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What is it?

by JIM RAMP

What is it about a man in uniform that makes him more sexually attractive, more exciting to most women—and to some men who ordinarily would not be drawn to another man? Does he seem more masculine, potent, physically desirable? Or is it that he may be more apt to die in the beauty of his manhood and absolve us from our sexual desire for him? It is one of the traditions of our culture that we admire bravery and worship heroes. Is every man in the uniform of the armed forces brave—and a potential hero? The uniform of an American sailor is—or seems to be—designed to parade his virile attributes. Are we, basically, worshippers of Priapus? Watch any one on the street—man or woman—when an especially gifted sailor passes. Women react with desire and admiration, but what of the men? Envy? Shame of their own comparative inadequacy? Or do they also lick their lips and shove their hands in their pockets to prevent betrayal of a primitive instinct?

Every year, it seems, the attire of officers in all branches of the service becomes more masculine, because their loins are covered by belted and decorated jackets. But the Marine, the Soldier, the Sailor, the air force enlisted men continue to wear tight pants and loose skivvies for ease and titillation. And it is an American tradition that the enlisted man away from home and family is freer with his favors than he could ordinarily be. And more trigger happy. There is, however, no way to check on his predilections. Does he react more favorably toward homosexual men—in the service and out? If he has plenty of money is he more apt to seek women? Lacking money is he likely to react savagely to a man after the act? These are moot points which tie in, of course, with his early experience in sex. Take me, for instance. I was an Army lieutenant—a career man—thirty years of age, West Point. Intelligent parents who bird—and—beed me when I was twelve. Lost my cherry to a gal in high school when I was fifteen, though I had been masturbating before then. No homosexual experiences—so I can't say how I would have reacted. Don't think I would have had any guilt complex because my dad had taught me to regard sex as fun. Guess I just never had any curiosity about fooling with other boys. At West Point I had a small reputation as a cocksman—not entirely earned—and not denied. After all, vanity is a common weakness in men among men.

So—I don't know exactly what in Hell happened to me—but I can tell you this: it was something that I shall cherish in my memory even when I dandle my first grandchild on my knee! And I could ask nothing better for that problematical grandchild—if it is a boy—that when he reaches maturity he may have a similar experience. Notice I do not say the *same* experience. *No* experience, even to a sensitive, intelligent grandchild of mine (and I am sure he will be sensitive and intelligent!) could hold such wonder and fulfillment! The only thing that troubles me is *why* it happened to *me*. It may be that God, in making out my report card for my thirtieth year decided I needed a little more humility (which means added knowledge) to ripen me in mercy and loving kindness. Certainly He didn't select me for this experience because of

my great good looks or intelligence. Drill and discipline have given me a good body, a clear mind and a healthy approach to life. I am a romantic realist, reasonably religious, as well adjusted as most. Selah!

Attached to American forces in Germany, I was on leave and on my way to Zurich Switzerland. I am a sucker for scenery and native costumes and yodelling. I thought I had a reserved compartment on the train, but when I entered it I found a Marine. He looked so surprised I laughed and said: «Guess this is the wrong compartment.» But when we checked we found that we both had a reservation on it. «That's German efficiency for you!» said the Marine. «No waste space. There's two bunks, so if you can stand the Marines I can stand the army! I'm Bill Simmonds, attached to the Embassy in West Berlin.» He held out a tanned, muscular hand which I took. «My name's Hank Morrison. Glad to share your reservation.»

«And I'm glad to share yours. Let's get comfortable.» He unbuttoned his blouse, removed his belt, ran it through a shoulder loop and hung the blouse in a shallow closet. Then he sat down, loosening his tie and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. «Be my guest?» I shucked my jacket and belt, hung them in the closet, and sat down next to him on the settee. He offered me a cigarette, took one himself and lighted both. Then he leaned back, expelling a cloud of smoke and said: «Leave us not sit and stare at each other, Hank. Shall we talk about you, me or the weather or the cold war?»

«Leave us talk about you.»

«Me?» He glanced down at his bulging thighs in the bright blue cloth. «A big subject. 190 lb. stripped. 6'2. Single, American male, high school graduate, 25 years of age, eight years in the Marine Corps, bucking for sergeant. Some guard house blues when a rookie. Not much chance for advancement in my present assignment. What else?»

«Heart-whole and fancy free?» Soon as I said it I was sorry. It was suddenly too personal. He looked at me, impersonally, snubbed out his cigarette and lighted another. «Matter of fact, I'm a Dear John. I had this girl. Even though I used to screw her I intended to marry her. Guess she missed the screwing too much and couldn't wait. How about you?»

«Me? Oh, I love 'em and leave 'em.»

Bill stood up and pulled at the crotch of his pants. «Damn these dungarees anyway! Why in Hell they don't make them with ball room, I'll never know!»

«Heving forfend, Bill! What would your mother think? What would the President think? You aren't supposed to have balls until you are married!»

«Right now I don't care about the opinion of my mother or the President. I'm going to shuck these iron pants!» And he did, including his shirt, kicked off his shoes and sat down again. «Why the damn Hell don't you, too?» he said. His level voice ran through my veins like quicksilver, but his glance was cool, amused, noncommittal. I felt clumsy, at a loss, but I couldn't refuse. When I sat down again, he lit a cigarette for me and chuckled: «Feel better?»

«I feel like a strip tease artist!»

«Teasing who?» Bill looked at me with such cold eyes I felt like a fool. «Certainly not *you*,» I answered weakly, trying to believe it.

«You outrank me,» he said bleakly, «so you wash your teeth first, piss in that contraption, first, and take the lower bunk which I will now make up.»

So that's the way it was. Lights out and I was lying on my back contemplating nothing when a hand dropped from the upper bunk and Bill said: «Hank? You asleep?»

«No,» I mumbled and took the hand in both of mine.

«I was rough. I'm sorry!» Bill murmured. «Don't know what happened to me.»

«Nor I!» I said. «Well, we'll be in Zurich tomorrow. Time enough to talk about it.»

«Yeah,» said Bill. «Goodnight.»

I muttered goodnight—but it wasn't for me. I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing Bill, sitting next from me, his legs spread, a bold outline bulging his shorts. But I did sleep, somewhere in the small hours, and when I woke Bill was ship-shape, shaved and battle ready.

«We'll be in Zurich shortly,» he said. «Better get your ass outa the sack. I'll wait outside to give you room.»

«Wait a minute,» I said. «We've got things to talk about.»

«Yeah, I know. I'm not ducking out. You got a hotel reservation?»

«Yeah.»

«Then you better make it for two—unless you got a broad joining you?»

«No broad.»

«Me neither.» He gave me a mock salute and slid out of the compartment. I was decent when the train squealed into the Zurich station. A porter loaded our bags in a taxi and directed the driver to my hotel. When we arrived Bill took over. His German was more fluent than mine, and the fact that my room had not been reserved for two seemed to make no difference. The ancient bellhop happily clutched our bags and conducted us in a creaking elevator to a huge room with an enormous double bed. I tipped him and he backed out of the room bowing and smiling and wishing us 'happy dreams.'

«Happy dreams, Hell!» said Bill. «It's time for breakfast, and I'm hungry. Let's go find some chow!»

We had an enormous breakfast in the hotel dining room, then, since it was a fine, warm day, wandered through the city, rejecting all guides, grinning at pimps. When our hands touched, walking, I felt an electric spark. When I looked at Bill he was always looking away, curious, unconcerned. We had lunch, somewhere. I don't remember what I ate. I think Bill paid for it... Then he gripped my arm and said: «It's time we got this settled!» I wasn't sure what he meant but I agreed. We returned to the hotel and creaked up in the ailing elevator. Once in the room Bill said: «I need a bath. How about you?»

«After you.» Hanging my jacket and cap in the closet, I walked over to one of the wide windows and stood looking at the city while Bill opened his kit. My chest felt tight and the hair on the back of my neck prickled. The air seemed charged with electricity. We had agreed we must talk—but *what about?* That silly strip-tease remark of mine? There had been nothing overt about that... or was there? Had I challenged him in some fashion by covertly admiring his male equipment?

Did he, for God's sake think I was homosexual? As I turned to charge him with it the bathroom door closed and in a moment I heard the shower. I felt a vast relief as though I had almost stepped off a precipice. Lighting a cigarette I sat down, confused by the urgency, the pressure just out of the reach of consciousness. Did he feel the same?

The room began to darken and I realized it was dinner time. I went over and tapped on the bathroom door. Bill turned off the shower and said: «I'll be out in a minute.»

«No hurry. Would you like to have dinner sent up?»

«Good idea. Order a rare planked steak for me with the trimmings. Feel like champagne?»

«Always—but what are we celebrating?»

Bill was silent for a moment. Then he said: «I just feel like champagne»

«To tell the truth, I do too.» I went to the phone, called room service and ordered dinner sent up at seven, the champagne at once. As I hung up Bill emerged from the bathroom, wearing a blue robe piped with red, and slippers. «All yours!» he said. And I had to fight down a senseless urge to make a crazy crack. What in Hell was the matter with me, anyway? I shook my head. «I'll have a wash and wait till bedtime for a shower.»

Shortly afterward the wine waiter appeared, opened a magnum and poured carefully, then placed the bottle in the ice bucket and bowed out.

Bill handed me a glass and said: «Let's drink to the accident of our meeting?»

«Agreed. Do you believe in Kismet?»

Bill considered. «Can't say I do. Old Bill said: 'There is a destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we will.' I think I agree with him.» He paused. «This may sound like a zany thing to say . . . but all day . . . yes, by God! . . . and all last night I had a feeling . . . Hell! a *certainty* that I have been moving toward this moment, surely, inevitably, as though drawn by a magnet. Knowing this, I also know it is not the be—all and end—all of my existence. I shall go on from here, but somehow richer, wiser . . .»

I poured champagne for us and allowed myself for the first time to look into Bill's eyes.

«You have said what has been gnawing at me all day—yeah!—and all last night, too! What in Tunket does it mean?»

Just then dinner arrived, and after the waiter had served us and gone, we began talking about our experiences, our interests, our conquests and defeats. Comfortable, relaxed slightly erogenous male conversation, perhaps a little boastful, but studiously detached. Dinner over, Bill dressed and we went to a few bars, decided against a theater—and returned to the hotel.

Bill started to prepare for bed and I took a shower. When I emerged from the bathroom Bill was sitting smoking, wearing only his shorts. He had turned out the lights—except the small bed lamp—and in the subdued glow he looked like a Praxiteles bronze. I was proud of my own physique—but he was magnificent.

«Shuck your robe,» he said softly,» and let me look at you. Stand there. Now turn around.» His eyes held mine as he reached and snubbed

out his cigarette, rose and came to me and took me in his arms. His touch was flame. Bending his head he put his mouth on mine, and my body trembled and hardened with such desire that I groaned and clung, drinking his endless kiss. In bed we explored each other fiercely, hungrily, desperately, sleeping only from exhaustion, returning to the act of love with renewed intensity.

I awoke late in the morning and reached instinctively for Bill, but he was gone. As I sat up in bed he came in by the door, closed it and leaned against it wearily. His face was white and he looked dazed. He said: «I've been walking for the past two hours, trying to figure things out.»

«Why?» I asked, still groggy from sleep.

«Why? Because there's no future for us together. I've never done anything like this in my life . . .»

«Neither have I. Are you . . . sorry?»

«I don't know! I don't know!» he groaned. «Let's not talk about it now. I'm going back to Berlin. Give me your address. I'll get in touch with you later.»

We were transferred back to the States the next year and are both married now, with children. I am a Major and Bill is a Chief. But each year we manage to meet in some city for a few days of love. We never have found the time to talk about it.

The Day the Rain Came

by ALEX VAUGHAN

Paul slid out from behind the wheel and began to walk across the white gravel of the parking lot. The sun was burning his neck. «Odd how you don't notice it when you're driving.» There were only two other cars in the lot, but then on a week day there never was anyone on the beach. Paul looked forward to that; the long stretch of deserted beach, the surf breaking on the rocks, and the beautiful scavengers cutting wide arcs in the summer sky. Not even the hot silence and the sun burning his neck, nor the sand in his sneakers could spoil the pleasure he took in these afternoon swims. And no small part of that pleasure came from being alone. It's not that he didn't like people. it's just that most of them made him uncomfortable.

He climbed up over the knoll and there was the ocean. Some distance down the beach a family had camped and the children were standing in the surf letting the waves dig holes with their feet. In the other direction, where the rocks scattered out into the sea marked the northern boundry of the beach, a young man had set up an easel. As Paul walked out onto the white sand their eyes met; Paul looked quickly away. The tide was out and there were bits of drift wood on the beach. He threw his towel on the sand and pulled off his sweat shirt. He was sure that the young man at the easel was watching him. It made him uneasy. Nothing made him so nervous as being stared at, and that was particularly true at the beach. That was why he never went swimming on the weekends. Now with the painter watching him he couldn't wait to get into the water.

The sweat, the sand and all the uneasy thoughts were washed away