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The Recruit

Among those familiar with the South Radar Station, to stand the watch there was to be in limbo. This referred to the station's remoteness from the island's inhabited areas, and to its lack of diversions. It stood stark and lonely as a lighthouse, at the island's south end, out on a point of land surrounded by ocean, sand and sky, the companion of palm trees and seagulls.

It had been established there during the war because the site was extremely advantageous: the radar screen commanded an unimpeded sweep of three hundred twenty degrees of the ocean and sky, and the visual sweep was almost the same. In those days the distance from the main installations, six miles to the north, and the lack of anything between except mountainous jungle had been no deterrent, for the war's prosecution had required extraordinary measures. But now the war was ended, and the necessity for constant vigil was removed almost entirely; it would be only a matter of official orders — time, in other words — until the station would be abandoned.

But this had not yet happened. For most of the radar personnel, the one thing in their lives to look forward to was the day when the watch would be secured forever, and the station and its site given back to the gooney birds. To them, assignment there was an exile from civilisation even as it was in the islands. It was banishment from the land of the living. The hours hung heavy.

To some, however, it was idyllic. These were they who never became adapted to military life; they to whom its unremittingly regimented nature was rancorous; to whom it was irony that he is called a private who eats, sleeps, washes, worships and dies *en masse*. For them, the watch was a reprieve, a time of respite, a holiday. Excepting visits from the duty officer and the officer of the day, the station was left entirely to the watch; accordingly, they spent most of the time pursuing their private inclinations.

One such was a marine. He liked the station because there he could sit under a palm tree and watch the ocean and give himself up to day-dreaming, or throw off his uniform and swim or stretch his limbs in the sand and sun himself. But he was not indolent. He had the marines' *esprit de corps*, manifested in a certain self-conscious self-assurance, and he knew he had it; but he often reflected, while looking at his body, that his pride was not unjustifiable.

Another was a sailor who prized the watch because the station's situation appealed to his logic and pleased his esthetic sensibility. This produced in him a feeling of proprietorship, so that he spent much time in keeping the station shipshape and the area around it free of trash and driftwood. He was ignorant of his own surpassing beauty.

The first time these two stood the watch together, the marine was already there when the sailor arrived. He stood at the door and watched him approaching along the beach. He liked the way the other walked. He also liked the boy's appearance itself. He looked on as the sailor bent down, picked up a shell and sent it skimming far out over the water.

«How do they get into those uniforms?» he asked himself. «When you get a boy like this dressed like that, you really have something.» He gave a low whistle.

The sailor, coming inside from the brilliantly sunlit beach, was blinded by the comparative gloom of the station's interior, so that for some moments he could not recognize any object in the room. When his vision began clearing, he was surprised to see the marine so close. But he extended his hand in a cheerful greeting. The marine, impressed by this departure from the conventional rivalry obtaining between the navy and marines, returned the greeting. The marine's hand, and the warm, strong handshake pleased the sailor, so that he shook off the vestiges of blindness and looked more attentively at the marine's face. That, too, pleased him. But he was startled by something in the expression of his eyes. At other times, in other places, chancing to turn about, he had found a man or a boy watching him with this same expression; they, upon seeing him turn, had averted their gaze, but not before he had seen this look. Each time before, he had been with someone else, or had been occupied so that there was no opportunity to investigate the thing; but he had mused upon it long after. Sometimes it seemed that he almost understood what it meant; but not quite. Now it was there again, and this time he was by himself, and unoccupied. He glanced around the room to ascertain whether they were alone. They were. Apprehension smote him. He sought refuge in conversation, and mentioned the admittedly banal subject of the station's remoteness. The marine smiled, and replied that it was not necessarily an inexpedience, that there were compensations; that, indeed, this was a quality highly valued by some. The marine's steady, unequivocal look unnerved him. He could not face it. So he stared at the floor instead, and was enormously chagrined. He wished that he might be so self-assured, to enjoy whatever interior calm it was in the marine that afforded him that candour. He also wished he could fathom that expression in his eyes. It was quite enough in itself; but he also found it impossible to look for more than a moment at a handsome boy, if that boy were looking at him. It had always been that way. He wondered why. He suspected there was something wrong with him.

The marine offered him tea, and this broke the impasse, and the sailor was glad, and accepted it readily. The beverage fortified him, and he was able to converse suitably, although he noted, with considerable discomfiture, that the marine continued looking at him. He tried to be unaware of it. He strove, too, to avoid thinking how handsome the marine was, and how uncommon his behavior, because these things disquieted him, and he could not tell why. Then the radio signalled, and the marine took up the earphones. The sailor, greatly relieved by this interruption, immediately recognized the opportunity to scrutinize the marine in turn, and did so. He saw that he was, indeed, handsome; exceedingly so. He observed, too, that the uniform was admirably designed for such a one, that it was especially commendable in not having hip pockets in the pants, thus leaving that area uncluttered and neat, and the natural contours of the body uninterrupted. It occurred to him that he would

like to see the marine naked. This disturbed him. He had seen countless boys and men naked since he had begun highschool, had graduated and joined the navy, and few of them had seemed to him worth a second glance; he had thought, therefore, that when his shipmates made jokes about queers he could laugh with them, for they were not referring to him. On the other hand, they also talked about the innumerable women they knew or had known, and they always spoke in superlatives about how deliciously those women were put together. He realized that he could not remember having seen any woman built as well as this.

The marine finished the message, secured the gear and turned around. The sailor, surprised at his perusal, looked quickly away, blushing. The marine saw this and smiled. He followed the sailor to the window and laid his hand lightly upon his shoulder. The sailor, however, was not prepared to assign a forthright explanation to his own conduct; so that, while he was anything but displeased by the marine's friendliness, he withdrew and put a space between them. A long silence followed, during which they looked out of the window. Finally the marine said, «May I ask you something?»

«Yes.»

«What do you do when you go on liberty?»

«Nothing much. — Why?»

«Nothing at all?»

«Well, not quite that. I haven't been on the island long. Sometimes I go swimming but usually I go to the ship service or to the library. Sometimes to the movies at NOB. — Why do you ask?»

«Idle curiosity — or because it's significant what one does with one's free time. Certain types of men lie in their bunks and sleep or read or write letters; others sit in the PX and drink beer or coke and talk or play cards or dice or marble machines. Still others swim. Some slip off and go the village.»

«But that's out of bounds.»

«True; but that doesn't keep some away; in fact, it appears to make it more attractive.»

«Did you ever go there?» the sailor asked.

«Sure.»

«Why?»

«It was something to do.»

«What is it like there? Are there grass huts and do the natives wear sarongs? And why is it out of bounds to military personnel?»

«Do you really mean you don't know?» the marine evinced disbelief. «There are wooden shacks just like they have them in the slum areas in the States, and the people dress the same way as they do in the slums. The only difference is that they have palm trees here.»

«Then why does anyone want to go there?»

The marine stared at him. After a while he asked, «How old are you?»

«Nineteen.» The sailor strove with the problem. Then he looked hopefully at the marine and tentatively said, «Girls?» The marine nodded. Encouraged, the sailor went on, «And they all have diseases, and that's why the fellows can't go over there?»

«That's partially correct. But the main reason is that the natives simply don't want their wives and daughters fooled with. The ban is a sort of joint action by the military and the natives.»

The sailor watched the ocean. The marine watched the sailor. «What,» he said, «do you do on liberty in the States?»

«About the same things I do here, I guess.»

«Don't you ever go with girls?»

«Sure. Sometimes.»

«What happens then?»

The sailor suspected that he was being crossexamined. He glanced at the marine with a trace of annoyance; but again his courage failed the quiet, steady gaze, and he answered, «It depends on the girl.»

«Well, of course. I should ask, what kind of girls do you go with?»

«Oh, well, three or four of us fellows used to go ashore together, sometimes. That was in my San Diego days. I didn't know anybody there, so one of them always fixed me up with a date. We'd all walk around in town or go out to Balboa Park, or get something to eat and go to a movie. It was lots of fun. They were always talking and laughing. Silly, at times. But I liked them a lot. It was what happened late at night that wasn't so good.»

«What happened then?»

«Well — you see, everybody's been running around all afternoon and evening, living it up. Suddenly, everybody gets quiet, the group breaks up into pairs, each fellow with his date, and everybody sits on park benches and makes love. — You know, hugging and kissing.»

«And you didn't go for that?»

«I don't know. I guess it was all right. But it happened so suddenly. There we'd be, all together and having a bang-up time of it. Then all at once I realize I'm the only one doing it. Everybody else is quiet and looking sick at each other. Even my date has a funny look in her eye. She just walks along, not saying anything. I feel as if I had missed the boat. Everybody got the same idea at the same time, except me. — So we go sit down. My date and I just sit there. I try to think up something to say, but I never can. She doesn't say anything, either. So I can't tell whether she's tired and wants to go home or what. I look around at the others, and they're kissing up a storm; so I think maybe that's what we ought to be doing, so I put my arm around her shoulder and kiss her.»

«And then what?»

«And then she leans against me as if she's cold. — It's cold in San Diego at night — but she's got a big coat on, and I can't see how she could be cold; but they say some girls are anemic, so I don't know. Pretty soon she says something like do you have a girl friend back home, and she says why not, a nice boy like you ought to have lots of girl friends, so I say thanks for the compliment, and then I kiss her again.»

«What are the others doing by this time?»

«They usually disappear. They call over and say they're going for a coke or something and will be right back. But they don't come back, I don't see them until the next morning at muster. — The fellows, not the girls. They wink at me and ask me how was it, and when I say how

was that, they laugh like madmen, as if I had gone to bed with the girl and was trying to act as if I hadn't.»

«But you hadn't done any such thing.»

«Well, no. After all, it was the first time I'd been out with the girl. I hardly knew her.»

There was a silence. The marine rubbed his cheek. «Didn't it ever happen otherwise? I mean didn't you ever meet a girl you *liked* to sit with in the dark and make love to, and after five minutes you felt as if you had known her always?»

«Not that I remember.»

The marine made a hopeless gesture. «Incredible!»

The sailor said, «I guess there's something wrong with me.»

«It's fantastic,» the marine said, «nineteen years old, and he doesn't remember having kissed a girl and liked it.» The sailor looked confused and miserable. The marine appeared to turn the matter over in his mind. «Tell me this,» he went on, «how does the *idea* of kissing strike you?»

«I guess it's all right. Everybody seems to think it's great.»

«But you're not so sure?»

«I don't know.»

«Then we had best settle the matter. Stand where you are, and don't move. Now, don't become frightened, and please do not act silly. I'm going to kiss you, and you tell me whether you like it.»

The sailor looked frightened. «Wait a minute — *wait!*»

«What's wrong?»

«You're a boy!»

«So what?»

«Boys aren't supposed to kiss each other.»

«Why not? Who said so?»

There was no answer. But the sailor continued looking frightened. The marine proceeded. «Now get this. I think possibly the only thing wrong with you is that you have never been kissed properly. If that is the case, then you wouldn't be in a way to know whether you do or do not like it.» He placed his hands upon the sailor's shoulders and disregarding the knitted brows, leaned over and gently kissed his cheek.

«Did you like that?»

Below the knitted brows, the sailor's eyes, clouded with confusion, looked searchingly into his. «Yes.» The marine leaned forward again, and lightly caressed the sailor's lips with his own. Tongues of fire surrounded him. «Did any of these girls kiss you like that?»

«No.»

«I can't understand —» the marine stopped, a soft, warm glow had suffused the sailor's eyes. His brow was quite smooth. Moreover, he made no move to withdraw. The marine closed his arms around him, and pressed their lips together. The sailor's arms encircled his neck.

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