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Tendresse

by JIM RAMP

Merely a word. A French word, meaning tenderness. Something which, traditionally, an American male does not feel toward another male—even his son or brother. It is unmanly. Even if his heart swells into his throat and his hands ache to comfort, to comfort even with *love*, a man doesn't do such things.

It is all right to feel tenderness for his mother, his sister, his wife or a female he *thinks* he has seduced. Even protectiveness, though they probably don't need it any more than they need another hole in the head—but it is the American tradition, and you'd better not try to come to grips with *that!*

Each man has his own secret loneliness. It may be of the flesh, the mind or the spirit. This is unmanly and must be concealed. A Man does not parade his agony. A man does not *weep*. That is an iron-clad rule. You can go insane, you can jump off a bridge, you can slash your wrists in the bath tub, but you *must not cry!* It isn't done.

But it *was* being done—next door.

I guess I'd better explain. I live in a *guest house*. Or rather, I *lived* in a guest house. This is an elegant euphemism for a boarding house, where one eats indifferent food and sleeps in an indifferent bed because one can't afford anything else.

Well . . . I had noticed him at table . . . a tall, pale young man, shy and silent. I recognized him as being my next door neighbor on the third floor. He always ate rapidly, never waiting for the soggy desserts, and hurried to his room.

The landlady informed me that he was a student at St. Mary's, and worked afternoons and week-ends as a clerk in a cut-rate drug store. Evidently he was a serious student, as I never heard him go out in the evenings. Although we shared a connecting bathroom, he was up and away before I wakened. In the evening he was always meticulously careful never to barge in when I was doing the necessary. When he was showering, and/or, the door to my room was locked so that I might not embarrass him. — A ghost for a neighbor.

Absorbed in the social activities of a homophile organization, I was often out until midnight. Usually the light showed under his door as I passed—as it did this particular time. I had beer taken and went to the bathroom. When I opened the door, I heard the ghost sobbing and forgot my own urgency. I knocked on his door, softly and tried the knob. Locked. I knocked more loudly and called: «What's the trouble?»

The sobbing ceased, and the ghost blew his nose.

«Could I help?» I persisted.

«No . . . nobody . . . I mean . . . I'm sorry. I was having a bad . . . dream.»

«Sounded like a very wet one!» I clowned, hoping to get a rise out of him, as I let the used beer thunder in the bowl.

Silence. You are a vulgarian, I chided myself as I washed my hands.

The next evening at dinner I stared at him constantly, a warm smile ready to pop my puss. No soap. His eyes never left his plate as he belted his food, and he practically ran from the room.

I may as well admit it. I am a snoop! Human misery of any kind aches my heart, and I can't let it alone until I have expended my two cents worth of

tenderness and concern. The ghost had spurned my offer, but I was not about to be counted out.

The next time I was out late I entered my room softly and prowled the bathroom silently. No sound from the ghost. I felt frustrated—a do-gooder with nowhere to park his good.

Time, the quicksilver of life, slipped into the attic of memory. Christmas with its tinsel brevity of sentiment and good will, brought a pause to my days' occupation of teaching, and I wondered if the ghost would be going home for the holidays. Or do ghosts have homes? I didn't.

And once again I heard him weeping. This time I cogitated. How to reach him? It was obvious he didn't want to talk. He had indicated that 'nobody could help.' Hell, he didn't realize what a great little helper I was . . . starting with Mother!

No use confronting him. He would duck and run. I would have to weasel . . . I sat at my typewriter for a puzzled five minutes and then knocked out a note which I pasted on the bathroom mirror:

«What's troubling?

You are a student, I have been and am now a college instructor. I know all about the slings and arrows of misfortune and am in possession of most secrets of healing. I do not wish to invade your privacy. Instead, you invide mine . . . if you wish. Whatever is on your back, shuck it off. If you'd rather talk in the dark . . . or not talk . . . come to my room when you feel the need. I need not say that I will honor your confidence.»

Well. When I went to the bathroom next morning, my note was gone. And the ghost, of course. I wondered if I had frightened him away and tried the door to his room. It was unlocked. His books and clothing were there. And my note—propped on his bid-side table.

This began an exchange of notes.

His first one said: «Thanks, but no one can help me.»

I declared via the mirror: «How do you know until you try?»

He replied: «It's too personal.»

I replied: «Unhappiness is part of the public domain. Share it!»

Then one night at dinner he looked at me timidly and I popped my puss with the now stale warm smile and winked at him. He blushed. Something happened to my heart. I was on tenterhooks. Ever try to lie quiet in bed with one . . . or a dozen? It brings out the hot sweet . . . of doubt and anxiety. Was it wise?

Was he a child molester? A rapist? A murderer?

Shit! remarked I to myself circa midnight, he has spurned you as a do-gooder. Go to sleep, you chronic idealist! — — — I tried.

Then suddenly there he was, sitting on the side of my bed.

«I . . . I wanted to thank you for your interest. But you can't do anything . . .»

«The Hell I can't!» I yelped joyously, snatching him under the covers and anchoring his head on my chest. «Now you just lie here for a while and listen to my heart. Don't talk, just contemplate the Mercy of the Lord!»

He sighed and gradually relaxed, keeping his body away from mine. Finally I felt the hot seep of tears against my flesh. I raised my head and kissed his nose.

«None of that! I'm not a sponge. Talk when you can. I'll be here more often than not.»

«I must go now,» he murmured. «Morning's early for me. Thank you . . . neighbor!»

«You know my name in case you want to use it, Ralph.»

«Thank you, Charlie.» He kissed my nose and vanished.

Well, I thought, ruefully, I can sleep a little . . . but not on this wagon-tongue. I could still feel the shape of his cheek on my breast . . . and the salt of his grief. If I cried who would comfort me? Certainly not my gonads!

The fever of my social activities abated during the days of wine and red Santa noses, and my bed became an early nightly habit. Ralph became a late nightly habit . . . as physically distant as a desert mirage. Except for his head. It remained inarticulate, but it no longer dripped on me. I wasn't sure I liked that . . . me staggering toward a mirage and no water for my sponge.

We didn't talk, so I forgot to mention that I was going to a grand Soiree New Years Eve. It was not only Grand, it was swampy, and when I sought my giddy couch in the spinning hours of the morning, I was expostulated to find Ralph there. He turned on a cluster of lights around the solitary bulb of the bed lantern and said out of the foggy distance: «Collapse and I'll undress you.»

Somebody else said: «Be my guess!» It must have been me, because I didn't see anyone else except two Ralphs . . . Together they stripped me and steadied the swinging bed until I could pounce on it.

In the general neighborhood of noon I woke to a steadier but throbbing world. The bed . . . no, the pillow was bumping under my ear. No . . . it wasn't a pillow . . . it was bear flesh. I chuckled. I didn't know any intimate bears. That wasn't right, semantically speaking. I wasn't intimate with any *bears*.

The bear murmured: «Feel better?»

«I'm not well enough to decide,» I muttered to the split-level question . . . coming as it did from under my ear and above my head at the same time. Here was a conundrum. A talking bear that was bare. No hair . . . but a very neat belly-button. «Hey! Stop tickling,» chuckled the bear, pulling my hand away. «What you need is some coffee.» It slid away and became Ralph in pyjama bottoms. «Better take a shower—you'll feel better. Instant coffee be all right?»

«The instanter the better!» I agreed guiltily.

I showered and put on a robe, brushed my teeth and shaved. Ralph brought the coffee, sat and grinned as we drank it.

«No use wishing you a Happy New Year! You were happy enough for three last night.»

«Lucky you were here or I would have slept in my clothes. Sorry I didn't tell you I was going to a celebration. I should have invited you to go along.»

He shook his head. «I'm not ready for that yet.» He poured more coffee. «Have I been a . . . nuisance?»

«Don't ever think so!» I protested. «My hopeful chest is yours without questions.» He rose, went to the window and looked at the bright day. After a while he said: «I hear the monkeys are performing at the Zoo.»

«Leave us find breakfast first,» I suggested. «When I watch sex in the raw, I need something under my belt.»

It became the kind of day dreams are built on. In the evening I introduced Ralph to Suki Yaki and taught him to use chopsticks. Hot Saki loosened his tongue and I learned more about him in that pleasant hour than I had in the months I had known him. Or at least known who he was and what he did.

That night when he joined me in bed and came eagerly into my arms, I knew the bridge of his reticence had been burned.

«Why have you given me your . . . tenderness?» he asked softly.

«Because you needed it,» I said. — «Is that the only reason?»

«No. You also needed love,» I confessed. — «Do you love me?» he persisted.

«The day before yesterday . . . tenderly, as one loves a lost child. After last night and today . . . hungrily as a *found* man.»

Then it came pouring out . . . all the hurt and bewilderment, the rejection by his family, the dazed terror of being unwanted in a jeering world, the wild fear of identification as a homosexual. He was convinced he *looked* and *acted* like a homosexual, and would never be able to find employment after he had received his University Degree. «You,» he sighed in conclusion, «are the only person who has accepted me for what I am.»

«Nonsense!» I said brutally. «I didn't accept you because I thought you were homosexual. I never dreamed you were. You don't look or act as though you are. *Believe* me, I *know!* I pestered you with my notes in the bathroom because you needed someone. Just as I did . . . and do!»

«*You need me?*» he whispered in wonder.

«And don't give me the father image routine!» I muttered. «I'm only about six years older than you are. Well? Where are all the kisses you owe me for nights spent in nothing but chaste sleep on my savage breast?»

He paid in full and opened a charge account. Usurer that I am, I see that he pays daily. It is he who insists on the added interest paid in the transactions of love.

One Splendid Moment

For R. B.

by MARSH HARIS

Two men of middle years sat across the living room from one another as the waning afternoon sun cast broad, angular shafts of light through the open Venetian blinds.

«What would you say,» asked one, «out of your entire life, would be your finest moment, one splendid moment that set all others apart, one single moment that made all others pale in comparison? Can you tell me that?»

«Out of my entire life?» the other considered, intrigued by such a question. «That is a great many moments, you know. After all, I'm nearly fifty-seven. By some standards I'm old; I am an old man. And you ask me to pick from fifty-seven years a single moment?»

«I do. But of course I can't really expect an answer, can I. I doubt that any man could answer that question.»

«Then, my dear Philip, I am going to surprise you; I am going to astonish you. I am going to answer your question. And furthermore, I am going to demand that you believe my answer. True, I am amazed at your asking such a question, but believe me, there is no doubt whatever in my mind as to its answer. I can be so sure simply because it happens there *is* such a moment in my life, one so extraordinary, so inexpressibly beautiful, that it stands towering over all the other moments of my life like the Great Pyramid of Gizeh high above the soil of Egypt. It has no comparison.

«Three years ago I visited America. I was tired; I needed the holiday. And so I decided to come spend a couple of weeks with some dear old friends of mine who were then living in Washington, D. C. They welcomed me, with the one stipulation that I come absolutely for the rest not tramp all over the city like a tourist. Well, I agreed to this, knowing full well it was for my own benefit.

«I had been there precisely four days when one evening a particular friend of theirs dropped in. I say 'dropped in', for as far as they were concerned that