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Goodbye, Pussycat

by William Wainwright

As Archy and Jerry drove down the main street of Corinth, each of them felt the thrill of fear and desire that everyone feels when he comes to a wide-open town. Neither of them wanted the other one to know it. After nearly two years together, each of them was beginning to feel again that familiar old tug at the prospect of new adventures. But two years was too soon to admit it openly. And so, as they drove down the sleazy main street, choked with that restless excitement, they avoided each other's eyes.

Everything about Corinth was designed to stir up that excitement. The main street was aflame with neon signs, and though it was not yet nine on a Friday night, the sidewalks were crowded with soldiers and prostitutes. Only a few blocks away, along the red brick row of the river front, flickering dimly lit signs discreetly proclaimed small hotels where nobody asked any questions and nobody stayed overnight, and in between was a maze of crooked streets and alley ways where bar jostled dance hall and crib, and where, if you were not too particular, you could always find something nice.

After driving the length of the main street, Archy and Jerry turned off and began to thread their way up narrow, winding streets to the tree-shaded heights above the river, where shabby old mansions set in wide green lawns exhaled an air of calm and peaceful ease. Here, in the long-gone days of the riverboat trade, rich merchants had built their turreted wooden castles, and here, even now, some of the children of their children still lived in them. Archy and Jerry, safely past the siren call of the streets below, breathed easier now.

When they arrived at the great old house where Phil and Bobby lived, they found the two old men waiting for them under the porte-cochere. Both were dressed for the summer heat in sports shirts and shorts that revealed their grizzled chests and their shrunken shanks, and both were a little «tiddly», to use their favorite expression, and excited by the prospect of weekend guests. And how reassuring it was to see them again, just as they had always been for as long as Archy and Jerry had known them. Even their conversation was the same as usual coming at Archy and Jerry all helter-skelter, pell mell from Phil—for Bobby scarcely ever said a word—all about some attractive young man whom they had seen, who was always flirting with Bobby. Phil swore he would slap the young flirt if Bobby did not stop encouraging him, but of course it was all made up and did not mean a thing. Bobby never looked at anyone besides Phil. They had lived together for over thirty years—«longer», Phil often said, looking at Archy and Jerry pointedly, «than some people have been alive»—and their house belonged to Bobby (it had been left him by Pussycat, Phil's predecessor in his heart and bed), and together they made enough money to keep themselves in comfort, Bobby with his bookshop in the basement of the house, and Phil with his job in a downtown bank. After thirty years they still slept together in the same double bed, and altogether they were, after the drive through downtown Corinth, very reassuring to Archy and Jerry.

Although it was past nine o'clock in the evening, and everybody was hungry, they had several drinks before dinner. Then they dined by candlelight on a great old mahogany table that had been floated up the river more than a hundred years ago. Once again Phil did most of the talking, his bald head bobbing and glistening in the candlelight. Bobby, he said, had found a new parking lot with the friendliest young attendant. Bobby, he knew, had been visiting the darling boy secretly, while Phil was at work at the bank, though Bobby of course denied it, and Phil was determined, since Bobby was so unfaithful, to find someone for himself. So it went, Phil prating on in his old, familiar way, while handsome Bobby, who still had his hair, and had always looked so much younger than Phil, though in fact he was two years older, served them all silently and did not even bother to contradict what everyone present knew was not a bit true. Then Phil began talking about the downtown bars (Corinth was, of course, famous for its bars, and people came to them from all over the state, and indeed, from several states around) and after coffee was served he proposed making a tour of the bars that very night—just to show them to Archy and Jerry.

«It's too late,» Bobby said.

«They don't close for an hour,» said Phil.

«We've got all the dishes to do,» said Bobby.

«Forget the dishes for once.»

«Well, you go, then,» said Bobby. «I'll stay and do the dishes. I can't stand letting the dishes go till tomorrow.»

The two old lovers argued angrily. Their wattles shook and their faces turned turkey red. They paid no attention whatever to Archy and Jerry, for whose entertainment the trip to the bars was proposed, and the two younger lovers sat in embarrassed silence, stealing uneasy glances at one another. Finally Archy settled the argument by saying that he and Jerry were too tired to go to the bars that night, and Phil grumbled himself into silence. «Tired,» he said. «I know what you're tired of. After two years together, you'd think they'd be tired of each other.» They all had a few more drinks while doing the dishes, and then they went upstairs to bed, Phil and Bobby to their great double bed in the room at the top of the stairs, Archy and Jerry to the guest room overlooking the garden.

«Ta-ta, and have a good sleep,» winked Phil suggestively. «It's always more fun when other people are doing it in the next room.» And when Archy and Jerry got undressed and into bed, they found that this was so, though after two years together it no longer took them much time to get it done. Before long only the ghost of poor Pussycat was still stirring in the house—or rather, the rattle and moan in the attic which Bobby, when he got hysterics, insisted was Pussycat's ghost, though as Phil always pointed out, it was only the wind in the eaves of an old and drafty house.

When Archy and Jerry got up next morning Bobby had already opened the bookshop, and Phil, who had nothing else to do on Saturday mornings, was helping him bundle books. Nobody came in the shop all morning—it was too far from downtown and nobody read much in Corinth anyway—but Bobby had built up a good mail-order business in old

and regional books. In three more years, when Phil retired with a pension from his bank, they planned to expand the bookshop to include antiques.

Archy and Jerry went out for a walk about town. July flies were singing in the trees and the thick summer heat made any exertion unpleasant. They strolled about for a while on the shady bluff, looking out over the shrunken summer river which lay like a hard nickel ribbon between baked muddy banks. Then they went down to the lower town, where soldiers were already beginning to come in from the nearby camp. Archy and Jerry walked silently through the streets, each pretending that the other was not really there.

After lunch they all went out to a riverside park and lay about in the sun. It was hard to make the afternoon go by when all their thoughts were focused on the night, and try as hard as they might, they could not interest themselves in the adolescent boys splashing about in the water. Here in the park were no soldiers from the Army camp; here were only people from the town. They ate dinner early that night and then about nine, after bathing and shaving and donning fresh sports shirts and slacks, they all went out to the bars.

They were silent as they drove down from the heights, the four of them stiff and solemn in Jerry's powder blue convertible. They felt they had a rendezvous with fate. They parked in Bobby's new lot near the center of town, trying hard not to pay too much attention to the friendly, sunburned young man who took Jerry's keys. Then, in a phalanx of four, two abreast and keeping all in step, they marched around the corner and into the Wagon Wheel.

The Wagon Wheel was the nicest bar in town. It had the decor suggested by its name: walnut-stained barrel chairs, leather upholstery, wooden wheels hung from the ceiling as chandeliers. It was crowded with people that Phil and Bobby knew. They only came here to get their courage up.

After a beer they all left and went to the Royal Roost. This bar was not so nice: a dirty old store front with streaked and tattered walls, and here they talked in whispers and did not laugh. Shifty characters that they did not know milled around under a stamped tin ceiling, and near the door a group of soldiers were talking much too loud.

Finally they went to the G & J, a huge, cavernous room splendidly located in an alley right off the main street, with a neon arrow pointing from the street, and a constant stream of soldiers and prostitutes going in and out. In single file, quietly as mice, Archy and Jerry and Bobby and Phil slipped in through the narrow door and found an empty table near the rear. A waiter bustled up, a dark, fat, blue-chinned man from one of the great Eastern cities, who knew (so his manner proclaimed) the worst but did not care so long as the money rolled in. They ordered whiskies here and drank them fast.

Some of the younger soldiers were already drunk, and Phil soon picked out a pimply-faced boy who kept sliding off his stool. «That's the one I want,» he said; «I bet he's ten inches long;» and when the boy went to the toilet, Phil followed him in. A few minutes later Phil came out winking and smiling and holding his hands about a foot apart, and a minute

after that, the drunken young soldier staggered out and lurched across the bar room to the door.

Bobby began to get nervous. «Phil, it's dangerous,» he said. «Suppose someone came in. Suppose you got beat up.»

But Phil just winked and smiled and chortled and crowed, and after another drink he followed another soldier into the toilet.

Bobby turned pale and began to tremble. «I tell you I won't do it,» he said to Archy and Jerry. «I just won't. It just isn't decent.»

«It isn't decent,» he repeated when Phil emerged again, grinning triumphantly, but Phil just looked at him contemptuously. «Decent my ass,» he said, «you're just chicken, that's all. You've always been chicken, and what's more, you always will be.»

With tears in his eyes, Bobby turned to Archy and Jerry. «Why does he treat me this way? What have I done? I've always tried to do what he wants me to.»

Archy and Jerry did not know what to say. Every time they visited Bobby and Phil the same thing happened, and every time it always ended the same.

Finally it was closing time and everybody poured out into the streets. Bobby wanted to go home right away, but Phil wanted to stay downtown and cruise. Archy and Jerry did not know how to say what they wanted to do. They all milled around in the streets for a while, but within a half hour the streets were almost empty. Finally even Phil was ready to give up, and they started back toward the parking lot, but on the way they saw a soldier bobbing and weaving about in the mouth of an alley, and Phil went over to him and talked for a moment. Then he took him by the arm and propelled him stumbling over to the others. By the light of the streetlight they were standing under, they could see that the soldier was young and ugly and sullen and so drunk he could barely stand up.

«This is Dicky,» said Phil. «He's a long way from home and hasn't got any place to stay tonight. He's coming to stay with us.»

«For gods sake, Phil—» Bobby began to whimper, but Phil shut him up with a look.

The sunburned young attendant at the parking lot was friendly again and pretended not to notice the drunken soldier. Phil and Bobby slung him into the back seat between them, and Archy and Jerry, pretending they were alone drove off as fast as they could. By the time they reached the house the soldier had lost consciousness and they all had to lift him out of the car. His head flopped over to one side and he started to drool.

«What will we do with him?» began Bobby plaintively.

«For gods sake, Bobby, shut up,» snapped Phil. They propped him up against the side of the house, and when Phil, cursing and sweating, had got the front door open, they carried him up the stairs and deposited him on Phil and Bobby's bed. Then Phil turned to Archy and Jerry and said, most courteously, «Would you care to join us tonight?»

«N-no thanks,» stammered Archy.

«Sure?» urged Phil solicitously.

«Uh-huh,» said Archy.

«Ta-ta, then, and have a good sleep,» said Phil, leering, as he shut the door in their faces.

The next morning the soldier was gone without a trace. How Bobby and Phil got rid of him, Archy and Jerry never learned. Perhaps they drove him back downtown in the early morning. Perhaps they simply dumped him out in the street. Whatever they did with him, neither of them mentioned him again, and except for a certain nervousness (Bobby was tense and jittery as he moved about the kitchen, Phil riffled silently through the Sunday papers and got up every two minutes to look out of the window) both of them went about their usual Sunday morning business as if he had never existed. It was as if the whole episode of the evening at the bars had been nothing more than a nightmare of Archy and Jerry's from which they had now awakened to the clear light of day, and after three Bloody Marys even Phil began to talk again.

«So you've been together for two years now,» he said to Archy and Jerry.

«Uh-huh,» said Archy. «It'll be two years next month.»

«My, my, two whole years. And all that time you've been perfectly faithful to each other.»

Archy and Jerry did not say anything, and Bobby, who was serving breakfast now, started to shake.

«My, my, ain't young love grand?» Phil continued. «Bobby, do you remember when we were first in love? For two whole years I was so wild about you that I couldn't even look at anyone else. Just like these two here. Why, I would die at the very thought of you with somebody else. I was even jealous of your past. And all the while you were flirting with Pussycat.»

«Phil, I wasn't. You know I wasn't. I just hated to see him going to the dogs—.»

«Well, not flirting, exactly, that's true. Pussycat never gave you much chance to flirt. But eating your heart out because of Pussycat. Just dying to do it with Pussycat one more time. Do you remember how jealous I used to get? And all the while Pussycat was whoring after every soldier in town. Lord, what a whore she was! And once she'd gone through all the soldiers, she started holding court in the high school john. Of course, it was all my fault, because I took you away from her. Lord, it's a wonder she didn't die in jail, instead of the way she did.» And then a silence fell, for everyone knew how Pussycat had died, naked in the attic, with his arms and legs tied together behind his back, and his throat cut from ear to ear.

«I often wonder what that old queen thought when she saw that bugger coming at her with a knife. Do you suppose she screamed? No one would have heard her way up there. Do you suppose she pleaded with him? What did she think when she regretted anything she had done? Do you think, for instance, she regretted letting you go? Not for a minute. If she hadn't let you go—just thrown you away, no matter what you may say, because you were nothing but a trick to her—she might be alive today, sitting here looped to the gills and gobbling her bacon and eggs. But that old whore couldn't have been faithful to you for two weeks, let alone two years, and how do you think she'd have been after thirty years?»

The dining room was quiet except for the curtains fluttering in the breeze. Archy and Jerry were silent. Bobby said nothing. They had all heard it all before, so many times, and they knew there was nothing they could say, and that they would simply have to wait till Phil ran down before they could start to enjoy the afternoon.

«Well, well, poor Pussycat,» said Phil reflectively at length. «I always used to think togetherness was for the birds, but maybe there's something to be said for it after all. At least it keeps you from getting into fixes like that.» He turned to Archy and Jerry and looked at them with a mournful, pathetic face. «Remember that, boys, now that your two years are up. If Bobby didn't have me, he might be up in the attic dead himself. And if I didn't have him—well, God only knows where I might be . . . a movie star in Hollywood, maybe.»

Fire in the Rain

by MICHAEL LACKERSTEEN

Rain! How Peter hated it. Caught in the fluorescent warmth and silent friendliness of the library, he watched it dissolve the image of the street in wavery strips as it swept down the windows. He picked up his book and walked toward the entrance, thinking how his tennis-shoed feet and uncoated form would be soaked by the huge, warm drops of the thunder storm. He stood in the porch of the library trying to make up his mind to launch himself into the storm.

«Kinda wet, huh?» laughed a voice beside him.

Peter looked to see who had spoken and gasped at the magnificence of the voice's owner. It was a tall, powerfully-built young man: pale-blue eyes smiled from a clean-jawed head and the strong neck swept into a broad chest, which was, it seemed, barely held in a T-shirt; firm, muscled legs in weathered jeans; and an umbrella in one hand.

«Yuh!» he answered finally, embarrassed at his perturbation.

They stood for a while in silence. Peter didn't want to move away now because it would have meant leaving the Adonis. He studied the man without appearing to be interested, taking in the whole of his man-beauty.

«Which way're you going?» asked the man.

«Er—up Duke Street,» Peter answered and his heart began to express his anticipation in its crescendoing thumping.

«May I offer you a ride under my umbrella, sir?» The man laughed a deep, golden laugh and bowed slightly from the waist.

«Why thank you! I gladly accept thy kind offer!» returned Peter entering into the joke and keeping the tremor out of his voice with difficulty.

They stepped under the black canopy of the raised umbrella and the rain smacked down onto it, leaving them dry.

Peter was almost terrified by the reaction of his heart to the man's presence. What is it? he wondered — why is it? He knew (he had known for a long time) that he was a homosexual. He had accepted it and forgotten it for the most part. He had admired the bodies of other men,