do just then, but I did not want to do it with her, and I said so.

«Then buy me a drink.» She was persistent, as they all are.

«You buy me one.» I was equally persistent.

She shrugged. «In a pig's ass,» she said. Then, realising that I was not to be a client, she turned her attention to the man next to me.

I had been watching him the short time I had been in the bar. He had come in just after I had, but he had not come from the street. At the far end of the bar was a staircase that lead to the upstairs rooms and he had come from there. I concluded that he had been having a short time with one of the whores. He was young, about nineteen, and I recognised him as being obviously another merchant seaman. He was very fair, with a fresh complexion, and could have belonged to any of the Nordic races. I thought he was English, for when he ordered his drink his accent suggested it, so far as I could judge through the almost deafening noise that filled the place. He drank a large gin on ice very quickly, and ordered another. The thing that interested me was the desperate unhappy look in his young face. I was curious. As he had just come from upstairs, even four dollars worth of making love should make one feel good for a while. It's different next day, back on the ship in the clean salt air with the freshness of the sea and clear sky around one. Then a man tries to forget the whole sordid affair, or else he glamorises it for the benefit of his friends who do not believe him anyhow, for they too know it all.

She was trying the same tactics with him as she had with me. She had one arm around his neck and her free hand between his legs.

«Buy me a drink.» I saw her lips move, though I could not hear the words.

He appeared to be completely unaware of her presence, and totally unconscious of the pressure of her arms and hands.

«You want to make love?»

He said nothing, and did not move. He just sat there looking at his glass of gin. With another shrug of the shoulders and a twist of her bottom she moved her coffee-coloured suppleness on to the next prospect. I do not think that the boy was at any time aware of her presence.

He took out a packet of cigarettes and groped in his pocket for matches. I flicked my lighter at him. He accepted the light, gave me a brief glance, but said nothing. He returned to his gin.

Unfriendly, I thought, but maybe just lonely, and certainly unhappy.

I turned my attention to the dance floor. The jukebox was quiet but the negro band was beating out a rhythm. A few men were dancing with each other; one or two were dancing with women. Most were sitting around the bar, some with women draped around them in attitudes of varying intimacy. Now and again a man and a girl went upstairs to a room; now and again a man came down alone. I was aware of two boys in high spirits coming down; they joined the silent one next to me.

«You soon finished, Johnny,» remarked one of these. «Was she good? Mine was smashing.»

«She was all right.» Johnny answered, but without enthusiasm.

«Finish that rot-gut and let's get out of here,» the second one invited. «Let's go some other place, out to the Jungle and see an exhibition. They give smashing exhibitions. I saw one last time. There was»

Johnny turned half towards me and met my eye. «Not me,» he said. «You two go. I'm having a drink with the Yank here. Maybe I'll come out later, but you go on now.»

There was appeal in his eyes as he spoke to them, but looked at me. I decided to play up to him, and in any case, I was curious.

«You a seaman?» one of the masked, addressing me.

I said I was.

«Then why not come along?»

«No. I'm staying here with Johnny for a while. Maybe we'll meet up later on.»

They were pleasant looking ordinary boys. At any other time I'd have been glad to do the rounds with them, but tonight I was determined to find out what was burning Johnny up. I had no base thoughts about the kid but I liked his appearance and I wanted to get to know him. The others went out; Johnny turned to me shyly.

«I hope you didn't mind me saying that,» he said. «I just did not want to go.»

«That's all right,» I told him. «But how did you know I was a Yank?»

«You look like one. I've been watching you,» he said simply. «How did you know my name was Johnny?»

«I heard your friends call you. Besides, I've been watching you too.»

For the first time he smiled, and his smile was pleasant.

«I'd like very much to buy you a drink,» he went on, but he appeared embarrassed. «The truth is, I gave all my money to the old boot upstairs and I'm just about broke. In fact, now I am broke. But would you buy me one?»

He was not begging when he asked me to buy him a drink. We were both seamen, a fact which made us almost brothers. I had done him a small service, and that made us friends. I had been broke myself on other occasions, and had done the same thing with other seamen. Such is the companionship of seafarers, who have no real friends. More stable landlocked people are inclined to regard us with suspicion, not without justification perhaps, for we are birds of passage over the seas of the earth, without roots, and therefore not entirely to be trusted. So, because there is nowhere else to go, we always meet up in the same dives where at least we shall find companionship among our own kind. The bond of seamanship is the greatest bond in the world. It is not a thing that shore-side people understand, for such bonds do not exist with them. I was glad to buy the lad a drink.

«Was she worth it?» I asked.

His smile faded, his face flushed, and his former unhappy look returned.

«No.» For a while he was silent.

«I couldn't do anything,» he went on. «When I was up there I just could not do a thing; not a thing.»

I was sympathetic. «That happens to all of us now and again. Maybe you had too much to drink. I wouldn't worry.»

«I haven't been drinking,» he insisted. «I had only two drinks before I went up. But it happened once before, in Barcelona it was. I went away with a girl, wanting it, but when the time came I was useless.»

«Still, just one of those things.»

«Am I always going to be useless?» he went on, ignoring me. «At night I lie in my bunk and dream, and I know I'm not useless then, but on shore, when the opportunity comes, I just can't ever make it.»

«I still wouldn't worry,» I argued. «What you get in a sluthouse isn't very inspiring, ever. With a decent girl ashore it would be different. I know it.»

«It's not, you know,» he said. «There was a girl in England. I knew her a long time and I liked her. One night we went to a dance, and afterwards she was willing. But it was the same thing. I couldn't make it.»

He finished his drink and I bought him another. After several large ones he was talking freely. He told me about himself, his home, his sea life, his ship. Like a true seaman he was really happy only when he was at sea, though he said there were times when he hated the life, as all seamen do, knowing full well that they are rationalising, telling themselves lies.

«I wonder sometimes if I'm different,» he said again. «The other fellows on board all have their girls at home, and when they come ashore they all make out all right. I just never make out. It can't be the girls, so it must be me.»

It was getting late. The negro band had packed up and most of the sailors had gone. A few were left, all fairly well tanked up; one or two were asleep, sprawled over tables. The girls were still there, but were not trying very hard. Now and again someone put a dime in the jukebox. Johnny's tanker would be sailing for England in a few hours. About the same time my old tramp would be heading for San Francisco. By a coincidence our two ships were berthed alongside the same wharf. We took a taxi back to Balboa where the ships were lying.

We had almost arrived when Johnny said: «There's a beach on the other side of the canal. I'd like to swim.»

«What, with the sharks?» I knew there were sharks there and I had a real fear of them.

«I won't go out very far. Besides, what matter a few sharks? And if a shark did bite me in a vital place, I wouldn't miss it anyhow, after tonight. Come with me.»

It was hot and humid, as the Canal Zone always is, and the night was only a few degrees cooler than the day. I myself thought that bathing at night was not a bad idea. We paid off the taxi and crossed the canal on the old car ferry that runs all night. After walking a few yards through

some dense scrub we came to a sandy beach; we made our way up to the end of it.

«I don't think there's anyone here,» said Johnny, and he was out of his clothes in a matter of seconds. There was a flash of gold in the moonlight as he ran across the sand and dived into the surf. A minute later I was with him. We shot a few breakers but stayed in the water just long enough to cool off. Back on the beach we lay down on the sand without bothering to dress and smoked a cigarette.

«We don't have to be back until sunrise,» Johnny said. «I wish we didn't ever have to go back. I like it here with you, just lying down under the stars. It's better than those crummy bars, and the women.»

We were lying side by side. The stars overhead were brilliant and the only sounds were the surf crashing on the beach and the occasional bird calls. Presently Johnny put his hand in my hand, and drew his face close to my face, and he seemed at rest.

An hour later, the moon had gone down, the stars had faded, and the first flush of the early morning was in the sky. In five more minutes it would be broad daylight. We got up from the sand, brushed ourselves off, dressed, and walked back to the ferry and back to our ships.

«I think I know now,» Johnny said slowly, when we were back at the wharves. «I should have known before.»

«Do you mind?» I asked him, a little afraid of his reply.

«No, I don't mind, if that's the way of things. I guess I had to know sometime. But I'm glad it was you I met tonight Joe. I think I was close to packing everything up. I wonder if we'll ever meet again.»

«It's a small world,» I said. It was not what I wanted to say, but I could not think of the right words.

«With a lot of water on it. But I won't forget you Joe.»

We shook hands, and with a smile he was gone. An hour later the tanker drew away from the wharf and turned its bow towards the canal and England. There were groups of men on the decks, some working, some just standing around. One solitary figure apart from the others was Johnny. I hoped he felt a little less alone than I did right at that moment; and I also hoped he felt as happy as I did, right at that moment.

