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WARWICK

by George Miller

I had seen the type often enough before. West London is full of them.

Walk through Earl's Court or South Kensington, explore the coffee bars on the fringes of Chelsea and you will see fifty, a hundred Warwicks: square-jawed, broad-shouldered young men, with their well-muscled bodies held in attitudes of self-confidence.

We English treat them with a mixture of amused tolerance and chilly disapproval. They come from the far corners of the Commonwealth, so in a sense they are our own flesh and blood, but they cheerfully disregard every nicety and unwritten rule of English behaviour. They mock us with their aura of openness, sunshine and informality—and their belief that life is there to be lived, every second of the day.

Yes, I had seen the type often, and instinctively I had shied away. Their easy masculinity was too attractive—and much too dangerous.

My life had been secure for ten years—a solid job, a carefully chosen range of interests, an even more carefully cultivated facade of respectable normality. But there had to be sacrifices. I couldn't afford risks, like the gay friends I had once known at university and in the army, or the hazardous game of deliberately flirting with temptation. The Warwicks of the world were intriguing shadows on the outside of my life.

And they would have remained shadows if I hadn't been working late that night, perhaps feeling a little lonelier than usual. I looked up, and there he was in the general office, with his arms akimbo and his eyes narrowed into that half-aggressive, half-mischievous look I later grew to know so well. He hadn't seen me yet, and I stared at him unashamed. His was the rugged beauty of a desert rock, carved by wind and sand. There was no softness here, only strength, candour and an instinctive grace.

And as I watched I felt desire seize me by the throat.

He turned, and saw me standing in the doorway staring at him avidly. I started and flushed: it was a long time since I had allowed anyone as obviously «straight» as Warwick to see me with my guard down.

The stranger grinned and I relaxed. He had not noticed, and automatically I slipped into the familiar role of the conventional, imperturbable Englishman.

«Evening mate,» he said with a quick nod in my direction.

«With an accent like that you could only be Australian,» I replied with an answering smile.

«Strewth—gave myself away.» He chuckled and shoved out a large, sun-tanned hand. «My name's Warwick Pearson. I used to work for this mob in Melbourne.»

«I'm Michael Matthews, George Cubitt's personal assistant. He's our European Manager.»

«Glad to know you, Mike...»

He draped himself over a chair and began telling me about his trip over to England. He had worked his passage to Ceylon as deckhand on a small freighter and then followed the long, dusty trail, hitch-hiking across India, the Middle East and Europe.

I listened entranced. There was something infectious about Warwick's sheer joy of living. The physical discomforts, the drunken parties, the bitter-sweet

beauty of Isfahan, Petra and Baalbek, the moments of real danger, combined into a lusty adventure, more Elizabethan than twentieth century.

The story came to an end—and there was a long, comfortable moment of silence. My mind swam with exotic names: Agra, Kabul, Damascus and Mykonos. I looked at him and smiled a warm, secret smile.

But the habit of ten years was strong, warning me to leave now before it was too late. Too late? For what? For ten years now I had been a prisoner of my own choice. A good job—but it was eight years now since I had been promoted; an impeccable circle of friends—who bored me stiff; secure—and wretchedly lonely. How old was I—34? Yet there were times I felt more like 50.

I tried to stop the dangerous line of thought. I must be insane. I had known this virile young Australian less than an hour, and already I was questioning my security, my respectability, my job.

«Do you think I'll land a job here?» Warwick was asking anxiously. «If I don't move into better digs soon I'll be carried off in triumph by the cockroaches. There are enough of the bastards in my room to pull Ben Hur's chariot.»

He smiled again, and with a wild mixture of delight and despair I knew that if he were refused a job, it would be over my dead body . . .

*

It had never occurred to me that Warwick, too, might be lonely after a fashion. Not lonely for people—like any other goodlooking, amusing, self-assured youngster in London he had an enormous circle of acquaintances, casual girl friends and drinking companions—but lonely for a particular kind of person and a particular atmosphere.

It had never occurred to me that I might provide just that person and atmosphere: a slightly older and wiser shoulder to lean on, a companion set apart from the ever-changing migrations of Earl's Court where today's best friend might be 6,000 miles away next week, and a comfortable, cosily-furnished flat with the unmistakable stamp of «home».

Later I understood all this, but when Warwick first came to work for the firm, I was all doubts and nervousness. Did I dare invite him to dinner, or for a Sunday excursion in my car to the Cotswolds? What must he think of a man, ten years his senior, seeking his company at every opportunity? Surely he wondered why there were no women in my life? What were my motives anyway for courting his friendship so ardently?

This was the hardest question of all to answer. Lust came into it, of course, for I still reacted violently to his physical presence, but the more I saw of Warwick, the more I enjoyed his company for its own sake. Our times together were lively, stimulating—and hilariously funny. It was impossible to remain with him long and be pompous, staid or prematurely middle aged.

My motives may have been ambiguous, but in Warwick's open straightforward world, there was no room for subterfuge. He responded to my hospitality with the only coin he knew—the warmth of true brotherhood. Within a month I had become his mentor, confidant and drinking companion.

He would call round at my flat two or three times a week to chat, drink or play records. He would talk, casually, haphazardly, about his family and friends, his life in Australia, his attitude to women, morals, religion—in fact anything that came into his head.

He told me about the girl Daphne—«the long suffering Daphne,» he called her—waiting for him patiently in Melbourne.

He told me of his plans for the future: another vagabond tour through Europe and then, perhaps, down to Africa. «Zanzibar . . . Malindi . . . Sofala,» he would say, savouring the words like vintage wine. «They're part of the stuff dreams are made of, mate—my dreams anyway . . .»

I smiled, and dreamed with him.

And there were times when we would both sit quietly, comfortably, totally relaxed—wrapped in the silence of a friendship that needed no words to express itself.

Warwick's vision of life was splendidly uncomplicated. He sensed the turbulent undercurrents of my character, and became a fierce guardian of the honour of Michael Matthews.

«The trouble with you is that you're too busy being a bloody English gentleman all the time,» he exploded one night. We had spent the day hiking happily in the Chilterns and now we were relaxing over a beer in my flat. «I know you're not happy at the office, but all you do is smile and bend over so they can take another kick. You know you deserve promotion. Why don't you stick up for your rights?»

«I can't stop being the way I am,» I said quietly, looking at the sensuous curve of his body sprawled against a nest of cushions in the corner.

«You bet your sweet life you can. Why can't you come out of your shell at the office, the way you do with me? Those bastards you work with talk about you as though you're an old man.» He shook his head hopelessly, took another swing of beer, and stretched himself with the voluptuous abandon of a great cat. «You're as bad as Martin,» he said moodily.

«Martin—who's he?»

Warwick gestured vaguely in reply. When he spoke eventually his voice was gentle with the weight of memory. «Funny, I haven't thought of him for years. He taught me Maths, in my final year at school, but what he really wanted to do was lecture English literature at university. Only he was scared he wouldn't make the grade.

«We became kind of special mates—and, boy, was he full of complexes!» There was a long pause, and then: «I talked him into throwing up his safe job and now he's a senior lecturer at Sydney University.»

«And you plan to do the same for me, God forbid!»

Warwick chuckled, yawned and closed his eyes. I went over to the radiogram to change the record. When I came back he was asleep, his head thrown back tousle-haired among the cushions.

I looked at him and winced. If only he wasn't so damned attractive!

Warwick was desire. Everything about him, from the strong lines of his mouth and chin to the body-tight jeans and heavy commando boots was desire. I stood over him and stared at the muscular arms set against powerful shoulders, the curve of his chest, the ripple of the stomach muscles and the suggestion of hidden power below. I stared, and admired and hungered.

I knew that I would only have to kneel to brush my lips against his, lying full and slightly parted beneath me.

But in the same instant I knew I wouldn't. He had shown me his coin was golden; I could not adulterate it with brass.

Besides—and I leaned over almost light-headed to shake him into wakefulness—besides, I could sense there were some exciting changes ahead for me.

*

Looking back on it, I suppose I must have been changing from the very first day I met Warwick.

Imperceptibly Michael Matthews was turning into another character named Mike Matthews who existed originally in the mind of a husky young Australian from Melbourne. Mike Matthews did not shrink from the world and its temptations. He played squash and tennis, attended and threw parties and even—though Warwick never realized this—found the courage to look up some old university and army friends he hadn't seen for almost ten years.

And Warwick too was changing, losing the rough edges, gaining sophistication and knowledge. Each of us had struck a responsive chord in the other. As the months fled he borrowed a little of my stability, and some of his glitter seemed to have rubbed off on me.

It took George Cubitt to write the epitaph for the old Michael Matthews. Early in spring he called me in one day to tell me I was being promoted to Assistant Manager from the end of the month.

While I tried to wrestle with the sudden onrush of good fortune he added: «I might say Michael there have been times when I wondered whether my hunch in making you my personal assistant would ever pay off. Oh you've always been a steady worker, but I don't have to tell you we expect more than that from our senior executives. Somehow you seemed to lack,» he waved a hand uncertainly, «I don't know—flair . . . confidence. But this last year you've changed, Michael. Whatever it was you needed, you've found it at last . . .»

*

But spring brought something else as well. Outside the days were lengthening, London was bursting into blossom—and Warwick was growing restless.

He came into my new office one morning, sat down, and scuffed the carpet uncomfortably with his foot once or twice.

«Mike, I've been thinking. It's time I was moving on. It's almost May and I still have to see half of Europe. Besides—there's Daphne to think of too.» He lowered his eyes as I stared at him searchingly, anxiously. «I guess I'd have been on my way already if it hadn't been for you, cock. I—I'd like you to take this as a formal resignation. I want to leave at the end of the month.» He stopped, embarrassed by his speech.

«Will you be back?» I asked in a small, level voice. But already I felt an aching loneliness in my heart.

He smiled wanly. «Maybe.» He leaned forward suddenly. «This will be a bigger wrench than you'll ever know, Mike. But I must go.»

Wretchedly, I cast around for something—anything—to stall off the loneliness. And at the back of my mind I caught the ghost of an idea. «But the end of the month is so soon—and I had plans . . .»

«What do you mean—plans?» I saw the flicker of interest and the idea took shape.

«Well, the firm owes me 12 weeks accumulated leave, and I'd thought of booking a passage on a cargo ship to Zanzibar. That is, if you're interested. But, of course, if you're leaving . . .»

«Zanzibar?» He spoke in wonder, like a little boy. Then his face lit up with that wonderful smile of his. «Zanzibar! You old bastard, I'll bet you only thought of it this minute.»

I flushed.

«But it's a great idea, mate. I reckon I'll be through with Europe in three months. As long as the ship leaves after July it's perfect, and if it leaves earlier—why, I'd bolt through Europe like a Bondi tram for a chance like this. Maybe I can join the ship in the Med. somewhere.»

Within a week it was all arranged. A Dutch cargo ship was due to sail for East Africa in the first week of August. Warwick would come aboard at Gibraltar, the first port of call.

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Now that Warwick had gone, I realized for the first time what he had really meant to me.

He had been more than just a friend, for Warwick to me was both man and symbol. Symbol of desire and achievement, the star to which I'd hitched my wagon. Now the man was gone, but the symbol remained.

I missed him desperately, but the new life continued. There were still friends and acquaintances, games, parties and picnics and drinks after work. And of course there were still the old, gay friends who had welcomed me back without malice for the eight, lost, timid years . . .

Then, early in July, Warwick arrived back in London unexpectedly.

«What on God's earth are you doing here?» I asked delightedly when he phoned one Sunday morning.

«I was on my way from Scandinavia to Spain, but I was offered a lift through to Calais, and here I am. Beauty, isn't it? But I must leave tomorrow. Can I kip at your place tonight?»

«Of course you can. I'll borrow a stretcher . . .»

«What the hell—your bed's big enough for six! Lets see if we can rustle up a party somewhere.»

I laughed. This was just like old times. «Never mind. I'll call up some of your pals and invite them over tonight. It should be quite a party . . .»

It was.

Sadly, tipsily, I surveyed the debris afterwards. Warwick was still propped up against the cushions in the corner of the room, nursing a third of a bottle of Scotch tenderly in his arms.

I lowered myself on to the divan and looked at him. And as I looked I felt my love and yearning beat out like a living thing.

Warwick smiled, a lopsided friendly grin. «I'm plonked, mate, but I wan' you t'know this is th' best day I've had in two months . . .»

Suddenly the well of tenderness overflowed.

«Warwick, the best day I ever had was the day you barged into my life. Everything worthwhile since then has been thanks to you . . .»

«Crap!» he said gruffly.

I went on, but the tenderness was under control now: «Do you remember

you once told me about a schoolmaster friend of yours—what's his name? Martin. You threatened to do the same for me as you'd done for him. Well you've succeeded. You've made another Martin of me and I'm grateful Warwick—mate.»

The atmosphere of the flat was charged suddenly with the tension of words submerged by emotion. My chest was tight and my mind swam with the words I dare not say. But Warwick had sensed it too. One does not need words to communicate an emotion so deeply felt.

He raised his eyes and in them there was a new expression I had not seen before. An expression compounded of tenderness, expectancy and a penetration that frightened me, as though he were peering into the depths of my soul.

Abruptly he stood up. He was frowning now, and his voice was steady.

«We've both had too much to drink, cock. It's time for bed.»

The spell was broken. Warwick began preparing for bed while I filled the bathtub and relaxed in a hot bath. When I returned to the main room Warwick was asleep and the bottle of Scotch—empty now—was lying on its side by the broad divan.

I shook my head, drew back the blankets, and paused, half-shocked, half-intrigued. He was sleeping in the nude. Naked—in my bed. Naked—and blind drunk.

I stared and felt the familiar symptoms of desire: the moist churning at the pit of my stomach, the catch at the back of my throat, the rubbery tingling in every limb.

But even as I desired I knew Warwick was quite safe that night. Now, of all times, I could not afford to jeopardize our friendship. Drunk he might be—but what if he awoke and caught me in the act? I shivered and slipped between the covers.

How long I lay there I cannot say. It seemed like an hour; it was probably nearer ten minutes.

Warwick was safe, but that didn't make his presence less disturbing. I wanted desperately to sleep, to plunge gratefully in oblivion—but my body picked up his nearness like a sensitive aerial and transmuted it into spinning, uncontrollable fantasies.

I could feel the warmth beating outwards from his limbs, so close surely, that he would only have to shift his position slightly for us to touch. And if we touched...

Warwick rolled over on to his side and the fantasy was suddenly part of reality. A hand grazed my knee, a foot brushed against my instep. I froze, not breathing, not reacting, not even daring to think.

Warwick's breathing was still the breathing of a man who slept. But now the hand slid tentatively inside the leg of my shorts, across my thigh. Another hand touched my side and strong, supple fingers pressed upwards to enfold the nipple.

Sharp arrow points of pleasure stirred my consciousness—and yet I lay mute and limp and unbelieving. There must be an explanation, there must be...

The lips I had hungered for so long brushed against my ear, and I could hear the straining of his breath as the hands grew bolder.

Oh Warwick, Warwick, why did we wait so long?

Yet—there must be an explanation. Stiff, quivering, I hesitated an instant longer before surrendering to the broken dam of passion.

And in that instant I had my answer.

«Daphne,» Warwick whispered thickly, «Oh Daphne!»

And now I was just a man lying in bed with a hot, alien hand pressed against his chest, and a drink-flushed face nuzzling his ear.

Carefully, gently, I removed the hand, straightened my shorts, and rolled over to the extreme edge of the bed.

*

Warwick was still asleep when I left for work next morning, but he made a subdued, hungover appearance at the office to say goodbye.

He made no reference to the previous night.

A week later I received a hastily scrawled postcard from Madrid to thank me for the night's accommodation. And then—silence . . .

I tried to forget everything and concentrate on the holiday. But a false note had been struck, and I knew things could never be the same again.

Then at last it was sailing day, and a fresh-faced young officer was showing me to the cabin that was to be my home for the next four weeks.

«You'll see it's a single berth, sir,» he murmured as he opened the door, «but there have been one or two last minute cancellations and you can move to a double cabin if you like once we're underway.»

«I thought I'd booked a double cabin. My friend is joining the ship in Gibraltar. We made our reservations together.»

The officer took a puzzled look at his list. «Gibraltar? I don't think we have anyone joining us there sir. We only take ten passengers you know, and this voyage we are sailing with five . . .»

But I had already seen the envelope propped up on the dressing table.

«Oh yes,» the officer said. «The letter arrived for you yesterday. I say, those Ghanaian stamps are splendid aren't they . . .»

I held the envelope a long moment before opening it. I was calm, submissive almost, for the blow had fallen when I recognized the writing and only a kind of numbness remained.

«Dear Mike,» it began, «this is the most difficult letter I have ever had to write, but write it I must or I feel I shall never be able to look the world in the face again.

«Yes, I am in Accra, and by now you will have realized that I will not be seeing you in Gibraltar nor, I am afraid, ever again. I cancelled my booking before I left London and spent the money on a ticket to West Africa. My plans from here on are vague. All I know is that I need time—lots of time—to sort things out in my own mind.

«When I think of you boarding the ship without me, I twist the knife a little harder into my conscience. I know what this trip meant to you, not just as a holiday but, in your funny, tidy mind, as a right and proper culmination of our friendship. I can understand that because I will always think of you as the best, sincerest friend I ever had.»

I closed my eyes for a moment and bit my lip hard. Then I continued:

«But I had to do this to you, mate. Take my word that if we had sailed for Zanzibar together the voyage would have been a disaster.

«You see, Mike, I love you. Not in the way one friend loves another, but in an altogether different, more frightening way . . .»

The floor of the cabin seemed to twist upwards, and I stumbled against the bunk. I sat down and picked up the letter from where it lay on the carpet.

«Well I've said it, and I'm glad to have it down on paper, even though it means the end of our friendship.

«How did it happen? I wish I knew. I suppose it must have been building up for a long time although I closed my eyes to what was happening. There's been nothing like this in my adult life before. Not since my last year of school, anyway, when I became friendly with Martin, but I was only a kid then, not yet 18.

«Yes, I loved Martin, and it was only when I realized how much you reminded me of him on that last terrible night in London, that I understood what my feelings for you really meant. It frightened me, and when you went to bath I knocked back the rest of the Scotch, hoping it would put me to sleep. It only made things worse.

«In bed afterwards I knew I was going to make a pass at you. I pretended to sleep, but all the time I was thinking, planning. I reached out—and then I knew it was the end of everything. Of course you lay unresponding, hot with embarrassment. How could it have been otherwise?

«And then the ultimate degradation—using Daphne to save me from what I deserved. Mike, if it's any comfort to you, I have gone through the miseries of the damned, right through Spain and now down here in Ghana.

«Now you know why I am not leaving you a mailing address, nor any hint of my future plans. I deserve your contempt. But perhaps you might take it into your head to be noble and forgive me, and that's what frightens me most of all. I could stand your disgust, but not your pity . . .»

I sat on my bunk for a long time, waiting for the numbness to pass.

A crying anger against Warwick, myself, the whole world, was building up within me. Now I saw our entire relationship in perspective. A thousand half-forgotten details crowded in—athousand clues to lost opportunities. Oh, the monstrous injustice of it all!

And then, abruptly, the mood of self-pity passed. I remembered the days when our friendship had seemed a thing complete in itself. I thought of the unhappy man who had stared avidly at Warwick that first night—the convention—bound Michael, condemned by his own choice to a life of ingrowing despair. And I thought of Mike Matthews, secure in the new-found knowledge that it is possible to have something of the best of both worlds.

Warwick had gone, yet in a sense we were still together. I might never see the man again, but wherever I went now I would always carry a little of his spirit in my heart.

Our subscriber 3056 writes in a letter:

I cannot let this Christmas season go past without thanking you for the happiness which comes to me each month when *The Circle* arrives. It is ironic that we who call ourselves «gay» can find so little real happiness in this world; and to have arrived at the age of thirty-seven before finally admitting to oneself that one is «gay» is sad indeed. Thrice welcome, then, is *The Circle* whose stories are interesting, whose articles informative, and whose pictures pleasing. It serves to remind us that though we may be lonely we are not alone. Thank you.