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The Time of Day

by Neill D. Summers

Though I am manly and muscular, for days I will carry teeth marks on my body. Two loves have I and both are men. One is Leon and the other is Chuck.

I met Leon during my senior high school year when my folks sent me to live with my aunt so I could study piano under Lemoyne. Leon was in my typing class and kept giving me side glances. I admit, I noticed him too.

Physically he was superb: wand-slender, a tanned sinewiness; proudly tall and, understandably, vain. But I had heard rumors about him, rumors to the point that I wouldn't give him the time of day if he asked.

One day at the end of class period he lingered. «Boy, you can really goose the ivories,» he grinned.

I thought he meant the typewriter and nodded toward it, noticing his gleaming smile.

«No,» he chuckled, «I mean the piano.»

I didn't like his laugh. «How would you know?»

«Coming back from football practice I pass Lemoyne's. I saw your Pontiac and heard music coming from an open window, so I stopped, lit a cigarette and listened.»

I closed the typing book and prepared to leave.

«I didn't know whether it was you playing but I like to think it was. As a rule I hate classic stuff, but jeez, I thought the one being played was the most! What was it?»

I believed his sincerity now and smiled. «It was probably me playing and it might have been a paraphrase on the Sabre Dance that you heard.» As I walked toward the door I found him walking beside me.

«You play football?»

«Not unless I have to and that's when my ole' man insists. I'm six feet, weigh one hundred and forty pounds and can run like hell, but I get the crap knocked outa me when I'm tackled.»

As we started down the hall, some girls swarmed about him. I wanted to linger but thought I should not. He was a real beat kid but I just a 'cube', Leon might easily be my passport to popularity. But right now I decided to get lost.

«Hey, what's the matter? Don't run off.» He hurried after me. The girls had moved on as he fell into step. He whistled. «Man oh man, that brunette's a knockout, huh?» He punched my shoulder lightly. «Take it from me, she's lots of fun. I saw her eyeing your curls and black eyes. Try her.»

I cleared my throat. «Uh, sure. Honestly, with piano and art and a creative writing course this year, dates are out for me.»

«Yeah? I bet you don't get much out of life. I'm cutting classes in a few days when hunting season opens. Do you hunt?»

I hung my head. «I've never had much time for sports. I don't think I could aim a rifle right.»

He chuckled. «Well, maestro, you and me's got a rifle practice date after school.»

I protested. «But I've got to get right home... that is...»

I saw the earnest look on him. «You're not joking?»

«Hell no.»

«Okay, all-American! It's a deal,» and I stuck out my hand. I gave him just as strong a grip which surprised him I imagine.

We drove our own cars to his house, he in his new convertible and I in my old Pontiac. When we entered his house he breezily introduced me to his mom and then ushered me upstairs to his room. He picked up a box of shells and a high-powered rifle and lay them on the bed. Next he pulled open a bottom bureau drawer and unearthed a mickey of whisky. He uncapped it, took a few swallows and thrust it at me. Unhesitatingly I tipped it up, but shut my eyes like a girl before swallowing. In a second he had his arm around my shoulder, patting me while I coughed.

«That's my boy,» he beamed with both pride and tenderness.

«What if your mom stops me to talk,» I gasped.

«Here. A couple drags on this weed will baffle Scotland Yard. Mom will think it's toilet water.» He put his cigarette between my lips. His slender brown hand was under my chin this time when I strangled. «My God, do you even know how to kiss a girl without drowning? Look, I don't say you have to smoke, but know how so you can smoke once in a while with the fellas casual-like.»

I pushed him away. «Too bad I don't belong to your stag night drink-it-or-bust club.»

«Oh, you heard about what we do every Thursday night?»

«And a helluva lot of other adolescent frivolous things. To hell with this rifle practice. By the time I get there we'll be playing russian roulette. You stick to your jazz, Dad, and leave me with my classics.» I dashed away downstairs. But he and his rifle reached my car about the same time I did. Finally he persuaded me to get into the convertible and we started out of town.

«Look I—I'm sorry. My dad's served me drinks since I was fourteen. I like to have a big time and just don't know when to stop. It's just a phase. I wasn't trying to corrupt you,» he grinned foolishly.

I gave him a sick smile. I was nauseated.

«These damn rough roads make me feel sexy, don't they you?»

Stunned, I met his twinkling glance. «As a matter of fact—» I slumped down in the seat and shook with laughter. «I thought that only happened to me.»

He reached over and cuffed me. «You're okay.»

Until we reached the firing range he discussed the engine in his convertible. That was the beginning.

It was a September-through-May friendship. We got drunk a couple times that winter. He stayed overnight at my place the one time we got drunk and I stayed at his several times, too. His wealthy parents had overspoiled him, I thought. A lot of Leon's life I could not share and firmly begged off. I was a scholar and I didn't want to drink and make girls as often as he did. I guess he cherished my friendship because he always sought me out in his inbetween engagements.

Leon seemed to be rather dumbfounded by my strangeness, that I could look so masculine and still be so ignorant about engines and rifles. Saying good-bye in June was agony for me since school was out and I was to return to my parents' home. I admit that sometimes with his arm around me, helping me aim the rifle, or his hand mussing my hair, or an arm across my shoulder, or even his hand on mine to steady the flame I offered his cigarette—sometimes I felt a strange ache in me to be fused somehow with this beautiful creature. But he never wrote to me although he said he would and five years have passed since then.

*

Last summer I met Chuck in a very boring spot: a writer's conference in Denver. We both came from southern Montana and after an introduction, we decided to get better acquainted over a beer.

«Have you read THE CHARIOTEER?»

«Yep. Skillfully told. Very perceptive style,» I added.

«Last summer I was playing the lead in a summer little theater group. WAITING FOR GODOT.»

«Really! Man, Becket's the most. You should see the shelves of drama I've got, and quite a bunch of LP records, too.»

Chuck looked interested. «Got a lot of classics, I hope?»

«Yep. Too much piano maybe because piano's my instrument.»

«Well now. Shall we have another beer or come up to my room? I want you to taste a bit of Renault's PURPOSES OF LOVE.»

I know I was in love. Chuck felt that way too.

*

Chuck moved to my town studio where I fixed him a makeshift den of his own, a retreat for him to work on his novel. When my friends among the teaching profession returned to high school and college faculty positions, they came and went as ever at my place, browsing among my books and records. Often as I worked, I heard the fellas arguing with Chuck and I knew he was happy. It was good after a long season of loneliness to lie down at night and to wake with an arm curved over me, my shoulder pink where his dark head cradled itself.

*

When I returned from the summer institute to my bookkeeping job, I discovered Leon being interviewed by the directors for trucker's position of distributing our novelties.

«You son of a gun,» he yelled and hugged me. «Now I am on top of the world, having you, too. My wife got the top paying job at the bank yesterday.»

My heart sank but I said pseudo-brightly, «You! Married!»

He grinned, «It was a choice between living with Uncle Sam or marrying Joyce. Who wants to sleep with Uncle Sam, so—» he threw up his hands.

He got the job. After work I said, «Let's go have a drink. I want to hear all the news.»

He looked sheepish. «Not unless you want me to sleep at your place tonight. I'd never get any chow if she caught the scent on me.»

«You, reformed!»

«Look. We're house shopping and as soon as we get settled, I'll invite you over to meet Joyce and my little girl.»

*

Leon was exuberant about his home the night I was invited. He dragged me from room to room, briskly having introduced me to Joyce, a dark bubbling girl whom I thought rather plain.

«She's a bookworm, too. You oughta get along fine with her. Now, see! These paintings are by my mother. We just finished payments on Joyce's piano.» He continued to chatter as he pulled me in and out of the rooms. He wanted my suggestions on the color of this wall. I watched and listened while he opened catalogs. «How do you like these curtains, and this material for drapes for the living room?»

Suddenly I laughed and Leon looked crestfallen. «You restore my faith in marriage.» I sobered. «How few wives ever find a husband who cares. My dad cursed mom if she even consulted him on which side of the bed he'd like to sleep.»

Leon grinned. «That's nothing. Who gets a wife that's a swell cook, likes to hunt, can clean a carburetor and repair almost anything?»

Later Leon and I cleared the table and washed the dishes while Joyce sprinkled the ironing. «I'm glad you came as our first guest,» Joyce said. «You must come often.»

*

That was the beginning of renewed friendship. The seasons passed idyllically until the inevitable climax. They insisted on including me in everything, even when I protested that married couples ought to go somewhere occasionally alone. Their eyes met and she said, «We've been married two years. We've been alone often enough.» Impromptu dinners, picnics, movies, tennis, concerts, art shows—just the three of us sharing humor and gaiety. When I invited Chuck along, Leon was polite but insisted it spoiled the usual camaraderie.

You see, Leon's life was now complete. He was happily married and I provided the male companionship he desired to complete his nature. I wished, though, he knew all about me. I urged him to read *The Theban Warriors*. Our discussions were jaundiced on his part. He could not tolerate such behavior, not even by manly men like the Theban Warrior.

During our friendship, there were supreme moments. A look suddenly comes into Leon's eyes. Whether he is at work, crossing the lawn to join me, or falling into step beside me, his look will both frighten and paralyze me. I know I should turn and move quickly away; yet I wait . . . with anticipation screaming elatedly along my nerve centers.

He will come to me with that look and cradle my ribs in his hands and perhaps hug me. «Thanks partner for everything,» he will say huskily. I find myself touching him lightly back and in our confusion both of us move apart and our hands fall. Yet, fleetingly our fingers link as we move into step beside each other.

For days I carry the beauty of those moments, just as I carry Chuck's teeth marks on my body.

Chuck returned from a holiday of his own and we were so overjoyed to see each other that we did not think of anything but the moment's happiness. People always come and go at the studio. Usually they knock. A high school youth opened the door and burst in. He stared incredulously. «Good gosh!» he gasped and fled.

You know the rest. How rumor spreads.

I didn't go to work the next day. Chuck and I were packing things. He was out at the car. I was tying a blanket around the piano, getting it ready for the transfer when I heard Leon speak behind me. «Hello, partner.»

Tears misted my eyes for a moment. His voice was like a loved strain of music. We stared at each other.

His voice alien and cold decided, «Then it's true.»

«What the heck do you think,» I banged the piano top. «I'm not moving for my health.»

«Just tell me it was for kicks you did what Joey's telling people.»

«God bless the blundering Joeys in this world. I don't give a damn what anyone but you believes. No, partner, it wasn't for kicks.»

He swore, and exploded, «My best buddy a lousy dirty queer.»

«*Dirty?*»

«Yeah, *dirty!*» His bright eyes were steel.

He kicked my wastebasket with venom. It caved in just like my heart felt. Leon passed out of sight.

Soon Chuck came in and put his arm around my shoulder and we leaned on each other.

As I said before, I wouldn't give Leon the time of day if he asked. Now Chuck had taken the car to the service station.

Then Leon was leaning in the doorway, flicking ash off his cigarette. Finally he spoke. «You just can't involve yourself like I have in someone's life and then walk out. I keep thinking about our good times together. How I made you in one day smoke, drink and shoot . . . and how I put lineament on your bruised shoulder from the rifle's kick.»

«You knew I was different then,» I accused. «It's degrading, Leon, when you have to seek out someone because you're going crazy with loneliness. That's why Chuck and I are together . . .»

Leon swallowed. «I know, I apologize, I—»

«Did you think I don't want all the things you have, too? I need Chuck in my life to make things have meaning. We don't sit around now remembering times of happiness to keep warm by. We're living our happiness just as Joyce and the baby symbolize yours.»

«I know, partner. You tried to show me with the *The Theban Warriors* how good it can be.» Suddenly he was looking at me that special way and we were moving toward each other, comrades again, our fingers briefly linking in shy confusion. Moving away he said, «Joyce asked me to ask both of you to dinner.»

«Thanks. We—we'll come. Gosh, I'm starved. It's that time of day, isn't it?»

«About the wastebasket—»

«Aw heck, I was looking for something to kick right then, too, but you got to it first,» I grinned.

The Age of Rejection

One of my friends, who resided for several years in the Near East, recently came up with this comment, «Over in Europe one finds a different psyche. In the Near East, for instance, it is possible to find a lover who will be devoted to one. Here in America it is much more difficult, but that is mainly because homosexuality is far more neurotic in our country than it is in other countries.»

While our readers are chewing this bit of cud either with acceptance or resistance of it, another friend's interpretation should likewise be considered. He claims the reason there is so much unhappiness and frustration in the American gay world is because ours is primarily an age of rejection rather than one of open-hearted acceptance of experience.

It is with some regret we feel obligated to pass on these cynical though perhaps accurate remarks, but we do so in case they may be of some assistance, and may have some validity.