

Dawn at Naples [end]

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DAWN AT NAPLES

by
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(Conclusion)

The group discussed the war, politics, sex, and the Air Corps. Jack took charge of the conversation, guiding it hither and thither in a way that admitted Dan into their world as if he were an old habitu  , or fellow-officer. And when Jack proposed that the Air Force could end the war single-handed and asked for the sailor's concurrence, Dan said, «It's all right with me.» He smiled at Jack as he spoke, and felt his heart leap at the flash of warmth in Jack's eyes. He was being accepted as an equal.

It was getting late, and Dan wondered if he should leave, but he was beginning to be fuddled and at the point where a strong attachment forms toward the company, and always at the core of his behavior burned a resentment at being found different or inferior. He looked at Jack, saw him staying, and decided to stay too. He would need a ride to his barracks, and the officer had the jeep. The talk grew bawdy, and the drinking fast. They laughed, they sang, they beat upon the table. One officer almost slid under it. Still the rout went on. Before the night advanced much further, he was almost too drunk to know

when they left. He remembered the feel of the cool air upon his body as the jeep drove through the streets of Naples. Jack did the driving, and of the four he was the only completely sober one. He had carefully kept his quantity of liquor to a minimum. Just after the other two officers were dropped off at their quarters in a commandeered apartment building on the Vomero, an air raid alert sounded, and Jack headed for his own nearby quarters. Within a couple of minutes the officer and the sailor were within a villa and safe from any shrapnel. There was very small chance that any bombs would land in the upper reaches of the port-city, Jack explained. The Germans aimed for the bay and the shore line area where ships and supplies were concentrated. Jack explained how his fellow officers had been transferred out and no new ones had moved in, so he had the small villa to himself.

Once alone with the young sailor, Jack poured a drink for himself and for Dan. At that moment his raw desire was more than he could bear without the insulation of alcohol. He was half grateful to the sailor. Earlier he had felt tired after the long day, but now the officer thought, «He's burned away my weariness, as though it never existed.»

Jack got a towel and wetted it and gave it to the sailor to place on his forehead, since the fellow complained of a growing headache. A couple of aspirins were hastily swallowed. Jack watched the sailor as he sat in one of the chairs, his head resting against the backrest with the damp towel soothing his head. Jack moved his chair closer to Dan, just because he wanted to be closer to the young man.

«There's no telling how long this raid will go on, mate,» said Jack. «Possibly you had better plan on spending the night here.» There was a silence. And then Dan said, «I'm free tomorrow anyway, so I might as well bunk where I can find a welcome berth.» There was another silence. Jack heard what Dan said, and the words did something to the night, intensified it suddenly, the way it seemed when you were tracking in the city and a body made you stop and think hard. A little pulse was beating in his temples, as though started by some invisible clockwork. But Dan hadn't known then of the inner workings of Jack's mind.

Then Jack got up, turned on the phonograph, and then left the room. «... to get the bed prepared, and to change into ...» Dan felt the carving of the chair in which he was sitting. Removing the towel from his forehead, he looked closely at the design of the chair's arms, and ran his hand over the carving. His uncle had taught him to know and to love good work, from rough warm bark to smooth cool even finish, in all the variations of the grain.

His memory responded again. Let's see ... He'd been listening to the symphony, waiting for Jack to finish changing into something more comfortable. It was Brahms, or some composer, he remembered. The grave, passionate music had ended and alone in the room, he got up and turned off the machine. Then thinking of Jack now and the few hours they had had together, hearing in his skin that other soundless music that was all the memories he had of earlier days, he'd felt suddenly eager and young: the lethargy, that numbing ennui of the bones slipping away from him in a wash of exuberance. He'd gone down the hall to the bedroom.

Jack stood there, looking cool, yet with that elusive tang of sensuality he'd always found so attractive about some men, that always reached for some recollection in him a hundred thousand years old ...

The scene was sliding from his recollection and he hung on desperately, pulling it back. He'd stood there... He closed his eyes and hammered on his forehead with his clenched fist.

«Where's *my* bathrobe?» Dan had asked.

«Sorry, Mate, but I have only one. Always willing to share it though.»

Something in his tone, the quality of amusement or indulgence perhaps had turned him completely wild. «Why can't I have a bathrobe when I want one?» he declaimed. «It doesn't seem a great deal to ask.»

Jack had kept looking at him, shaking his head with mingled amusement, as one does with a small child.

Dan shook his head with a wry grimace. The things a grown man could let himself in for! The situation had deteriorated rapidly, of course. Yes, yes, he thought now: the rest was history. He must have been pretty thoroughly plastered by the time he went down the hall.

«Stop tying the bathrobe and share it with me then.» Dan pulled the cincture loose and the bathrobe fell open and revealed the officer's naked body.

Jack had given him one of those indulgent smiles.

He'd resumed, with an almost sensual movement, the adjustment of his bathrobe. «I told you to stop tying it,» Dan said. Giving the bow a yank, he undid it again and stood looking at the dangling ends. Jack had taken hold of the cincture again, and the irritation had risen like a tide in Dan and he'd grabbed the ends away, hard.

He grimaced, remembering the petulant violence of the gesture. He saw himself flinging the ends down... Yes, it was funny, the things a grown man could let himself in for, with a few cc's of alcohol in his blood.

All right, so he had behaved badly. No use making a production of it.

He had a sudden overpowering sense of his reality and pushed it violently out of his mind. He swallowed. It was suddenly very close, the *something* that had been hanging over him ever since he awoke.

He looked around wildly, as if seeking some place of escape from the unbearable thought. Suddenly his attention froze. He stared incredulously toward the bed. The feeling of derangement was again mixed with a sense of relief.

Outside the night was paling visibly now: the bare, proud forms of the trees came up out of the purplish dark as he watched, with a motionless bow, the figure on the bed.

He walked back toward the bed, eyeing it fixedly, trying to focus his thoughts. If he could find some starting point, something he could be sure of. If only the dream wouldn't keep coming up on him, like an undigested dinner. What a tricky thing the mind was, actually. It can retain for a lifetime the echo of a whisper it wants to remember and it can blot out, as if it never happened, the havoc it created this very night.

Maybe it wasn't just a matter of some dream: maybe he'd done something last night *he didn't want to remember*...

He wrenched his mind away from the thought, sat down again on the chair. The cold prickly feeling moved around his chest. He narrowed his attention to that one idea. He rotated his head against the remnants of headache that had collected like grit at the back of his neck. The pain was gone but there was an achy numbness left and his mind was blurred now like a double exposure.

With the sweat pouring down your back, and your stomach in a knot, and your brain turning to watery cottage cheese, he thought.

He jumped up, unable to sit still for a moment longer, the tension mounting in him unbearably. I can't take much more of this, he thought. He dug his fingers into his scalp. *I've got to remember what I did last night...*

He went over towards the bed again, aware of his steps on the marble floor crumbling the silence faintly. Dawn stood motionless about the house, like some invisible gray presence holding a finger to its lip. He reached the side of the bed and stopped with an exaggerated sigh that mocked his real sense of relief. There he was, large as life, a lovely, lovely body on the bed. He wasn't crazy, after all, not entirely...

What did this mean now? Well, nothing complicated, obviously.

He closed his eyes and a memory of flashing lights and shadowy shapes moved into his mind.

Jack had wrenched away from him but one of the ends with which the bathrobe was cinctured remained dangling in Dan's hand. Dan took a step toward him.

«Jack,» he said. His voice fuzzed down now to a gasp. «Jack...»

Dan blinked as if the lights had gone on suddenly at a play he'd been watching. Everything had held together beautifully up to that point, moving forward with precision and logic and credibility, and now abruptly, brutally, there was this monstrous invention, turning the whole thing into a plot without rhyme or reason. No, he would not go on with this charade. It wasn't true, none of it was true. It was his cursed brain cutting loose on that nightmare again. He went to stand up, and like an exploding ratchet full of dancing light and shattered movement, the scene whirled back into focus in his recollection. Only the officer was laughing indulgently. «Dan, you're a regular bull.»

He had taken a step toward Jack, and Jack was still smiling.

He jumped up, saying aloud, «No, no, no.» He stood with fists clenched, his face gray. Memory had gone all misty and confused again but the center of it, as if caught in the cloudy topaz gleam of a wine glass, and moving in on him with a terrible stereoscopic clarity, he saw himself pulling the bathrobe off of Jack, exposing the full nakedness of his body, the hair so tantalizingly attractive where it congregated on the chest and at the groins.

He started back, knocking into the chair. He dug his hands into the material, hanging on for dear life, feeling as if he were drowning, all his life, his reason slipping away. This was the payoff. You've been a bomb, kept one locked up inside of yourself; only your will, your conscience, has kept it locked up; someday the sharpness of it would explode... and it had. He straightened up abruptly. He stood for a moment with his hand on the arm of the chair, feeling it grow wet under his grasp. Suppose it *was* true...

He thought of the dream. There was hurt in the thought and very soon now he was going to have to take it to his bosom. Jack had been part of his dream—the part that counted—much more than he was willing to admit. There had been passion and gaiety, and talk—God, what had happened?

A prickle of excitement went through him. The excitement mounted in him in a cloudy tide. There was a little leap of pleasure inside him. All the weariness was gone suddenly.

He couldn't remember it all with the same clarity. Some of it was blurred out in his mind, scenes over-lapping, little breaks in the continuity. But through

it all was that rather wonderful sense of newness in a relationship, something building, a wonderful sense of aliveness, of language suddenly coming to life, of actions taking on new dimensions, new meanings.

And there was a deeper tinge of emotion too—an awareness of how different things might have been for him without this new friend—and finally there had been much wild hope and the dispersal of despair.

He surrendered to a communal pulse beat, thoughts unsharp, misting in the friendly haze of the room, and music like new wine, clouded, heady, always heavily underscored with the surflike beat that got into your throat after a while so you could almost taste it.

He could remember the gleaming bronze body and its soulful gyrations. It moved with something ritualistic caught in whatever slight movement he gave to his head, his hands, legs. A modern priest of passion. The voice was a little strange to the ear at first but singularly pure, infinitely subtle and warm, moving within its compass from a kind of native elegance and restraint. He found an uncommon pleasure in the sight of the naked body, and a kind of forbidden delight in the focal center. Some light spilled in at their feet and Jack stood in it, slim and vertical against the dull glow from the lamp.

The little pulse of excitement ebbed, left him feeling rather bleak. He winced. Good Lord. Maybe *this* was the nub of his secret desire. Or was the man, the man on the bed, only a creation or product of his own? Out of what moss-grown summerhouse in his brain could he have pulled that body?

No, it was a living man on the bed.

He smiled faintly. As real surely as himself—no flittering fragile smoke or dream.

In the dream, he remembered, the officer was someone he'd known long ago, and now he had come back—to teach him. Teach him what? The recollection went murky with confused violence and shadowy movement. He saw him creating him, endowing him with a propulsive life of his own, and now he followed and ran faster after him in the dark, brushing against him, pawing him, whispering hideous, unbelievable things...

He shuddered. What did it all signify? A word stood out in his mind, full of meaning, empty of everything but the memory of terror being hauled, like a bloody carcass, across his mind. Why the hell was that? Was it really a title to be applied to himself? From what dark alley of consciousness had it come, gibbering, to make hideous the dawn?

He gave his low, liquid laugh: Dan bit his lips. A word was running around his mind, a hybrid word, a laughable word, but it was a word that had loads of meaning to many. It was like a drawstring, that word, that might loose danger on himself, deep humiliation, and make him a fugitive. It was a word that he had warned himself unconsciously to forget, and he had forgotten it until now.

But he found himself framing it with his lips as though he were taking out a queer and dangerous weapon, examining it, and testing it.

«Homosexual,» he whispered. «Homosexual.»

«Homosexual,» he said aloud. Even the shape of the word was chilling, the terror built in like the murmur in a sea shell.

Strange, puzzling thing. How close it lay to the core of what one was as a vertebrate mammal, to one's very existence.

The mightiest of all the taboos? Mighty, certainly. He leaned against the chair, sick and dizzy, struggling against the chill bleak oblivion of shock. The events of the past day went weaving through his head. This was the first time in years he'd faced it from this direction. He went fearfully down the past. Well, why for that matter was his entire life a history of wanting one thing and settling for something else?

He walked around the room and stopped at another chair which held his clothes. As he lifted his mitty, a metal object fell out of a pocket... a small bronze phallus. Where had that come from? Jack! Of course,—Jack had given it to him. Oddly, now the little gust of awareness cleared the last clinging cobwebs from his mind; the dream fell away and recollection opened wide within him like a clogged sinus, letting in the first real deep breath of memory. But it brought no relief. Because with it came the dark knowledge of what lay there in his being; to what sorry pass remembering must now inevitably bring him.

He rubbed his forehead agitatedly. He snapped his fingers.

The sound brought Jack to wakefulness.

«Dan!»

I'm dreaming again, Dan thought, I'm back in the dream.

«Dan!»

It was Jack's voice. Incredibly, miraculously, it was Jack's voice, fuzzy with sleep. The feeling of crisis was so intense that he almost lost consciousness.

«Dan. What is it? Are you all right?»

Dan roused sharply, then looked at Jack. It would be too much to say that panic or desperation stood between them, yet they were waiting for something, some urgency in the moment to find a voice, speak for them, the inevitable response.

The voice had trailed off. He seemed to be waiting for him to pick it up, urge him. But he remained silent. He reacted now, a little startled, and he said, with a quizzical smile that turned the corners of his lip up, «Yes, yes, I'm fine.» He felt like shouting suddenly. «Yes, I'm okay. I'm sorry I awoke you. Go back to sleep.» The cold place formed at the back of his neck. A surge of exultant, prayerful aliveness geysered up in him. For just a moment, as he realized what the discovery meant to him, the knowledge was too much to be borne. Then it was as if the thing on the bed, the body he had slept with, had frozen him inside with its Medusa stare. He thought, with something like relief, *at last*. This is where I black out, this is where my mind, that strange and complex mechanism, blots out the havoc. Actually it seemed now that he'd never really been fooled: deep inside he'd known that sooner or later, whichever road he took, however far and circuitously he travelled, he must end up here. He'd merely taken the long way home, the way children do, because they are afraid to pass the cemetery in the dark. Well, there was no detouring any more. This was it. And he was glad now that it was over, all the wild retching and writhing and trying not to know. He was aware in some abstract dimension of just what this would cost him.

It was all there and more, crowding, incalculably precious, insupportably lost. But it was strange. He was of an age past mourning, almost past surprise, shock as a result of the war. He had turned his mind inside out to avoid facing this horror... and now, facing it, it was no longer horrible. In the moment of knowing, or acknowledging, it and his share in it, he had become

somehow more than himself; he had moved an infinite distance away from every personal feeling he'd ever known before... it was as if he himself had suddenly been transposed. He was beyond fear now, beyond regret.

He grinned suddenly, sheepishly. He'd made quite a production of it. The officer: Jack Young—virile as a stallion, cool as a mountain spring, and with a core of untouched passion as hot as a cache of chili powder—this was one of those milestones again—like graduating from high school, enlisting in the Navy. Until now, he'd always had an answer. It wasn't that he'd lied to himself. In all honesty, he'd never believed it would happen to him. It was something for adolescents, for personality cripples. You spoke of them with contempt, or at best with a kind of humorous pity. And now, here it was, in his own lap, and it wasn't funny. To have a darkness clamp down on your life—it was like being lost, a lost soul, no longer quite human, no longer a creature of dignity and reason.

«Mate! Come here, lover.» The voice of the officer was coming softly across the interval between the bed and the chair. There was an invitation in the words and tone.

It had seemed to him, at that point, that fate might have spared him that little indignity but fate obviously wasn't on his side that night. Sudden weak tears stung Dan's eyes. You fool, he said to himself. It doesn't matter to you, does it? All right, come out of it, he thought. Jack had got to him in a big way. He felt shaken, wrought up, vulnerable. He tried to smile, tried to fight off the sudden weariness closing in. His first humiliation, the first intimation of what life could hold, were forcibly printed on his mind.

He stood alone, feeling his senses quiver under the impact of a reality that all but engulfed him. Facts had been flung at his head this morning helter-skelter, and all information was bad. It was an impact no man could bear without staggering. And yet, he thought, I must turn to that bed, even if doom is waiting there.

He decided to do it now, get it over with. And he walked slowly over to the bed and took hold of the officer's outstretched hand. He found the small sensation rather enjoyable. The sweat coursed down his spine coldly, yet he was oddly happy.

And then, oddly strange, half nightmare and half dream, his hand finding and holding a precious jewel, with the universe whirling around him, and stars shuddering towards birth, Dan felt himself descending towards the center of the cosmic maelstrom, with pressures upon him, his head, his neck,—and within the fierce expanding joy, the shyness conquered, the desperate desire for withdrawal fading into the far corners of the nebulae. And steadily, within the island universe, the great dog star drawing and drawing upon him, and he—a hound of heaven—pursuing, reaching, groping, with words reaching him from far away, warning, a presage of the cosmic wave like a swollen avalanche sweeping the heavens clear behind it: or like the second flood, lifting, rising, drowning the lights: and red stars flickering briefly at the back of his eyes. Always the pressures, until—heaving like an untamed pegasus—the galaxy arched itself, a great drawn bow, taut against the shock of creation, and whipped with its whirling a new hot star into existence.

And then, a little rest, and the feeling of a warm arm around him, an all enclosing comfort, until with a blinding sudden rush, the universe began to unwind itself, this time upon him. And in Dan Montgomery there was a

period of non-being, long or short, he could not tell, during which the world simply did not exist and he had no idea whether he was on his feet or his back or whether he was living or dead. Then he knew he lay on the bed and Jack was rolled slightly above him, and he could feel the man's body against his own; his senses bounced up to his fingertips and toes, his head drumming. He blinked once, and then the world was full of stabbing wonderful flames.

(From an unpublished novel.)

Intelligent Film on Homosexuality

During its opening sequences, *Victim*, is little more than a crime story—it could even be described as a crime thriller—in which the crime itself is blackmail. The reason for the blackmail is homosexuality, but the subject is referred to only obliquely in these opening scenes, and the actual word is scarcely mentioned.

But gradually the story comes to grips not only with its characters but also with its theme. The setting is London, in the area that covers so many contrasting streets and alley-ways between Piccadilly and the Temple, and the central character is a prominent barrister, on the point of taking silk, who is himself a homosexual and who becomes involved in the investigations which follow the death of a boy with whom he has previously associated.

The suspense in the film—and this is by no means inconsiderable—is sustained by the prolonged search for the blackmailers, whose cunning is altogether too great for the victims whom they have snared, but the chief interest in the film lies in the victims themselves, who are seen to come from all types and classes, and to be motivated not so much by a differing impulse as by a differing reaction to the same impulse. The basic issue in this matter must always be the interpretation of the word «love» which—used often so loosely in this as in so many other contexts—can refer either to an erotic desire or a deep emotional need. Here the emphasis is laid on the genuine feeling which one male can feel for another, and which can still affect a married man.

A large cast has been chosen with care and perception, and this is of the utmost importance in any story which depends, as does *Victim*, on the cumulative effect of a number of small but important scenes. The acting is exceptionally good throughout, and although Mr. Dirk Bogarde is not required to reveal any wide range of feeling as the barrister, his practical and intelligent interpretation of the part provides the solid foundation upon which the film is built.

Victim may not say a great deal about this difficult problem, but what it does say is reasoned and just; and it does invite a compassionate consideration of this particular form of human bondage.

(From: *The Times*, London)