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SKID ROW, LOS ANGELES

By Alan Anthony

A boy of college age stood at the open door of a rescue mission on Skid Row in Los Angeles in the early evening, listening to the minister speak to «lost» men wearily sitting on wooden benches. He was about to leave when a man in his late thirties, slightly drunk, and somewhat stronger and better looking than most of the men on the street, came up to him and asked for a cigarette. The boy gave him a Pall Mall.

«That preacher doesn't know what he's talking about,» the man said.

«Really?» the boy replied. «How do you know? You just came.»

«Listen, kid, I've been around.»

«Well, don't talk so loud,» the boy said, and moved away from the door.

The man followed. «What is a nice looking kid like you doing down here on Skid Row?» he asked.

«Just passing through. I got off the bus at the wrong stop.»

The man moved close to the boy and took his hand into his. The boy jerked away.

«You know, I'm the biggest joker there ever was,» the man said, and placed his hands on the boy's shoulders.

«That's quite a statement,» the boy said as he moved away.

«Yeah. There's nothing I haven't done,» he said following the boy down the street.

«That's taking in quite a bit of territory,» the boy said.

«I've been all over. I've done everything. I've worked on boats and sailed around the world. I've hopped freight trains across the country. I've shot Japs in the Pacific. I've worked on a newspaper. I've played football for the University of Illinois.»

«You went to the University of Illinois?»

The man nodded.

«How long did you go?»

«Four years. I graduated.»

«What did you get your degree in?»

«Business. And I was a damn good football player.»

«Where did you work on a newspaper?»

«In Chicago, after I got out of the Army. I was a reporter for two weeks. I got drunk and the city editor fired me. Both of us were too hot-headed to get along.»

As the man talked he moved his hands from the boy's shoulders to his arms, and then to his wrists. The boy kept moving away. He noticed several men standing on the curb watching them, and started to walk away.

The football player from the University of Illinois followed. «Do you want a drink?» he asked the boy. «Let's go down the street for a drink.»

«All right,» the boy replied, «and then I have to catch a train for Long Beach.»

They began walking down the street. The man spoke and joked with many of the men they passed.

«You seem to know everyone around here,» the boy said.

«I'm the mayor of this street.»

«Really?»

«Yeah. And a nice kid like you shouldn't be down here.»

«Why? I'm capable of taking care of myself. I told you, I got off the bus at the wrong stop. I'm on my way to the Pacific Electric Station to transfer to the train for Long Beach.»

They crossed the street, and the man greeted more cronies. They entered an almost deserted bar at the end of the block. The man ordered a glass of cheap wine and the boy asked for a bottle of beer.

«Can I borrow your comb?» the man asked.

«I don't have one,» the boy replied. There was a short silence, and the boy reached into his coat pocket and brought out a small comb. «Here, I forgot I had this.»

The man combed his hair and gave the comb back to the boy.

The bartender brought the drinks. «I hope you have money to pay for this,» the man said.

The boy paid fifty cents for the drinks

«Let's get out of here,» the man said.

«Drink your wine. I thought you wanted a drink,» the boy said.

«I've already drunk too much,» the man replied.

«What is your name?» the boy asked.

«My name is Jones, Johnny Jones. Did you ever hear of me? I was a star player for the Illini.»

«No,» said the boy, «but I don't know the names of many star football players.»

«Do you go to college in Los Angeles, kid?» the man asked.

«Yes. I go to the University of Southern California.»

«Played a great game against your school once,» the man said.

They left the bar, and the boy turned toward Main Street. The man followed. They passed a group of men who hollered, «Hallo Johnny.»

«Come over this way,» Johnny said. «I want these guys to meet you.»

The boy ignored the request and continued walking. Johnny caught up with him and linked his arm through the boy's.

«Hey, let's go in that theatre across the street,» he said to the boy. «It's only thirty cents apiece.»

«I don't want to see a show,» the boy said, «I'm on my way to see my cousin in Long Beach.»

«It's the only place we can go. No one will bother us there. Come on.»

«No. I'm going to catch my train to Long Beach.»

«Come on,» the man insisted. «We're brothers, aren't we? We understand each other.»

«We might be brothers,» the boy said. «But I'm not going in that theatre.»

There was a silence. Then the boy said, «Where do you live?»

Johnny was silent.

«Where do you sleep at night? Do you have an address?»

Johnny remained silent.

«Where did you sleep last night?» the boy asked.

«I don't know. I'm sick. I'm lonesome.»

«If I had the money I would give it to you for a room. I'll buy you a cup of coffee, and then I have to catch my train,» the boy said.

«I don't want coffee,» Johnny said. «All I want is some understanding.» He placed his arm around the boy's waist, and this time, despite the glances of the people on the street, the boy didn't remove it.

«I know how you feel, Johnny, but I must be leaving.»

«No, you don't know how I feel,» Johnny said, removing his arm.

«Here, I'll give you some money.» The boy took some change from his pocket. «This is all I have, except enough to get me to Long Beach and back.»

Johnny accepted the money, peevishly.

The boy placed his hand on Johnny's shoulders. «Goodbye, Johnny,» he said. «Take care of yourself.» The boy walked away, and after a few steps turned and called, «So long, Johnny.»

Johnny stood motionless. He answered with only a slight nod of the head. He put the change into his pocket, and stood looking at the boy until he vanished around the corner.

CONSOLATION

As for your glee at seeing your lover's receding hairline—ah god, that's something we all feel, as we sit and watch the young arrogant ones grow old, fade, turn grey, grow pots, get bald—a great many times in my life, on being slurred or offended by one of those pipsqueaks, I have either thought or sometimes said aloud—«Well, that's the only consolation of growing old: we can watch you decline, lose your looks, grow fat or bald—and then the arrogant refusal gradually changes to the hunt, and on down the line, until you begin to pay for sex—and I want to be around and alive to watch you come to such a point.» Trouble with young punks (and I was the same) you think either that a) you're gonna live forever, and still look the same as at 18; or b) that you're never gonna live to be 21, and so it doesn't matter. This all boils down to the generalization that the young believe that any situation which exists at any given moment is going to be permanent; they have no conception of change or compromise . . .

(From a letter.)

