

The sergeant with the rose tattoo

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The Sergeant with the Rose Tattoo

He was almost the first person in my little shop, for I had been officially open only three hours. He came tentatively to the door and stopped there, outlined against the lovely pale pearl of the Paris dusk, his face turned a little sidewise so that the red and green and yellow of my new neon sign made a kind of jewel around his head. His uniform was neatly pressed, the ugly familiar khaki of the American army, the three stripes of a sergeant's rank on his left sleeve.

I was more than astonished, for when one opens a tattoo shop in Paris, somehow one thinks the first visitor will be a Parisian. How he ever found his way up the high hill of Montmartre to the dark little alley near the white dome of Sacre Cœur was almost a major mystery. I turned from putting up the last of my design cards and said, «Oui?»

In a dreadful halting pidgin French and English, he said. «Vous — you . . . er . . . ah remuer lez tattoos?»

In the smoothest French I could muster I said, «No, I regret it—you must go to a plastic surgeon for that; the whole cell structure must come out.»

He looked so comically blank and woebegone that I had not the heart to deceive him any longer. «C'mon in, Mac,» I said in English, «and take the load off your feet. You got a problem with a tattoo?»

His mouth opened slowly and then closed. «You—you're American,» he said. It was almost a gasp. It had wonder—and lonely heartache—in it.

«I sure am,» I said, «and you're the first customer.» I turned to look at him more closely. I had been wrong in thinking that the last rays of the sun had somehow illumined my shop when he came in; instead, he brought light with him, in his golden close-cropped hair and the brilliance of his friendly smile. He was a distillate of all fraternity men and young football players and husky farm boys from the Midwest that I had left so far behind—and I found myself in a kind of homesickness opening to him, as I knew he opened to me—a compatriot in a foreign land.

«Holy cow,» he said, «how'd you ever come to be working here in—in this place?»

«It's a long story,» I said, and it was. I hardly knew how to tell it, nor that I even understood it myself. I remembered reading long ago somewhere in Gide that a man should make at least one decisive break in his life—with his family, his thought, or even the room in which he lived. And I had made two—one, when I gave up being a music and drama critic for a San Francisco paper, and shocked my friends (most of whom could not survive the blow) by becoming a tattoo artist. But the second—and greater—separation came when I renounced my country—tired to the death of its phony optimism, its stifling puritanism, its bigotry—but most of all its hypocrisy, which in a kind of idiot dance-of-death publicly denied that it tolerated what nearly all of its citizens practiced in private on the sly. So I renounced its sham, rejected its money-grubbing ideals, called it the only country which had ever passed from youth into decay without going through maturity—and left. My first papers of application for French citizenship were already amongst the bureaux.

«Pull up a chair and sit down,» I said, and he did. He moved with an easy grace, throwing one leg over the back so that he straddled the seat, and clasped

his hands on the chair edge in front of him. I saw the hand-made letters on the lower phalanges of his fingers, but said nothing about them.

«You asked why I was here,» I said. «Well, it was just a case of my geographical birthplace not coinciding with my so-called 'spiritual' home. I never liked America or its attitudes.»

He thought about that for a moment. «I guess I don't know where my home is,» he said. «I kinda think it's not in Germany, where I'm stationed.»

«What are you doing there?» I asked.

«Military police,» he said. He made a fist and rubbed it into his palm. «But I've been doing a lot of boxing for the company. Even some exhibitions. If I can get permission, I been thinking about doing some pro work around the German towns.»

«I thought you might be an athlete of some kind.» His shoulders were broad enough so that you had to turn your head slightly to see both of them, and his waist so narrow he could have swapped belts with a chorus girl. «What are you doing in Paris?»

«I got a week's leave,» he said. «Another guy and I came over. He knew a babe here, and he's shackin' up with her.»

«That kind of leaves you at loose ends, doesn't it?» I said.

«Yeah.» He looked at the floor a moment, and then caught sight of his hands down between his legs, clasping the chair. «See?» he said, holding them out for my inspection. «I did that with a needle and some India ink. I wish to God I never had.»

I had seen similar lettering before. On the fingers of one hand were the letters: L T F C; on the other—well, never mind. When you put both hands together, palms down with the fingers interlaced, it spelled out an obscene invitation. «That was a foolish thing to do,» I said, but without reproach.

«Guess I thought it was funny at the time,» he said ruefully. «Can you take 'em out?»

«I'm working on a simple method,» I said, «but it's not ready yet. The only way now is sanding, or skin graft. »

We talked for a half an hour, a kind of nuzzling little conversation like two dogs sniffing each other to the extent of our friendliness. His name was Buck, he came from Seattle, where a girl waited for him. Before he left, she had tried to use on him the oldest of the devices to snare a man. «But I didn't quite believe she was gonna have one,» he said. And now the letters were spacing themselves farther apart; either she had cooled, or he had—he didn't know which. His father and mother had separated. His mother, he indicated with more delicacy than I would have thought possible in him, was a tramp; he adored his father, but had lost him somewhere—a simple case of desertion when his old man had caught his mother in bed with a sailor.

A tattoo shop is usually a friendly place. The intimate nature of the operation stimulates confidences. In my long and battered career, I had seen thousands of young men, and with a greater patience than a bartender's, heard their tales of joy and woe and defeat and triumph. But as I listened to Buck, and urged him gently on like a father confessor, I was amazed at what was revealed. There were no tough and artificial overlays of brutality and sophistication to be cut through; his very real purity lay close to the surface. Oh, he had been in bed with a few women—but somehow he seemed to have retained a virgin quality that was most attractive. And like the romantic I am, and have always

been, I began to project my own desires and idealizations upon the screen of his youth and charm.

He had a wonderful body; its beauty shone through the drab mustard-colored cloth. A few courses in life-drawing years ago had taught me how to see through clothes. I noted that the definition of his muscles was superb; in the position in which he sat, the cloth was drawn taut across his magnificent thighs, and his calves were strong as the fabric tightened down to his well-polished army boots. His hands, big and well-shaped, a farmer's hands, lay quietly powerful as he talked, or moved a little to emphasize a point.

It has been said that no one ever asks another person to stay the night without having an ulterior motive in mind. But I can honestly say that such a thing was not in mine. I suppose, in a sense, I was as lonely as he was, for the wrench of leaving my homeland had been a strong one. So it was with a heart nearly as clean as his that I asked him . . .

«Where are you staying?»

He gestured down the hill. «At a dump on the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette,» he said. «I think maybe it's a—how you say it? maison de passe. Girls keep screamin' and runnin' up and down the hall, and drinkin', and people rent rooms but they're in 'em for only about thirty minutes.»

I laughed. «And you trapped there, the innocent in the whorehouse. I have an idea. How would you like to come stay in my apartment? There's an extra twin bed so . . . so you won't be bothered, and I—» But I need not have felt guilty. His face lit up, and his warm friendly grin was that of the long-lost returning home.

«Chee!» he exploded. «Wouldja mind? I'd like that a heluva lot. And say—» he leaned forward and laid one of his great hands on my knee. Mentally I shivered and almost moved, but I controlled my reaction. «—wouldja have any time to show me a little of Paris?»

If I haven't, I'll make it, I thought, and nodded. «As much as I can,» I said, «and I'll steer you where to go for the rest.»

«That's swell!» he said. His joy was touching, and his excitement grew. «Tell you what—I'll go down to that flophouse and get my gear, and bring it here, huh?»

«That's the best idea,» I said.

He laughed in high glee, and sprang to his feet, knocking the chair over. He picked it up, smacked his fist into his palm, laughed again, and tilted his cap forward until the visor came down on his nose so far that I did not know how he could see underneath it. He almost pranced. «Gee!» he said again, grinning. «I'll get goin' right away. Now—now you wait for me. You won't go away, huh? You'll be here? For sure?»

«For sure,» I laughed. His excitement was catching. «I'll be here.»

And I watched him move out into the deepening night, jaunty, alert, handsome, trim. The streetlight picked out the spots of shine on his boots and belt. A few feet away he turned, gave me a half-salute and another grin, and then walked rapidly down the hill.

*

And thus began an odd and troubled week for me. I was disturbed in the first place because I had broken a cardinal rule: never mix business with pleasure. It might be hard to believe, but of the unnumbered thousands of young men

who had passed under my needle, I had never in any way overstepped the bounds with a single one. It was too dangerous, in a business sense. Amongst the young of a city, such a bit of gossip would flash like fire through a forest; and had any of them known my secret—well, I would have been popular, no doubt, but I would never again have made a cent in my business. Thus gold conspired to keep me pure, as far as my clients were concerned; certainly the strangest thing that gold ever did. The motivation, I'll grant, was hardly of the kind to gain me admission to the *civitas Dei*, but it did for all practical purposes make me keep my hands off my customers.

For the rest—well, I was no different from most of the brotherhood. Any handsome young man, provided he was not a customer, was a direct challenge. By cajolery, flattery, outrageous bribes, talk, the bait of records or books or pictures or liquor, or money itself—I'd get him sooner or later. But what was Buck—customer or handsome young man? Distressed, I pushed the problem away and refused to face it for a while.

That first night was both a pain and an ecstasy. We hailed a taxi when I closed the shop, and piled his gear inside, then crawled in ourselves. I directed the driver to pass by the Place de la Concorde, to show Buck the lights, and the great jewel box that was Paris by night. He laughed and hollered, and asked continually, «What's that building?» or said, «Chee! lookit dat babe!» and pummelled me on the shoulder and back like an excited child. And when we reached the Rue des Saints-Peres, where I had an apartment formerly occupied by two fairly wealthy Americans, his enthusiasm overflowed.

«Chee, what a pad!» he exclaimed. «Have you read all dose books?» He walked to the one wall where I had shelves to the ceiling. And then he peered through the door into the bedroom and saw the bath beyond. «And a real honest-to-god shower!» he said. «That's the first one I ever seen in Europe, outside the barracks! Does it work?»

«It sure does,» I said.

He started to unknot his tie. «I'm gonna take one,» he said. «You mind?»

«Of course not,» I said, «the place is yours.»

He stripped off his shirt and then his tee-shirt, and quickly stepped out of his trousers. And the room was filled with radiance. I had not been wrong in picturing his body—like a warm and living marble, sculptured with the hand of Praxiteles, descended from the Parthenon frieze to grace my living room. As he turned his head, a great muscle on his neck flowed smoothly down into his excellent shoulders; the torso was flat and ridged, and the great ligament that held his belly swooped down like a birdflight into one side of his tight white shorts, and up the other, to vanish in the warm curve around his back. The torso of a faun—*Behold my beloved, he cometh leaping upon the mountains . . .* In a moment of near faintness, I shut my eyes for a second, and then turned to busy myself. My mouth was dry.

«I'll get you a towel,» I managed to say, «and then I'll wash my face while you're in the shower.»

He strode like a conqueror into the tiled cubicle, and a moment later I heard the rush of water. I shook my head, took a deep breath, and took off my own shirt. Then I got him a towel and went to the bathroom with it. I drew the water and washed my face, and then sat down in the bedroom until he finished. The April air was cool, but not unpleasant. From a corner of my window, I could look out at the lights along the Quai Voltaire and see the black shimmer

of the Seine. The trees were misted over in the circles of light with the first faint green of their spring leaves.

The water stopped running in the bathroom. I heard the shower curtain being pushed aside, and the small soft sounds as he dried himself. And then he burst into the room like a blond panther, the towel wrapped around his middle.

«My gosh,» he said, electrified. «What a beautiful tattoo!»

I looked down at the garland of roses and flowers that hung across my chest from each shoulder. «You like it?» I said, feeling as foolish as a high-school girl in her first formal.

«I never saw anything like it!» he said with real enthusiasm. «Does it go clear around the back?»

«Yes,» I said. He put his hand on my shoulder and pulled it around to see. «Beautiful,» he said. Then, «Gee, you're all goose-bumps.»

«Your hands are cold,» I said, but it was not that. I stood up and put on a light dressing gown, and threw him a dark red one. «Be careful you don't split the back out of that with those shoulders,» I said.

«I'll be careful,» he smiled. «Don't worry.»

Then we talked some more, and I poured him a glass of cognac, and at last we went to bed—he to his, and I to the twin beside him.

To judge from his breathing, he was asleep almost at once. But I—I lay for a long time listening to the night sounds of the city. The strong silhouette of his shoulder and back under the covers lay between me and the faint light of the window.

And I concluded, finally, that I'd rather have him as a friend . . . and then, partly at peace with myself, I fell asleep.

*

It was a wonderful week, but I must confess that I neglected my business—a bad thing to do when one is just beginning in a new place. Together we did all the silly and wonderful things that tourists do, and the thrill was great for me. I was continually refreshed and stimulated as I saw Paris through his young eyes; it was almost like a first visit again, and once more I fell captive to the sweet grey spirit of the old city. We walked up the Champs Elysées, had apéritifs at little sidewalk cafés, and strolled through the Bois de Boulogne, marvelling at the recurrent miracle of spring in Paris. I introduced him to the cafés of the St. Germain district, and we went once to the Folies Bergère. In the mornings the air was cool and sweet and thin as a golden sauterne, with little sparklings in it; the evenings were sometimes chill and lemon-colored still—but it was all beautiful, seen with the eyes of love.

And I must confess, again, that the wall of my resolution lasted about three days; then it began to crumble from the repeated onslaughts of his beauty. His shyness disappeared, and whenever we got into the apartment, the first thing he did was take off his clothes. Not that I objected, of course; but the effect weakened me, to see him walking in his young glory nearly naked around the rooms, or playfully taking the boxer's crouch, or showing me a few judo holds over my protestations. Contact with his body chilled and frightened me, for I saw the end of it that was hidden from him. And then gradually I began to say things, leading statements that he could hardly misinterpret—and he was not stupid.

I think it was the fifth evening. We had gone to bed, both mildly soused from a good deal of wine at dinner and cognacs afterwards at La Reine Blanche. The light was out. I was greatly depressed, and lay on my back in bed, biting my wrist and aching with desire.

Suddenly he switched on the lamp between us and propped himself on his elbow. His handsome face was serious. He bit his lip a moment, and then said, «I'm sorry.»

I stopped acting like a cheap theatrical ham and turned to face him. «Sorry for what?»

He flushed with embarrassment and looked down at his pillow, and punched it. «I—it's kinda hard to say. But—but I guess I know what's in your mind, these last few days . . .»

I said nothing.

«Well, the thing is, I just *can't*. The idea of it . . .»

«That's okay, Buck ole boy,» I said. «I'll get over it.» And then out of my frustration or spite or something like it, I added with some bitterness, «Besides, there'll be others coming along.»

He looked at me for a long moment without speaking, and I saw the cornflower blue of his eyes turn frosty and darken. Then abruptly, without saying more, he switched out the light and turned on his side.

But by the next morning it was as if nothing unpleasant had happened at all. He had to leave the day after, so we made a real celebration of the last twenty-four hours. We even went up the Eiffel Tower, over my loud complaints, for in all the years I had been going to Paris I had carefully avoided that excursion. Then in the afternoon, a lot of Pernod, and in the evening an excellent bouillabaisse. At the end of the meal, he leaned across the battlefield of our dead dinner and said, «I've got just one more favor to ask of you.»

«Name it,» I said through a happy haze.

«I want you to put a rose in the middle of my chest. Like in your garland. And someday I want the rest of it, too.»

His request shocked me a little, and pleased me a lot. «You quite sure you want it?»

«I've thought a lot about it,» he said. «Yeah, I want it. And in addition, that's one way I can be sure I won't ever forget this week.» He toyed with a fishbone fallen to the tablecloth. «Or you,» he added in a low voice.

So we got into a taxi and climbed back up the hill of Montmartre to the Rue Gabrielle, and opened up the shop. Then I went to the back room and got out the slanted bench. I put the screen up and did not turn on the shop lights—just those in my working area.

«Well, uncover the muscles,» I said, and he took off his shirt. «And lie down.» I put a pillow under his head and got my needles ready. Just before I started, I looked down at him stretched out on the bench, and said, «It's not too late to change your mind, you know.»

He shook his head. «Nope. I want it. The big one just like yours.» And then suddenly he put his arms up and clasped his big hands around the back of my head. He drew me down towards him, as startled as I had ever been in my life, and kissed me full on the mouth. Then he let go, and grinned up at me. «Now, go ahead,» he said. «I just wanted you to know how I felt.»

Trembling, shaken, I dipped the needle in the ink, and drew the first lines of the great scarlet rose upon the smooth and swelling plateau of his chest.

*

It was a little over a year later, almost at the beginning of May. My shop had begun to prosper somewhat, and although I was not yet the rage of Paris, I had a good flow of customers. The number of women wanting tattoos surprised me, and to protect myself from the predatory females of Montmartre (and their vengeful *macquereaux*), I had bought a plain gold wedding ring, which helped to scare them off.

I still remembered Buck, of course, but in the deluge of young French *durs* and hoods, of sailors and soldiers, and in the making of new designs to satisfy their tastes, he had begun to recede into that pleasant opalescent realm of the past where we keep our best memories. My frustration had lost itself in a vague glow of pleasure that I always felt when I thought of him. He had written three letters to me, each enclosing some clippings. He had won bouts in his company and regiment, and the write-ups in the Army paper were flattering—«The Rose Boy-Cop,» they called him. And then there were some clippings from German papers, and one victory picture of a referee holding Buck's hand high in the air, and he grinning like a Cheshire cat, with the rose plainly visible on his chest. When he went 'pro', the crowds went wild over him; he turned out to be one of the most popular young boxers in Germany. And what was his name in Frankfort and the other towns? Why, it was a natural: *Der Rosenkavalier!*

It was ten at night and I was getting ready to close. I heard my doorbell tinkle, and looked up. It was Buck. He had on slacks and a windbreaker, and was bareheaded; his golden hair shone in the light.

«Well, here I am,» he said.

I played it very low-key. «So I see,» I said quietly.

He came into the working area through the swinging gate, and sat down. «I'm outa the army.»

«Really?» I said. «You're a pretty famous boy now.»

He grinned in the old way. «Mostly your doing,» he said. «That rose sure caught on. I guess you made me, all right.»

The opening was there, and I said with a faint bitterness, «Hardly the way I intended, however.»

He smiled briefly and then sobered, and moved his toe in a small circle on the floor. He said, without looking up, «I guess I've learned a lot in the last year. They always said travel was broadening. So what I'm really here for, in a way, is to apologize.»

I felt a churning inside that formed into a tight knot, and then suddenly released. «No apologies needed, Buck ole boy,» I said. «It's all in the past.»

He looked up with his eyes, keeping his head down, and smiled. He said nothing.

«What's all this leading to?» I asked.

He stood up, raised his arm high in the air, and stretched like the handsome young animal he was, and looked down at me.

«To a final question,» he said. «How's about putting me up for the night?» He lowered his arms, and put one hand on each of my shoulders. «We've got a lot to make up for,» he said, and playfully cuffed me alongside the ear.

I looked at my ink-stained hands, lying in my lap. I had made myself a good life with them, and regained a measure of self-esteem. Why should one be at the mercy of the Bucks and Tonys and Chucks and Jonnys of this world? For me, there had been too much experience, it had multiplied itself until I was no

longer under coercion from any person or thing. It was not my fault that it had taken this young man so long to learn, under how many faceless tutors I would never know. And it was not flattering to hear him now say something that I had known for many years, and had once told him was true. It would be so easy to show him the wedding ring, and tell him that I was married, and that my wife would not understand.

And yet, from the slowly unrolling frieze of the young men that had passed before me in life, there were few that had stepped down to join me, and call me friend; and fewer still who had offered me love. And was not love the answer, the bridge between soul and soul, the joyous agony at the very heart and end of being?

It took me less than three seconds to have these thoughts. Then I looked up and said, «Okay, Buck. I'm glad to see you back.»

—Ward Stames

ON THE BEACH

by O.F. Simpson

At the sea's edge one summer morning bright,
Your hard and handsome face alive and gay,
Your swinging hips the promise of delight,
You suddenly start to walk along my way.
Strong swimmer's legs spurning the supine sand,
A forward thrust under your tight wet strap,
Twirling a red towel in your idle hand:
Teenage, but all a man, one helluva chap.
Come turn to me, new pole of my desire:
This is my hut and open stand its doors.
Cool in its shade your sunburnt body's fire;
My food, my drink, my springy bed is yours.
Under the jet-black windtossed curls grey eyes,
Dreamy, incurious, veer just once aside
To look right at me. Nothing. No spark flies.
No pause whatever in your long young stride.
So here I sit and watch you off the beach,
Knowing the moment will not come again:
Hard handsome boy-god, sauntering out of reach,
Your swinging hips a ballet of disdain.

NOTE. This is a 1960, Anglo-Saxon version of a much finer poem —
Tristan Klingsor's *L'Indifférent*.