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Autor: Lackersteen, Michael
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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,

but never before had it had this effect. Still perplexed and slightly confused, he heard the man's voice drifting towards him through the mist of his thoughts.

«Where d'you live?»

«O—an apartment house on Vine.»

«Mind if I walk that way?»

«No.» Peter could have shouted for joy. The man was walking closer to him now and the trim waist was brushing against his body.

«I'm Andrew,» the man introduced himself with a smile.

«Peter.» He took the out-stretched hand and felt something more in it than mere formality: the lingering grip held the promise of something far more than acquaintanceship.

Again, Peter's heart pounded out his excitement, but in that excitement was the fear of what might be going to happen. He wanted it—he wanted it more than anything—but the unknown essence of the act frightened him. Twenty-two, this was new to him, it was something he had thought about and wanted for a long time, but, at this moment perhaps approaching fulfillment, fear of pain was obscuring desire.

They turned into Vine Boulevard, splashing along the pavement.

«Here, hold this awhile.» Andrew gave Peter the umbrella to support.

Again a silence as they continued up the street. It was not just a silence: it held something intimate and close to which the falling rain provided a whispering backcloth.

Peter started as he felt Andrew's arm unexpectedly encircle his waist. He almost stopped, but kept moving lest it was removed. He looked frantically along the street in case there were people about, but the evening was empty. He moved right up to Andrew and enjoyed the sensation of their bodies so close together. Andrew stopped and turned to Peter. And Peter saw the desire which flamed in the blue of Andrew's eyes. Silently Andrew pushed Peter up against a tree, but Peter didn't notice the wetness on his back as Andrew's face came closer and closer and their lips met and opened. Peter shut his eyes as he sank into the delicious glory of the kiss and he let the umbrella slip to one side as his body was crushed by Andrew's. The rain drenched their hair and ran down their faces. Andrew kissed away a drop which hung, jewel-like, on Peter's eyelash.

Peter couldn't control his trembling. «I'm so scared,» he confided. «I'm so scared.»

Andrew spoke with his lips against Peter's: «Don't be. It's the most beautiful thing in the world, Peter. The most beautiful thing in the world, I promise.»

Peter tried to believe that as they walked the remaining distance to his apartment. It was easy to say it was beautiful, but what about the pain? How could one forget it in the fire of beauty?

They reached the apartment-house and Peter led the way up to his door. He turned the key, pushed open the door and flicked the light-switch.

«Hey! nice room,» exclaimed Andrew, looking round at the neat order.

Peter came up to him and stood so close that they could feel each

other's passion. He rested his hands on Andrew's hips: «Now, Andrew. Please.»

All at once, the room began to whirl as Andrew's fingers became flames that explored and excited the very core of Peter's manhood. The exploration became more intimate. Their passion and desire unleashed themselves till the floor slipped from under them and they forgot all else. Peter felt the fire of emotion released within him and he felt it drench his whole being. They whirled faster and faster until the climax exploded in a blaze of flame and covered them completely.

Andrew had been incredibly gentle—Peter knew. He had buried his face in Andrew's chest and savoured the mansweat of him, thrilling at his every touch and kiss. Now, there was a terrible gulf between them: they lay quiet and apart; strangers again; different beings now that the shared intimacy was over.

«Thank you,» said Peter at last. «Thank you, thank you, thank you,» he repeated as the memory of it returned. There had been the pain, but the beauty and perfection of it all had, as Andrew said, drowned it.

Andrew turned to face him and brought his face close to Peter's. He drew Peter's mouth onto his own and the room began to spin once more—but this time, it was moving even faster than before; this time the flame blossomed and showered them with pin-points of ecstasy as their bodies fused with an icy-hotness.

Peter released his whole being and the two of them plummeted into an ocean of fire and were engulfed within one another. No longer was there the fear. Only the knowledge and experience of it all and Peter allowed himself to be carried and to soar past the blinding orb and into an infinite glory, beauty and achievement. He knew now and was never, never going to forget.

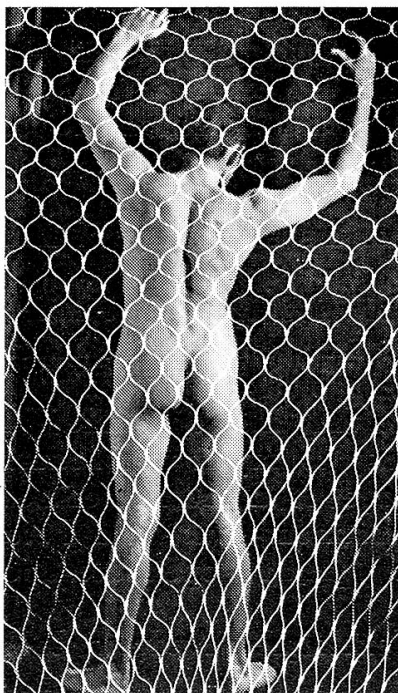


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