

On the road to Rockport

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the human person. In due time the heterosexual man usually gets married and compromises, by accepting the physical attributes of his wife. Taken out of the framework of this relationship and put in the army, he quickly reverts to the former state. Homosexuals, however, are nearly always in this «free» state. American homosexuals, for the most part, lack the will power to place upon their life any check similar to marriage and hence there is a great deal of compulsive behavior. Americans will have sex with someone *in order to* call someone else up and tell him about it. Often in America a man's sexual life is more important than what he does, his art or profession.

In England and France, this type of split between the psyche and the sexual element does not exist. A Frenchman is more apt to regard his sexual partner, not as a thing or number, but a human being, in whose future he will take an interest. If he meets someone he likes, he anticipates really knowing and developing him in a general way, and somewhere en route constructing a sexual relationship. The French homosexual naturally thinks in terms of a long continuous relationship (a fact, incidentally, brought out by certain unpublished letters of Proust.)

For the most part, the modern American only impresses the European with his rootlessness and his romanticism. The American bohemian in Europe, by the very fierceness with which he disowns American attitudes, reveals one of the most American of attitudes: «*the inability to believe that time is real.*» Europeans themselves would prefer Americans to be more firmly American than they are; it would give both nationalities a cadre, a positive and agreeable ground on which to approach each other.

On the Road to Rockport

by

Evergreen

From time to time the woman puts her foot on the floor to keep the rocking chair moving. Forwards and backwards, forwards and backwards. Her head keeps time with the chair. In her lap lies a pair of rough canvas trousers which she is mending with coarse stitches. Now and then her eyes search the room, expressionlessly, the room tilts to and fro like a ship's cabin. Then she goes on sewing, stitch after stitch. Forwards and backwards, forwards and back.

Humid air hangs thickly under the rafters. There is not much furniture in the room. A blackened copper kettle hangs on a chain, the embers under the ashes are glowing. There are geraniums on the outside sills of the dim windows. The door is open. She lifts her head, looks dully at the few stunted blossoms in the stony earth of the flower-beds.

A highway passes nearby, following the rugged sea-coast. Half a mile farther on the road coils upward, round a promontary of bare rock. Then the huge rock hides the curve of the road leading landward again. The

road seems to end in midair, the rock towers steeply over the sea. There is no wind, the waves seem to lie in wait. Only the noise of passing cars and the whispering of the tepid Summer rain come to the ears of the woman in the rocking chair.

The boy enters by the door, carrying the wet dog in his arms. He is bare-footed and has rolled his trousers up over his strong, dirty calves. His smooth chest is bare. His blond hair, covered by a film of raindrops, lies shining sleekly on his temples, his skin and eyes are bright. The dog nuzzles against his belly.

The woman looks the boy over. «Leave the dog outside.»

At the words from the woman the dog gives a slight whine. The boy fondles it. «He won't bother nothing.»

The woman rocks more fervently. Forwards, backwards, forwards — backwards.

«He's wet. He stinks. Throw him out.» she says quietly.

The boy lifts his arm and the dog leaps down and scuttles for the door. On the threshold it stands still, cocks its head, and wags its tail sadly. —

«The nets are ready,» says the boy.

The woman grasps her darning-egg, throws it; the dog cleverly evades the missile and trots out into the rain. «Fixed your pants. They ought to fit you now,» the woman says.

The boy lowers from his back a small net containing fish, puts it on the table and sits down. «Dave cleaned them for me. He wasn't going to. His old woman said, 'Might as well clean them for the Evanses while you're about it.' So he done it.»

The woman rises and tosses the trousers across the table. «Let's see if they fit.»

The boy lifts his bare left leg, inspecting it. «Gotta clean up first. I'll go down to the shore when the rain stops.» He fingers the cloth and listens to the cars passing on the wet road outside, to the hum of their motors, to the hissing of their tires on the slippery surface. «They sound good, them cars,» he says. «A car — that's what I ought to have.»

Thoughtfully, the woman draws one foot across the floor, tracing a small arc in the dust. «Cars!» she says. «You seventeen — and a car. What'll you have left when you're seventy? When your Pa was your age he was saving his money for a boat.»

«That's all he ever did have, that boat. And he never got nowhere near seventy.»

They hear the dog growling. The woman stretches her back and shuffles towards the door. «Here comes a man.» Indifferent, she throws the fish into the kettle, kneels down and starts blowing into the embers. Soon little flames lick. She lays on kindling wood.

The man stands in the doorway. The dog has followed him. It sniffs carefully, wags its tail, but remains outside. The downpour has lessened, the rain moving out to sea. The man is tall. His face is dark with the grime of the road. His clothes are wet and bits of grass stick to his legs and thighs. His black hair hangs down in loose strands, half-covering his dark, lively eyes. One fist rests against his shoulder, across which he now

pulls forward a small bundle and puts it down at the door. «Hello,» he says genially.

«Hi,» says the boy, getting up.

The woman draws nearer to look him over. «Bad weather you're bringing us,» she says.

The man comes into the room. Great brown nipples are faintly outlined under his wet shirt. «Isn't there anything but rain and rocks around here?» —

The boy looks at him. In the silence the dog barks quickly and excitedly.

«I'm hungry,» the man says. «Can you give me some supper? I'll gladly pay you for it. And I'd like to clean up and dry my clothes.» He sees that the eyes of the silent boy are still watching him intently. «My jeep had a flat down the road a way. I've been driving in the rain all afternoon. She hasn't got a top on her.»

«The rain's letting up,» the woman says. «You'd best go down to the beach and wash. He'll take you there,» she jerks her head towards the boy. «Supper'll be ready when you get back.»

Man and boy leave the house together, the dog trotting behind them. The air is sultry, only a slight breeze is stirring. The stony path leads them across the road and through a clump of pines, the trunks of which are arched like tight bows towards the sea. Soon they look down upon a cove, sheltered by high rocks from the open sea. The boy walks in front. His thigh-fitting trousers reveal every movement of his lithe hips and thighs. His gait is relaxed, boyish. His shoulders are as husky as a man's.

«I could get to like this country,» the man says. «I might almost be tempted to stay.»

The boy in front of him makes sounds which might be laughter.

By a series of leaps they descend to the cove. The man notices a boat moored to a wooden post. The shirtless, barefooted boy pushes his trousers down around his ankles and kicks free of them. Under the old, discolored trousers he wears a bathing slip which looks new. It is bright yellow, the color of broom. The man watches him, as he plunges in, and swims seaward with strong strokes. Then the man, balancing, removes his shoes and socks. He looses his belt and lets his trousers drop. He pulls his shirt quickly over his head. Then he follows the boy. As he approaches him the boy turns round.

«How far is it to the open sea?» the man calls out.

«Barely a mile,» the boy answers. He swims towards the man. He fills his mouth and spouts a geyser of sea water at him, drenching his face. The man splashes him in return. They grapple playfully, duck each other. The rocks echo with their shouts. They race each other, then lie floating on their backs.

At last they head towards shore, swimming side by side. Where the water ends the boy stands still, looking at the naked man before him, at the dark skin, glistening, mapped by little rivulets of sea water. From the middle of his chest black hair makes a path downward, ending in a dense chestnut-brown thicket, then spreading diffusely to soften the form of his hard legs.

The man stretches and laughs happily, conscious of the boy's gaze. «Fishing makes good muscles, I see. I've got a friend in Rockport who looks a lot like you,» says the man.

The boy reddens. He picks up the man's shirt and inspects it, then wades into the shallows with it. He draws it back and forth through the water, he rubs it between his hands. Then he wrings it out.

«I guess I got the worst of the dirt out of it,» he says as he hands it to the man.

«Thanks.»

Their hands touch. Shy, the boy looks down, then turns away. He goes to where his trousers lie. Hesitantly, he pushes down his bathing slip and steps out of it. «Catch,» he says, and tosses it to the man. «You wear it. Then later on we can dry your clothes next to the fire.»

The man thanks him again, with a nod and an appreciative smile, and dons the slip, throwing his clothes over his shoulder. The boy slowly buttons his trousers.

«Ready?» the man asks.

«Ready.»

«You're a very nice guy.»

«It looks better on you than me anyhow,» the boy responds.

They begin the return trip. The man takes the lead. His walk is animal-like, springy, but he moves carefully on the stony path. Water pearls in tiny drops on his broad back, trickles down and is absorbed by the yellow slip. «Don't you mind the stones?» he asks. «Your skin is smooth as water. Soft.»

The boy blushes again. «My feet ain't. They're darn near as hard as a turtle's back . . . Nobody ever said anything like that to me before.»

«Do you mind?»

«Oh no! I don't mind.»

They walk along in silence.

The woman is waiting for them at the door. «Did you wash that dog?»

«Clean forgot it,» the boy says with some perplexity. They enter the house. The fire is burning brightly. Plates and a steaming bowl are on the table. The woman hangs the clothes near the fire. Then they all seat themselves around the table. The woman fills their plates with soup and gives them each a slice of bread.

«Speak up if you want some more,» she tells the man. «You're big. You need a lot to fill you up.»

«What's the matter with the dog? What's he whining for?» the man asks the boy.

«He wants to come in.»

«May as well let him in. But don't feed him. I'll feed him later,» the woman says grudgingly.

«Ted,» the boy calls.

«Nice name,» says the stranger.

«It's my name too.»

Now the dog stands between the two, looking expectantly from one to the other, his tail wagging happily. They both lean over to pat him. Their hands touch again.

«A nice dog,» the man says.

The woman presses her lips together. The boy gets busy with his soup, his head over his plate.

«A nice dog!» the woman says sarcastically. «First the old man was lost. Then two boys killed in the war. Then the eldest one went out with the boats and never came back. Boats, nets, men, everything was lost — except the dog. The dog got back. God knows how he did it, but the dog came back, that useless, good-for-nothing dog.»

«And Ted?» the man asks quietly. «What's going to happen to him?»

Her spoon clatters against her plate. «A man must take his chances like a man. The sea's chock full of food just for the taking, but the Lord don't give anything away. A man's got to labor for his keep by the sweat of his brow. That's the law of it. A man, that's what's missing here. Two could turn a pretty penny — by and by there would be a good stout boat once more.» She refills the man's plate with soup. «Where do you hail from?»

The man throws her a quick glance and gives a bit of bread to the dog stretched out on the floor between him and the boy. «I had a little farm up north of Bangor. Did some hunting and trapping. Worked out as guide sometimes. Well, there's a fellow from down in Rockport who's been coming up to hunt with me whenever he could get off; we got to be good friends. You can't make a living on that kind of land up there. It'll break your heart. It was a lonely life, too. I've been restless since the war. So I sold my place and now I'm on my way to Rockport to go in business with my friend. He's got a filling station with a lunch-room next to it — he's doing fine. He doesn't need my money. There isn't any risk for me. It's just that we get along fine and having a partner will ease the work and responsibility for him, and with my capital we can improve the place some more.»

The boy does not seem to hear. He is leaning over playing with the dog.

«You might be able to buy a good boat with what you've got. If you had a boat you'd be independent, free as the wind. It's a rough life but it's a good life for a man. And there's money in it.»

The man laughs, not unkindly. «It's too late now. Besides, I don't know anything about the sea. This thing is what I want. For me it's ideal.»

The woman eats her soup noisily.

Through the door the pattern of rain can be heard again. The three continue their meal in silence and soon the sound of the rain is steady and monotonous.

«I thought for a while it was going to clear,» the woman says. «That rain won't stop now.»

The boy looks at her, then turns to the man. «You can stay here tonight. You can start out early in the morning and get to Rockport by dinnertime.»

«I'd like to,» the man says. «But I think I'd better not.»

The woman goes to the fire. «Your clothes aren't dry yet. I could properly wash them for you and have them dry by morning.»

The man gets up. «I wrote my friend I'd be there tonight. He's expecting me. Now that I've got some food in me I don't mind the rain too much.»

«He won't care if you don't get there till tomorrow. Because after that you'll be with him forever. If you start in the morning you'll be there by noon,» the boy says.

The man winks at him. «Another time,» he says.

«You can dress,» the woman says. She shuffles over to the door. From a peg behind the door she takes a shapeless, threadbare man's coat and throws it around her shoulders, then she goes out into the rain.

The boy gets up and brings the man his clothes, then he blurts out, pointing to the yellow bathing slip, «Take it with you. It looks so good on you.»

«Thanks a lot.» The man's smile is very gentle.

As the boy watches he picks up his trousers and climbs into them. Then he seats himself to put on his socks and shoes. As his hands tie the laces of his shoes he raises his head and looks the boy square in the eye. «When you're fed up here then clear out and come to us. Cal Woodson's filling station and snack bar on Market Street. Open day and night. Can you remember that? Cal Woodson's place on Market Street.» The man rises and crosses to the boy. With one hand he grips his shoulder. The other he buries in the fine blond hair roughly caressing the shapely skull. «Now don't you forget. You can count on us for bed and board until you find a job. And when you've got a job you can send a little money home to her. My name is Jean — Jean Dubois. Can you remember all this? Will you?»

The boy nods, looking at him solemnly.

By and by the woman returns.

«What do I owe you?» the man asks.

«Nothing for sale here,» she says harshly.

«Well, thanks . . . It was good of you to take me in. Maybe some day I'll have a chance to return your hospitality.»

The woman picks up his bundle and passes it to him. He turns to the boy with his right hand outstretched. Impulsively the boy grips it in both of his. Then the man pats the dog who tries to lick his hand. Straightening up, the man shoulders his bundle and goes out into the rain.

Woman, boy and dog stand in the doorway looking after him. When he has put a little distance between them he turns round, lifts his hand to them, then runs in broad leaps towards the road. The rain comes down like a curtain between them. For a moment the outlines of the running man are indistinct, then disappear. The boy stoops and picks up the dog and presses it close to him. The woman puts her arm around the boy's hip and draws him into the house.

It seems like earth and rock are all dissolved and nothing but the rain and the sea are left.