

Ramon

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RAMON

The youth wore a bright red, Italian-style, turtleneck sweater with a glaring design. The sweater, the studiously disdainful look, and the bar in which he was sitting all worked together, so that it was not difficult to picture a card on the table in front of him reading, «To be Had.»

Carl entered the bar and passed the table of the bright sweater without realizing that he would be sitting with the youth in a few minutes. Pierre had spoken to him of a nice boy he would show him that afternoon and had left the rest up to Carl's imagination.

Pierre came in a few minutes later and joined Carl. He had hardly sat down when the bright sweater was standing at their table. His name was Ramon, Pierre explained, but, in spite of the Spanish name, he was German-born in Bavaria. Ramon sat down casually and looked at Carl with a blank expression. The usual pause of sizing each other up followed. Ramon spoke laconically. The three of them, so disparate in age, sat almost silently. Pierre conveniently noticed some friends at another table and excused himself to greet them.

Carl looked at Ramon. «Well, why such a long face?» he asked. Ramon gave him the blank stare again. «One has his problems,» he replied. «Oh?» Carl hoped that his questioning tone would get more of a response, but it didn't. The conversation hung. He tried to think of something to say, even though he knew that the purpose of the meeting was as clear to Ramon as it was to himself. Ramon seemed lost in thought and showed not the slightest interest in Carl sitting across from him. Carl couldn't start the conversation, so, realizing that the youth really did seem to have his problems, he decided to finish the day with him. He had planned to do so several days after the initial meeting, but it was Saturday, and the rest of the day was free.

Pierre came back to the table, and Carl told him that he had invited Ramon to dinner. They smoked another cigarette and then left the bar together. Pierre had to do some shopping, and, with his knowing, grinning-wink, he turned and left them. Carl appreciated Pierre's help, but that knowing wink was always a little irritating.

Carl opened the door of his small apartment to the unexpected guest. «Après vous.» He smiled and extended his hand through the doorway. «Merci, Monsieur.» Carl thought that the blank expression had softened for an instant. Ramon walked in as calmly as though he lived there.

They had sat quietly opposite each other over a couple of cups of coffee before Carl regained his composure. He looked up from his cup and noticed that Ramon had turned and was intently reading the titles in the book shelves. He studied the handsome profile for a minute, and, with unfeigned sincerity, asked: «Ramon, what are your problems?»

Ramon explained that his father had been killed by the Nazis in Buchenwald. His mother had married again and had six children by her second husband. They were poor when the war ended, and, when he was eight, they had started handing him from one relative to another. Most of the time he had lived with his uncle who had been made his legal guardian.

Ramon went on, «You know, Carl, my mother never cared much for me, and I didn't care much for her. But sometimes, I have the feeling that I want to throw my arms around someone. It doesn't make any difference who it is—man or woman. It's just that I'd like to feel really the love that I never felt when

I was a child. Is that hard to understand? ... Well ... do you know what I mean?»

The uncle had sent him to a machine-tool factory in which he continued to work after serving his apprenticeship. «Oh, sure, I had a girl ...» he continued to ramble on, «... I've always been sort of half and half, I guess ...» He talked about his beloved racing bicycle and how strong his legs had become from the trip over the border, through the Gotthard pass, and on to Tessin. «Well, there I went broke, but that was no problem because I had a friend who was a millionaire ...» Strange, Carl thought with amusement, how they all turn out to be millionaires. «... He gave me some money, and I went on to Luzern. There I met a great fellow. He had a beautiful apartment, and I stayed there for eight days ... besides that he gave me ten Francs a day!» Ramon had called the factory and got an unpaid extension of his vacation.

He returned to the factory, but not for long. The millionaire (well, maybe just a hundred thousand!) in Basel and the free-handed host in Luzern had opened his eyes to easier ways of making a living. He could hardly be blamed for realizing that his good looks, youth, health, and beautiful build were all the capital that he needed. He had his girl in Germany and didn't have to prove his masculinity. Why submit to the demands of a greasy factory when one could find a job in Switzerland so easily? The hotels, alone, were always in need of help, and most of it had to come from over the border.

He went to Bern and worked five months in a hotel as a porter. Just why he left Bern after a scant half-year he didn't explain. Perhaps it was the enchantment of a larger city, the wish for more adventures or something new, but, at any rate, on his racing bicycle—the most cherished of his possessions—he came to Zurich. It took him two weeks to find a job. «It wasn't an easy time;» he explained. «I slept almost every night in a different bed with a different person.» He finally found another job as a porter.

The owner of the small hotel was married and the father of four children. «From the very first minute he wanted me in his nest. That's all right. I have often nested for money, sure; but, you know, I have often gone with someone out of sympathy—particularly when I met someone I could really philosophize with.» Carl was surprised to hear Ramon use a word like «philosophize». «I just didn't want to with him, though. So, he followed around behind me for two months, and, after seeing he really wasn't going to have me, he fired me. Oh, well ...» Ramon paused thoughtfully. «... There is always some reason for getting fired, I guess. That was two weeks ago. I haven't found another job yet, for the hotel business is off.»

That brings him up to date, Carl thought, as he got up to pour coffee again. No work, no room, and just four more months to go on his Swiss residence permit. Ramon had already said that he didn't have a room. He had lived with a friend for a month until the friend's mother found him comfortably ensconced in her son's bed. She immediately gave the son the alternative of either putting Ramon out or being disowned. The son chose mother, and Ramon lost his bed.

Ramon had gotten up and sat down in Carl's comfortable chair. He leaned back easily, and they looked at each other silently. Both knew the other look only too well. The older seeks the brief moment that means everything at his age, and the younger is calmly willing to pay for the night and a few Francs with his body. There is no decision for the youth: he needs the money and a bed. Carl had instinctively felt that, with certain omissions, Ramon's story was

certainly honest. God, he thought, what's the difference? One buys, one sells; it's all the same.

With the overhead light out the flickering light of the candles concealed the difference in age between the two, and Carl was pleased to note that Ramon relaxed.

An hour later as they started to make the divan into a second bed Ramon looked at Carl and asked hesitantly: «Would you mind if I read a few minutes before going to bed?» «Not at all,» Carl answered, «I usually do the same.» The youth reached in the breast pocket of his jacket, and Carl's eyes popped when he saw the title of the dog-eared paperback: it was Stefan Zweig's *Three Masters*—the biographies of Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoevski. Carl asked how he came to be reading it, and Ramon explained that he had recently read *Crime and Punishment*; it had made such an impression on him that he wanted to read the biography of the author—and pocket editions were cheap. An hour later they turned out the lights.

It was nine o'clock when Carl awoke, but as it was Sunday, there was no need to get up early. He lolled another fifteen minutes savoring the delicious calm and relaxation of his muscles before getting up and going barefooted over to the couch. Ramon was still deeply asleep, lying on his back with one arm crooked under his head. His shoulders were uncovered, and the smooth olive skin made a beautiful contrast with the white sheet beneath. How much more beautiful, Carl thought, is the sleep of youth—more beautiful than his own! He sat for a long time looking at Ramon. Then, getting up, he bent down and took the beautiful head in both hands. He kissed him gently and whispered. «Ramon . . .» As if by pure reflex the arms reached out and pulled Carl down. He sat down quickly on the edge of the couch and took the youth, still half-asleep, in his arms, burying his face in Ramon's neck.

These were critical minutes for Carl. He knew that nothing would have been more natural than that he once again submerge himself in the nearness and warmth of the form beside him, but he held himself back. It was hard to do. He knew only too well that the border between the youth's heart-felt relaxation during the night and the repetition in the hard light of day was a dangerous one to cross. He knew that it would take very little to reverse the desire and affection that he knew he had won—if only for a night.

A few minutes later he pulled his head up and looked at Ramon. Ramon smiled. Carl kissed him lightly and got up to wash and shave. Ramon stayed in bed until Carl came out and then followed him—his youthful nakedness like a jewel in the morning sun as he moved across the room. However, after Carl had laid out the breakfast, Ramon pulled on his long-tailed, green-checked sport shirt before he seated himself opposite at the table. The modesty was understandable, for Ramon was well aware of both the difference in their ages and the fact that they were in entirely different situations.

The morning went by in comfortable idleness. Carl warmed a couple of cans for lunch. They had fruit cocktail for dessert, also out of a can, and some more coffee.

Some friends had invited Carl out for the afternoon, but, before the good-bye, there was always the distasteful business of the check to settle. Why Carl doubled it was easy to explain: simply a matter of the guilt he felt. True, he worked hard enough to maintain his own existence and security, but, even though Ramon had chosen it of his own free will, Carl couldn't help but feel just as

responsible for Ramon's precarious existence. How easy it would be for Ramon to turn down that one way street that leads only to crime and prison. Who, actually, was the guilty party? After all, would the youth have chosen this path if there were not so many who were willing to line his pockets for doing so?

By Christian Graf.

Translation: H. H.

A Midsummer Night's Dream . . .

by Edo

I was furious with the weather-god. To play tricks on me like this! If only I had known that Saturday would turn into such a lovely day I would have made plans. Now here I was, on my own and with not even any schemes at all. But no, this must on no account spoil my happy mood.

I rushed into the bedroom, turned the contents of my cupboard upside down, took everything needed for camping out, and finally loaded my bicycle with it. It wasn't so much, after all. A tent, two air-mattresses, and a double-sleeping bag. But why two mattresses and a double sleeping bag? Well, even when cycling on my own I like to think: «You never can tell . . .» And a double-sleeping bag is—let's be frank about it, gentlemen—something wonderful. You will have to be spared a list of its advantages. Try one out for yourself.

I left Zurich shortly after noon and cycled through the valley of the Sihl towards the Lake of Zug. I was riding along comfortably, in no hurry, and my heart was easy and carefree. What a treat—to be able to put the town and all its eternal noise behind me for two whole days. I inhaled the scented air deeply. A thousand little things pleased my eyes, and I thought the world was more beautiful than ever before.

Half an hour later I passed a village where I had worked and lived two years ago. I liked to remember that pleasant time. The charming scenery, the quiet lanes—I lost myself in reveries. Suddenly I was forced back to reality. Someone had called my name.

I looked back. For a moment my heart was beating wildly. I wanted to get off my bicycle but the other person had a bicycle too and had come abreast before I had had time to collect my thoughts.

«Hello, Peter. Where have you been all this time? Nothing heard of you for ages. Did you forget us all so quickly?»

Well, this was Ernest from the local sports' club. The same lock of blond hair fell over his forehead—just as I remembered it. The same silky sheen of his hair; the same light blue eyes full of questions, and the very same full red lips—exactly as he had looked two years ago, a country lad, good-natured and quiet. He knew neither hurry nor haste. No cares shadowed his brows.

How did it come about that I knew him? At the time I had been living in the small village I had just passed. It had been a problem to know how to spend the long frosty winter evenings. Though I heartily disliked clubs of any kind, I had finally made up my mind to join the local sports' club. When I timidly entered the premises on the first night, I expected to be shown the usual cold shoulder from the local members; there is always that slight hostility towards strangers and new members. But I had been wrong. People were very friendly, right from the start.

It was a custom around there that the first-born son always had the same Christian name as his father and grandfather had before him. It may be a nice old