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Boston Adventure

By Orlando Gibbons.

Plymouth in the rain was a sad invalid. When Tom had arrived two weeks ago, the sun had warmed the ancient, handsome buildings and the new ugly ones; the bay had stretched before him shimmering in a thousand lights and Harriet's house had seemed the right sort of refuge. It was small and compact; it smelled of old woods, of seaweed and a little of Aunt Harriet's lavender—and old-fashioned, a reassuring smell. Aunt Harriet had not asked a single question when Tom had suddenly phoned from New York whether he could stay with her for a few weeks. Neither she nor Aunt Liza, her unmarried librarian sister, ever asked anything personal. They were there if he needed them; and if he preferred to be alone they would never bother him.

Aunt Liza, tall, a bit mannish, with a deep contralto voice, had once been to New York and he had made the mistake of taking Chuck to dinner with her . . . Just that evening, Chuck had thrown one of his jealousy fits right outside the restaurant, in front of Aunt Liza. She had never said a word, simply hailed a taxi and gone away . . .

When Tom arrived, he expected Aunt Liza to inquire about Chuck but she never did. As one sunny, lazy day faded into another sunny, lazy day, the tension began to leave Tom, the tension and the hurt and the bitter memory. After a week the day came when he was lying on the beach, drowsing, and for once didn't think back, did shut his mind to the last scene, the last ugly words, the violent accusations, the Moving Van people who had taken Chuck's things out of the apartment . . . It was then when the movers had left and Tom faced the deserted, naked apartment that he had made up his mind to take the vacation now, not in winter: Chuck and Tom had planned to fly South, to Antigua and Trinidad and swim in the warm, blue Caribbean . . . Instead he was swimming now in the blue but cold New England ocean, and on Plymouth Public Beach there was no one who even looked at him. In the evening he played Scrabble with Aunt Harriet and Aunt Eliza, or they visited some three-times removed cousins, none of whom paid any attention to Tom and to none of whom Tom found it worthwhile to pay any attention. But then, this strange summer, the sun had vanished for days. The air had grown cold, so cold that Aunt Liza kept the old stove going throughout the day. The rain had swept in from the bay, driving cold-looking, dismal clouds in a wild dance across the sky, the old town where hundreds of years ago the first Pilgrims had landed, Plymouth was gray and sad and the days grew too long . . .

Tom still could remember the names of some bars in Boston. He had sold the car when Chuck left. Yet there was the bus, an old smelly vehicle, unreliable and slow, but at least it took him out of Plymouth. As Tom put on his trenchcoat, checked the schedule, his money, he realized he had only five hours—unless he stayed over night. Since Aunt Harriet and Aunt Eliza would be worried, he decided to leave the bag at home. Five hours to meet someone nice, to forget the rain and the wasted summer and Chuck . . . Even for Tom Haskins, 29 years of age, of medium height, with green eyes and a pleasant disposition, even for Tom Haskins, intelligent, alert and experienced in the exasperating

ritual of bars and meeting places, five hours were a short time.

When the bus had staggered into the depot and Tom had found MARIO's, still in the same place, had ordered a drink, he realized five hours was ridiculous, particularly if the hours began at six in the afternoon and ended at eleven—the bartender told him it really «started hopping» at eleven . . . And so Tom made the mistake of smiling at the two boys at the nearby table who were laughing a little too much and dressed a little too loudly. They flirted with him openly and seemed to know everyone in the place. Soon they invited Tom to their table and introduced themselves as Joe and Mike, one from West Braintree, the other from East Braintree. Both worked in a department store, both were passionately interested in women's fashions.

They insisted Tom accompany them upstairs to dinner and there the dance began. When Joe went away to «freshen up» Mike would move closer to tell Tom they should get together afterwards, he had a car, they would drive out to Braintree. When Mike left to «freshen up»—they rushed out every five minutes—Joe would move closer, telling him he had a car, they must get together, they would drive out to Braintree. Each praised the other, each betrayed the other again and again. Each assured Tom he was really wonderful, and each asked him to lie to the other so that they could be alone in the car, Annabelle. Annabelle, Tom discovered, belonged to both, and after a while, Tom had enough. It had been wrong to talk to those two who pretended to be friends and weren't even hunting companions. And in the meantime, the hours went by . . .

Tom was ashamed but he used that old trick, the faked phone call. He told Mike—Joe was away at another table talking to an intelligent-looking fat man—that he was going to meet someone, paid the waiter and fled. Where to now, in this town of Boston which Tom hadn't seen since he was nineteen? Well, there was the ALCOA, the CORK CLUB, the FRENCH HORN . . . The FRENCH HORN was too close, Joe and Mike were sure to make this their next stop. So Tom walked slowly to the ALCOA, a tiny establishment toward the water front, less expensive than Mario's and a little rougher . . . The rain ran down his neck, and Boston, swaddled in fog, appeared distempered and unpromising. By now Tom wished he had stayed back in Plymouth near the fire, near Aunt Harriet and Aunt Liza, safe from his own desires.

The ALCOA was noisy, full of sailors, men in lumber jacks and yelling teen-agers with enormous locks plastered over pimply foreheads. The jukebox featured the latest teen-age girl rage, a Southern roughneck drawling innocuous love lyrics that had a distinctly obscene undertone. As he entered, Tom noticed the heads turning to look him up and down quickly, with what Chuck used to call the cattle-dealers' once-over: what was the cattle worth? How heavy? How marketable?

There was only one place free at the bar and when the man moved a little, Tom recognized the fat, intelligent man with whom Joe had spoken. If the man recognized Tom he gave no sign. He was nervous and, as Tom realized, he was waiting. One could always tell—the quick glance at the watch, at the door, the attempt to stay calm, the look toward the phone booth, the slip of paper on which the date was written: the symptoms were unmistakable.

When the music started on a theme from the «Threepenny Opera», Tom began to feel better. Wasn't it childish to try and force issues, to try and force something that should be rare and wonderful into the span of five hours? Strangely enough, the bartender, a husky with the brogue of the born Irishman, returned again and again to Tom, leaning over the bar, asking a few questions, smoothing down his apron so Tom could see the outlines of slim hips and thighs. He refilled Tom's glass without being asked. He also returned too much change and Tom was forced to realize that the man threw him a crooked smile even from the other end of the bar . . .

The voice that reached Tom suddenly was breathless with a trace of an accent «So sorry, Fred, but the car couldn't make it. The streets were slippery . . .» Tom turned around. The fat man was talking intensely to a slender blondish boy whose face Tom could hardly see. The fat man's voice wasn't bad; he had control and only the pearls of sweat on his forehead gave him away when he said: «Never mind the apologies, Sven. Main thing is you are here. What are you going to drink?»

«Oh, whiskey and soda», the blond fellow said and moved in next to Tom. Tom felt his glance, felt it as though it were a touch. The bartender, his face a blank, shoved the glass to the blond boy. Tom expected the fat man to pay but Sven paid—the fat man was now walking toward the back of the room.

As Tom turned, he confronted a face of such sadness that it came almost as a shock. Blondes, Tom imagined, usually looked active and cheerful. Sven had the fair skin, the light eyes, the nearly white hair of the Scandinavian, but on the face there had settled a melancholy too deeply ingrained to be false. Sven's answering look was quick and direct.

«We have little time», he said. «Hal will be back. He has been good to me. Now he is old and big and lonely. Tell me who you are. I am a musician and I like you. Do you write?»

«I do,» Tom said. Something touched his hand. The bartender had pushed a stubby pencil near his glass. «I'm not from here, «Tom went on quickly, «I am in Plymouth with my aunts for three weeks. It is lonely there . . .»

He stopped. Sven had nudged him slightly. The bartender laughed ostentatiously and shouted: «Well, Hall, another of the same, old pal?» Hal ordered a new drink and Tom remained silent. He waited and he hoped. He couldn't give away Sven. Once in a while, the bartender smiled at him giving him some sort of a sign but Tom didn't understand. He had to wait until Hal would disappear once more. Sven had told the entire story in a few lines: the man in his thirties, the young inexperienced one in his late 'teens; the first affair, and then as the one grew older, as the friendship became a habit for the young man and a necessity for the old man the problem of whether one should be cruel and break off, or whether one should stand by out of gratitude . . .

That the bartender meant well, Tom knew: he involved Hal and Tom in a discussion after Sven had gone to the phone booth. Hal, unsuspecting, was friendly, open-minded, joking about his girth, quite informed about the latest plays, the latest compositions of Boston composers—others didn't exist, of course. When Sven returned, he introduced him with a slightly proprietary air. As soon as he pronounced the name Sven

Gulbransson, Tom suddenly knew where he had seen the face: on a poster in New York some time ago, «Debut of the New England pianist». Even on the glorifying poster, the face had seemed strangely unconventional, the eyes brooding and sad . . . But there was no chance to speak to Sven alone. A few times, the surging crowd pushed them close together, and once Tom thought Sven was hunting for his hand . . . but then he dismissed the idea.

They talked amiably enough but Tom's eyes strained toward the clock: he had only fifteen minutes left to catch the bus. He left the bar and in the little back-room, smelly like all these rooms but amazingly clear, the bartender appeared. «Leaving us already, kid?» he said, looking the other way. «Why so soon? Where you from?»

As Tom told him, he shrugged his shoulders. «Don't feel bad», he added in his gruff, friendly manner. «I like kids like you, kids with a bit of brain. Come back, stranger, any time. I work until two.» He left.

The rain lashed out against Tom. Punished, he thought, punished for my silly trip and my cowardice. Why didn't I date Sven? One sentence, 'Be here next week at seven, or 'At Mario's next Friday at eight'—but he hadn't had the courage. And the nice, ugly bartender, putting a pencil before him on the bar. Tom felt defeated and empty. His hair was getting wetter and wetter from the furious rain. Tom never wore a hat: a sure sign, Chuck had always said, of people who were unsure . . .

He hurried down the steps to the bus-terminal lounge. As he gazed into the mirror, combing his hair, he saw the two faces and right away he heard the two voices, too familiar, giddy now, uncontrolled with too much liquor . . .

«Get you,» Mike said pulling out a huge comb with silver clasp. «You sure tried to make that number.»

«Why shouldn't I?» Joe leered into the mirror lifting his eyebrows. «And he positively stared at me. Can I help it if I'm attractive?»

Tom left quickly. He caught sight of the shoe shine man staring at the two wriggling figures, and then the yell followed him up the stairs. «Tom, daaarl, where are you running to, dear? Tommy, stay here . . .» Tom rushed to the side entrance where the old bus was beginning to warm up, fumbled for his ticket, slipped in and sank onto the worn seat. Through the window he watched Mike and Joe, a bit swaying, their loud sport shirts soaking wet, searching through the waiting room. Tom dried his forehead. Thank heaven, they couldn't see him. And the bus lumbered off into the rain like a good-natured, stupid animal at a loss to understand why anyone should make it go out on such a night . . .

There were two Portuguese girls in the bus, giggling and talking to the driver—it was Harry, the one who borrowed books on fishing from Aunt Liza, and an elderly couple ready for a summer vacation and looking despondent.

Strangely enough, the trip soothed Tom. There was a certain grandeur in the night landscape through which the lights of the bus cut like knives. At least he had met someone who was worthwhile. Those two minutes talking to Sven made up for a lot. Or did they? Was he again living in phantasies? All his life, Tom had known that he possessed no firm grasp on reality. His phantasy—a useful tool for his work in the publishing house—was forever interfering. It enlarged small hurts,

making them seem like wounds that would never heal, it prevented him from seeing people for what they were by conjuring up traits that came from him, Tom, and did not belong to the others.

Sven Gulbransson—there might be a chance. He could phone Howard who worked for that musician's agency . . . but then Howard was away in Tanglewood, and besides, he had blamed Tom for Chuck's leaving.

Suddenly there was Plymouth, the Pilgrim Drugstore. Tom said goodby to the driver and walked the ten minutes up the hill, toward the house. It had stopped raining. The air was cool and clear and on the island in the bay a solitary light was on. Over the ancient cemetery floated a huge majestic moon. The city slept and Tom, all of a sudden, felt worn out. He managed to get to his room without making any noise, he had learned that early—and turned on the small bed light. On the table, Aunt Harriet had put a piece of home-made peach pie, covered by a frayed napkin. He took out his wallet, felt into the jacket for the small change and stopped.

His fingers had touched something. He took the piece of paper. It was a fragment of a napkin. Something was written on it.

«I'll be in Plymouth tomorrow, at my mother's. Call me, Plymouth 4775. Sven G.»

Tom felt the blood rushing to his head. He took off his shoes, tiptoed down the stairs into the living room. A streak of bluish moonlight was lying across the old walnut desk. He took the small phonebook and began searching . . . perhaps Sven was playing a cruel joke? The light was poor but here . . . Gulbransson . . . Just as he lifted the book to his eyes, a light was switched on. Aunt Liza stood in the doorway.

«Why Tom . . . Boston must have been . . . what are you doing with the phone book?» She stepped nearer, her eyes fell on the spot where Tom held his finger.

He moved it hastily. «Oh . . . to look up someone . . . I forgot, . . .» he stammered.

Aunt Liza closed the book softly. «My goodness,» she said, «if I had known! I could have asked Sven Gulbransson over. He lives a few blocks from here with his mother. He has seen you, he even asked me for you in the library. He is looking for someone who can write lyrics for his music.» She stopped and a slow smile spread over her face. «He wanted to meet you, Tom.»

«I'll call him, Aunt Liza,» Tom said, feeling suddenly light-hearted and a bit giddy. Aunt Liza knew. She had always known. And she didn't mind.

«Don't give me away to Harriet,» Aunt Eliza whispered. «We keep this between us. By the way, I think I'll ask Sven for lunch. Tomorrow it will clear up. And you two can go to the beach together.»